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Potential of MGNREGA in Empowering Rural Women: Some Preliminary Evidence Based on a Field Study in Ernakulam District in Kerala, India

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Abstract:

The Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act aims at enhancing the livelihood security of people in rural areas by guaranteeing hundred days of wage-employment in a financial year to a rural household whose adult members volunteer to do unskilled manual work. Apart from the women empowerment point of view which is quite typical in Kerala, MGNREGA implementation has got tremendous potential for economic development of Kerala state, particularly through the socioeconomic upliftment of the rural poor. Besides, NREGS has the potential to give a new dimension to the work culture in the state. While the workers have been hitherto controlled by contractors and their middlemen who know how to extract work. With the NREGS implementation the out turn has been initially very poor as the workers could not be supervised properly. However, soon the workers have themselves realized that they would be losing collectively and a new internal dynamics evolved with peer pressure forcing workers to put in their maximum effort. Besides, a kind of social responsibility has also become evident as more capable workers have become more than willing to put in extra effort to make up for those who genuinely could not do hard work beyond a point, like the women and the elderly. In short, a new culture that promises far reaching benefits to the state in the future has begun to emerge.

Key words: Lively hood security, MGNREGS Act, Wage employment, rural employment guarantee

1.Introduction

The implementation of MGNREGA (Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act) has got tremendous potential to bring about far reaching improvements in the socioeconomic life of the rural poor. The implementation of MGNREGA could be observed to be a boon to unemployed rural women in India, as it can enhance the socioeconomic and political empowerment of rural women. It may be noted that in spite of the fact that Kerala has got one of the best profiles of socioeconomic and educational achievements in the whole of India, the state is having a very high unemployment rate. This in turn enhances the prospects of MGNREGA in Kerala, particularly with respect to rural women. However, though there is high development potential, MGNREGA implementation in Kerala has been facing a number of problems and challenges. In the above context, this paper looks into the salient features of the Act, its efficacy in empowering rural women, along with its major problems and prospects; by making an empirical study at Kottappady Panchayat of Ernakulam district in Kerala.

2.Objectives Of The Study

- To make an overall review of the salient features of MGNREGA in India and its prospects, including the major challenges in its implementation, with a focus on Kerala;
- To make a critical analysis of the potential of MGNREGA in bringing about socio-economic and political empowerment of rural women, including the problems faced by them, based on a field study at Ernakulam district in Kerala;
- To offer meaningful suggestions for more effective implementation of MGNREGA based on the findings of the field study.

3.Methodology Of The Study

The study is both descriptive and analytical. It is descriptive to the extent that it seeks to narrate the salient features including major issues and challenges in the implementation of MGNREGA with special reference to Kerala. The study is analytical too as it makes a critical analysis of the potential of MGNREGA in bringing about socio-economic and political empowerment of rural women,

including analysis of the major problems faced by them. The data used are both secondary and primary. Secondary data are collected from authentic sources like Government publications such as Economic Review, Economic Survey, NSSO estimates etc.. Primary data are collected using a carefully designed, pre-tested Questionnaire from the 200 women workers understudy who is chosen at random from 'Kudumbashree' members at Kottapady Panchayat in Ernakulam district in Kerala. Popular tools of statistical analysis are used to analyse and interpret the data collected as above.

4.MGNREAGA Implementation In India

In fact, the National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (NREGS) which comes under the NREGA (now, MGNREGA) is a historic employment scheme in India for providing 100 days guaranteed wage employment for all employment seekers above 18 years of age and willing to do the work. NREGS has come into force on 5th September 2005 in 200 districts in India and has been extended to another 130 districts later. The ambitious NREGS scheme of the United Progressive Alliance (UPA) Government in India is embroiled in controversies ranging from embezzlement and misutilization of funds to defective implementation. There are a number of apprehensions and concerns over the state of affairs of NREGS implementation, including allegations regarding bringing in political colour to the implementation of the scheme. Besides, the ruling UPA front has been accusing misutilization of NREGS funds, mostly against the states where opposition parties are in power. Expressing concern over the implementation of NREGS, the bench has commented that several projects under the scheme are failing as the funds allocated for them either remain unutilized or in many cases money lands up in the wrong hands.

