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# **Social Reproduction in the time of Neoliberalization: The Role of the Employment Guarantee in India**

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*Abstract:* Privatization and informalization of production, land fragmentation and the agrarian crisis in India has forced a significant fraction of rural households to underconsume and widened the income gap at a time of relatively high economic growth. Despite the significant role of the state in precipitating and intensifying this crisis, and in vindicating Polanyi's notion of a double movement, the state has also invested in social schemes such as the National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (NREGS). Seven years after this scheme was first implemented, there is growing evidence of a seemingly contradictory picture of the NREGS. This paper reviews current literature on the performance of the scheme. The paper aims to answer two questions. First, how has the program performed in mitigating underconsumption in rural areas? Second, how has it changed social relations?

## **Social