There is a classic case in Haryana where the funds meant for NREGS is allegedly misutilized in Ambala district. Though it is envisaged that there should be the maximum utilisation of all natural resources under NREGS to improve the living standards of the rural population, there are widespread complaints that the majority of the work in Ambala district under NREGS existed only on paper. Despite the inquiry reports recommending registration of criminal cases against the erring officers, no action has been taken so far. Another instance of misutilization of NREGS funds has been reported by the Union Minister of State for rural development, Pardeep Jain, who has revealed that the funds meant for the scheme are being diverted to renovate bungalows of district collectors in Madhya Pradesh. Similar charges of misutilization of funds have been leveled against the ruling U.P Government headed by Chief Minister Mayawati, according to which regarding the funds earmarked for the schemes like MGNREGA no one knows what happened to the money. It has further been reported that even after utilizing the entire funds under the scheme as provided in the budget, the government has not been able to provide a minimum of one hundred days of employment to the needy households who demand work under the scheme. In spite of some of the controversies in its implementation, MGNREGA has got tremendous potential for national economic development, particularly through empowerment of women and also the underprivileged classes. It has been officially declared by the Rural Development Ministry of the Government of India that women are contributing more than half the work force under this ambitious scheme. In fact, according to the Government women contribute about 52 percent of all households given employment under this scheme since 2008.

Recent study by Manoj P K (2011) [3] has looked into the problems and prospects of MGNREGA in India and has suggested a number of remedial strategies to tide over the problem. Another very recent study by Manoj P K (2012) [4] has looked into the utmost significance of ICT based tools for effective implementation of MGNREGA, including prevention of the possible misuse of the funds under the scheme using the potential of ICT advances.

5.MGNREAGA Implementation In Kerala: Progress, Problems And Prospects

In Kerala, NREGS was implemented in Palakkad and Waynad districts initially on 5th February 2006. The scheme was later extended to the remaining 12 districts in the state also on 1st April 2008. Kerala being a small state in the Indian Union with very high unemployment – most of the unemployed being educated also – the prospects of the scheme are quite good. Around five lakh people among the unemployed in Kerala are estimated to have a willingness to do physical labour. NREGS is a substantial boost in income and purchasing power.

5.1. NREGS Implementation In Kerala: Salient Features And Progress Made So Far

- In Kerala, the Local governments are given a central role in the planning and implementation of NREGA and are the sole agencies responsible for implementation of local development projects under the scheme in Kerala.
- Engineering support is put in place. In addition to one diploma/degree holder working on contract at the level of the Village Panchayat, there is a system of accredited engineers. Such engineers are drawn from amongst retired engineers, staff working in Engineering Colleges, Polytechnics/ ITIs, engineers working in NGOs etc. These engineers are paid at rates fixed by the Government for the work done by them. An engineer from a government department or agency, willing to help the Village Panchayat over and above his normal work, is allowed and paid at 50% of the rate applicable to others.
- Technical Sanction of the work is given not by individual engineers, but by a Technical Committee of engineers which includes a government engineer, a retired engineer and an engineer working in an academic institution for the purposes of transparency.
- An appellate system has been put in place at the district level to facilitate speedy sorting out of disputes.
- To mobilize the workers and the public and to assist the local governments in carrying out its duties, Village Panchayats has been given the freedom to identify one public servant of their choice having the time and inclination to do social work from any government department are posted on working arrangement as NREGS co-coordinators.

- Kudumbasree is given in the implementation of the programme. Under Kudumbasree every family below poverty line is organized into a Neighbourhood Group (NHG) at the local level consisting of 15 to 40 families with each family being represented only by a woman. The NHGs are federated into an Area Development Society (ADS) at the level of the Ward of the Village Panchayat (a Village Panchayat Ward in Kerala has a population of around 1500 to 2000). The ADSs in a Village Panchayat are federated into a registered body called the Community Development Society (CDS). Each NHG, ADS and CDS have five volunteers carrying out different functional roles. • The ADS has been entrusted with the task of organizing public works under NREGS. Muster Rolls and other records are maintained by the ADS, implements are provided to labourers by them and the transparency and monitoring requirements are also carried out by them. Welfare amenities to the workers are also provided by the ADS. Since ADS is an organization of the poor and is basically a woman's group, there has been greater sensitivity and community participation in the implementation process.
- The estimates are summarized in the local language so as to be understood by ordinary people. At the beginning of every work, the nature of work, expected out turn and the likely wages are explained to the workers' groups.
- Since Kerala has limited public land, the eco-restoration works are selected for integrated forest lands. Village Panchayats would implement the programme in forest areas with the technical supervision being done by field level officials of the Forest Department representing a new kind of relationship between a Panchayat Raj Institution and a government department.
- The road works has been limited to 10 percent of the total expenditure and to give special priority to integrated watershed development works.
- In Kerala the women have outnumbered the men in MGNREGA activities, than any other state in India. As per statistics with the Ministry of Rural Development of the Government of India, women have constituted 85.05 percent of the total 3,16,287 households which have been provided jobs under the Act since 2008.

5.2. Major Advantages Of NREGS In Kerala

In Kerala NREGS now provides Rs 125 per person for a stipulated quantity of manual labour offered as registered worker in the local governments, as against a National wage rate of just Rs.60/- per person. Besides, compared to the earlier wage employment programmes such as NREGA, RLEGP, JRY, EAS, SGRY, IRDP, SGSY, there are significant achievements under NREGS due to the combination of transparent processes and procedures, local action and constant vigilance, the implementation of NREGA has been comparatively corruption free. The factors contributing to this situation, inter alia, include the following:

- In Kerala, a clear political decision has been conveyed to the Panchayats stating that the scheme has to be implemented strictly as per the laws in force. The argument for an asset focused programme ignoring the processes and conforming to the procedures on paper, has been rejected. Likewise, another argument that Kerala would lose out as the demand for unskilled labour is very limited and as the wages are much higher than the statutory minimum wages in more than 90% of the State, it would be better to go for public works, has also been rejected in the case of this state.
- The work is organized through the Kudumbashree system. Accordingly, the poor have got a stake in the NREGS activities, right from the beginning of its implementation.
- The technocratic power that is responsible to accord technical sanction, measure works and recommend payments has been made more spread out in the state and it is made accountable through the Committee system. In case of difference of opinion the appellate system would be resorted to.
- In Kerala, a special emphasis has been given to the rights of workers and they have been made fully aware of their entitlements. Further, it has been stipulated that all the payments are made only through the individual bank accounts of workers. This has been done to obviate corruption in its implementation.

5.3. Major Problems And Impediments Of NREGS Implementation In Kerala

Though the Left parties (like, CPIM) are claiming that they have been instrumental in the enactment of the MGNREGA Act through sustained pressures on the ruling Government at the Centre, because of their commitment towards the upliftment of the poor, statistics show that in a Left ruled state like Kerala (and so also West Bengal) the implementation of the Act is lagging behind other states. As per the statistics compiled by the Government of India, while a job-seeking household under the scheme got over 40 days of employment on average nationally in 2008-09, in Kerala about 50 per cent of the rural poor did not avail even 15 days of employment during 2008-09. While a total of 6.3 lakh households availed jobs under the NREGA scheme in the state during the period, only 3.2 lakh sought more than 15 days of employment. In West Bengal, as high as 72 percent of such households did not get even 15 days of employment. At the national level, over 66 per cent households availed more than 15 days of employment during 2008-09. In the fiscal year 2009-'10 too, employment provided to job seekers in Kerala and West Bengal is far behind the national average. While the data compiled by the Rural Development Ministry for the first five months of this fiscal year has showed that on average 39 days of employment has been provided to job-seeking households nationally, in West Bengal the average has been just 19 days while the same in respect of Kerala has been just 16 days.

5.4. *Huge Potential Of MGNREGA In Kerala: Vital Role In Women Empowerment*

Because of the special features of MGNREGA implementation in Kerala, it has got high potential for women empowerment in the state, particularly because of the following reasons:

- As the work is organized by women's groups in Kerala, the gender perspective gets built in automatically. (This is because of the involvement of 'Kudumbashree' in MGNREGA)
- As women are comfortable working along with their neighbours, women constitute over 85 percent of the workers in Kerala – the highest women participation among all the states in India.
- For the first time equal wages are really paid and this has boosted the earnings of women.
- As the wages are paid into Bank accounts the habit of thrift which was already inculcated through the 'Kudumbashree' experiment has further been strengthened.
- As the Bank deposits are increasing, the intra-household status of the woman has also been improving commensurately as she controls substantial cash resources and withdrawal can be only on her decision.

Apart from the women empowerment point of view which is quite typical in Kerala, MGNREGA implementation has got tremendous potential for economic development of Kerala state, particularly through the socio-economic upliftment of the rural poor. Besides, NREGS has the potential to give a new dimension to the work culture in the state. While the workers have been hitherto controlled by contractors and their middlemen who know how to extract work. With the NREGS implementation the out-turn has been initially very poor as the workers could not be supervised properly. However, soon the workers have themselves realized that they would be losing collectively and a new internal dynamics evolved with peer pressure forcing workers to put in their maximum effort. Besides, a kind of social responsibility has also become evident as more capable workers have become more than willing to put in extra effort to make up for those who genuinely could not do hard work beyond a point, like the women and the elderly. In short, a new culture that promises far reaching benefits to the state in the future has begun to emerge.

Another implication of the MGNREGA implementation in Kerala has been the fact that public works have gained respectability. Hitherto such initiatives have been either highjacked either by a contractor or a local leader. At present, however, the workers consider it as their right. They tend to distinguish between wages provided by a contractor and wages directly given by the Panchayat. The latter is almost equated with a salary. This has motivated a large section of people who were hitherto unwilling to work into join the work force. There has been an interesting instance of a penurious descendant of the erstwhile Kollengode royal family in Palakkad District in Kerala taking an active part in NREGS and even motivating her relatives to join on the logic that self-help and access to legally entitled emoluments from a public source is better than charity from relatives

Yet another peculiarity of MGNREGA implementation in Kerala has been its integration with other developmental initiatives. Accordingly, strong natural resource management focus has been given to NREGS. For instance, the Bharathapuzha River rejuvenation with action plans emanating from the Village Panchayat as building blocks has been taken up as a mega project under the NREGS in Kerala.

In Kerala, there are attempts in the direction of integrating NREGS with People's Plan. Village Panchayats get more than Rs.1 crore on an average under the People's Plan. If intelligently dovetailed it is expected that substantial improvement in the quality of assets can be attained. In order to overcome the problem of shortage of technical staff, it has been decided to rope in voluntary services of reputed non-government organizations. Using the excellent network of Kudumbashree it has been decided in the State Employment Guarantee Council to develop a cadre of bare-foot technical volunteers from among the poor women. In order to develop the skills of the workers it has been decided to set up Labour Banks. A pilot has been launched in one Village Panchayat. The Labour Banks would be supported under People's Plan to take up other public works and even private works. It is well-nigh impossible to identify works in the plantation areas as well as in the coastal areas. It has been decided to seek the expert support from Government of India to come out with a shelf of projects which can be taken up in such geographical areas.

An innovative form of training has been developed by Kerala Institute of Local Administration (KILA) where there is a shift from the cascading model to a "ripple" model, according to which outstanding Panchayats become the master trainers and the neighbouring Panchayats formally learn from the experience of the best performers. Monitoring has been strengthened with the decision of the State Employment Guarantee Council to put in a system of State level and District level quality Monitors by identifying persons with a reputation for integrity and competence. The State level Monitors would be of two categories – outstanding individuals whose views are widely respected by society and senior Technical Experts capable of giving authoritative feedback on the quality of implementation. Further the State Employment Guarantee Council has decided to request a team consisting of eminent experts to conduct an independent assessment of Kerala's performance and offer suggestions for improvement.

5.5. *Strong Foundation And Markedly Superior Execution*

In spite of a number of teething problems that MGNREGA has been facing in the initial phase of its execution, it is clear that the policy focus on natural resource management and corruption-free implementation would bring in good returns. The administrative measures introduced in Kerala to implement the above Act with the active involvement of the Kudumbashree network have resulted in a strong foundation for it and has also opened up space for pro-poor innovations. The scheme has suddenly increased purchasing power of the poor and there is visible local economic development. This is particularly true of Wayanad District in Kerala which has been ridden with farmer suicides so far. The peasants have managed to get substantial relief from NREGS by getting over their inhibition in working as labourers in richer farmer's lands by moving on to the now-respectable public works.

A recent study conducted by Dr Jos Chathukulam and Dr K Gireesan, of Centre for Rural Management (CRM) has indicated that major defects identified during previous wage employment programmes in Kerala have been absent in the case of NREGS. The distinctive benefits of the scheme have been pointed out to be the provision of equal wages to men and women, non-involvement of contractors, very limited use of machinery, adherence to wage-material ratio etc. and also the absence of muster roll manipulations based on a study of its execution in the initial two districts of Palakkad and Wynad in Kerala.

6. Profile Of Rural Women Workers Under NREGS: Findings From The Field Study

As already noted there are 200 rural women workers in the sample selected for the study, cutting across different religions and castes. A brief discussion on the socio-economic and demographic profile of these women workers in the sample is given below.

Particulars	Profile of the rural women workers			
	Below 35	35 to50	Above 50	Total
No. of workers in each group	76	90	34	200
Percentage Share	38	45	17	100
Source: Field Survey				

Table 1

It is noted that 38 percent of the workers are below 35 years, 45 percent within 35-50 years and the rest 17 percent above 50 years. Thus, middle-aged (35-50 years) people account for relatively larger share in the sample workers under study as it is as high as 45 percent (Table I).

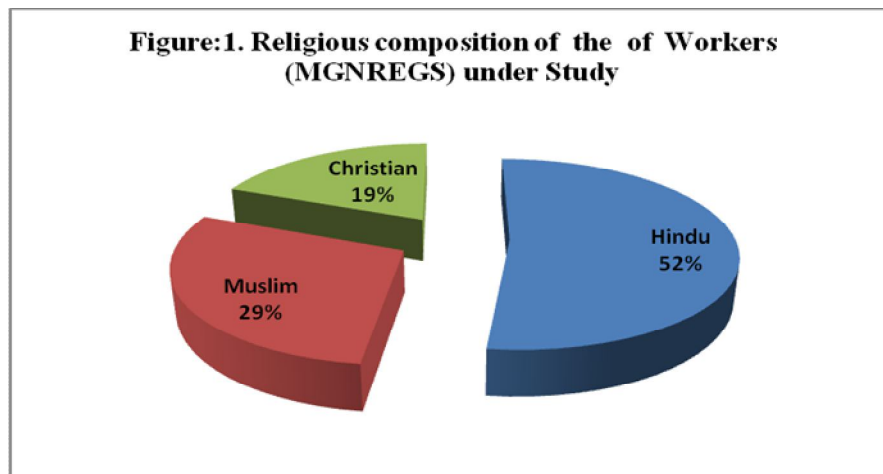


Figure 1

Source: Field Survey

From the figure 1 it is noted that majority of the workers are from the Hindu religion and they account for 52 percent of the total. Second come Muslim women workers who account 19 percent of the workers.

7. Women Empowerment Potential Of MGNREGA – Findings Of The Field Study

For assessing the women empowerment potential of MGNREGA by means of a field study, the following factors have been considered: (i) Better Financial planning and discipline, (ii) Freedom to spend and save the earnings, (iii) Freedom from money lenders and bankers, (iv) Deciding on purchase of household goods, (v) Freedom to decide on children's education, (vi) Raising voice against injustice, (vii) Expressing opinion in meetings/discussions, (viii) Election campaigning / contesting in elections, (ix) Public speaking ability. (Table IV)

Suitable weights are attached to the responses of the respondents viz. the 200 women workers under study as follows: 'Yes' Weight 2, 'To Some Extent' Weight 1, and 'No' Weight 0 (Table IV). Now, the factors leading to women empowerment can be categorized based on their empowerment potential into three major groups viz. High Empowerment, Moderate Empowerment and Low Empowerment as shown below:

Average Score below 0.67	–	Low Empowerment
Average Score between 0.67 to 1.33	–	Moderate Empowerment
Average Score above 1.33	–	High Empowerment

Table: II. Potential of MGNREGA for Women Empowerment in the study area					
Factors related to Socio-Economic and Political Empowerment of Women	Level of Empowerment			Total Score (weighted score of 810 employees each)	Weighted Average Score
	Yes (Weight 2)	To Some Extent (Weight 1)	No (Weight 0)		
Better Financial planning and discipline	163	32	5	358	1.79
Freedom to spend and save the earnings	153	40	7	346	1.73
Freedom from money lenders and bankers	123	67	10	313	1.57
Total Score for the 3 factors on Economic Empowerment				1017	1.70
Deciding on purchase of household goods	174	23	3	371	1.86
Freedom to decide on children's education	134	58	8	326	1.63
Raising voice against injustice	45	25	120	125	0.63
Total Score for the 3 factors on Social Empowerment				822	1.37
Expressing opinion in meetings/discussions	97	33	70	227	1.14
Election campaigning/contesting in elections	44	77	79	165	0.83
Public speaking ability	47	83	70	177	0.89
Total Score for the 3 factors on Political Empowerment				569	0.95
Grand Total Score for the 9 Social, Economic and Political factors				2408	1.34
Source: Field Survey					

Table 2

From Table II, it is noted that MGNREGA has got an appreciably high level of potential for women empowerment. This is evidenced from the high overall (total) score of 1.34 considering all the nine factors together. Besides, it is noted that the economic empowerment potential is the highest as evidenced by the very high scores of the first three individual factors and also a very high average score of 1.70 for the three factors taken together. In respect of social empowerment too, the overall potential for empowerment is high at the level of 1.37; and among the three individual factors in this group the factor 'Deciding on purchase of household goods' has got a very high (eventually the highest among all the nine factors under study) score of 1.86, followed by another factor 'Freedom to decide on Children's education' with a very high score of 1.63 while the third factor 'Raising voice against injustice' has got a rather poor score of 0.63. In respect of political empowerment, the average score for the three factors put together (0.95) as well as the individual scores for the three different factors are quite moderate. In short, it may be pointed out that MGNREGA implementation has given rise to very high level of economic empowerment, high level of social empowerment and quite moderate level of political empowerment of rural women.

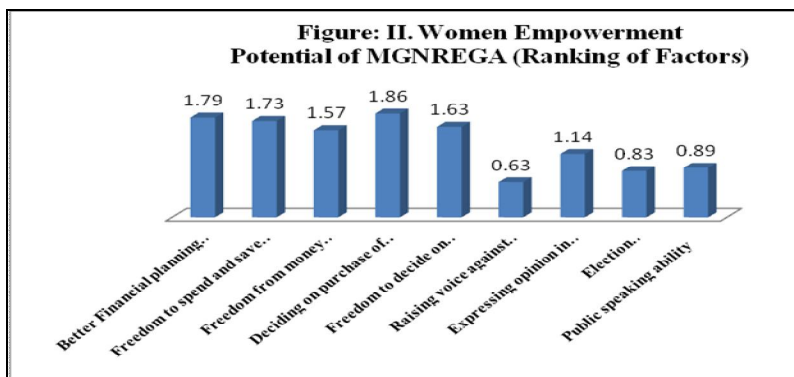


Figure 2

The summary position of the relative empowerment scope of the nine factors under study is shown in Table III. Accordingly, it is noted that MGNREGA has got high potential for empowering rural women in 5 vital aspects (factors) while it has got moderate potential for empowerment of rural women in respect of 3 other factors, and its potential is quite low in respect of one factor.

Table III. Categorization of Factors based on their Potential for Women Empowerment		
High Potential	Moderate Potential	Low Potential
(1) Better Financial planning and discipline, (2) Freedom to spend and save the earnings, (3) Freedom from money lenders and bankers, (4) Deciding on purchase of household goods, (5) Freedom to decide on children's education	(1) Expressing opinion in meetings/ discussions, (2) Election campaigning/ contesting in elections, (3) Public speaking ability	(1) Raising voice against injustice
Source: Based on the Scores computed from the Field Survey data shown in Table IV		

Table 3

8. Suggestions For Effective Use Of MGNREGA For Women Empowerment In India

For smoother implementation of MGNREGA in India, the model followed by Kerala appears to be quite advisable for the entire country. Apart from ensuring women empowerment it results in lesser instances of corruption and exploitation by the middlemen. However, except for a few states like Tamil Nadu, many other Indian states might not be having a strong machinery like 'Kudumbashree' in Kerala. This in turn results in MGNREGA implementation in such states less replicable from the Kerala model. However, other operational formalities (than ensuring the involvement of poverty alleviation programme like "Kudumbashree"), like ensuring better decentralization of powers in implementation activities, giving the central role of implementation to the local self government organizations, accrediting external technicians and engineers (ie. Those from outside the regular job / contract employment under the scheme) on adhoc basis etc. seems to be quite desirable for any state in India. Regular monitoring and follow up of the system, minimizing the bureaucratic interventions are quite essential for the success of the scheme. It may be pointed out that involving poverty alleviation programmes (like, "Kudumbashree" in Kerala) can make its implementation more meaningful and can ensure high level of women empowerment, socio-economic as well as political, in other states too.

9. Concluding Remarks

In view of the foregoing, it may be opined that Kerala has got excellent potential to become a role model for the entire nation for systematic and corruption-free implementation of MGNREGA. The strong presence of the poverty alleviation programme of the State Government viz. 'Kudumbashree' has made the position of MGNREGA implementation in this state unique; ensuring high level of effectiveness and transparency unlike in most other states in India. The field study has shown that there is quite high level of potential for MGNREGA for socio-economic empowerment of women, and reasonable (moderate) level of political empowerment too. The experience so far being satisfactory, the Kerala's model of MGNREGA implantation could replicated in other states. The Act appears to be quite meaningful and powerful for rural development in general and women empowerment in particular for the entire nation. The problem lies not in the Act per se, but in its defective implementation and lack of proper monitoring; as is evident from the bad experiences and unhealthy practices. Involvement of the middlemen, political and bureaucratic exploitation, misuse of funds, muster roll manipulation, lack of transparency etc. need to be strictly controlled. The prospects of the MGNREGA for rural development and women empowerment are quite bright provided it is properly executed.

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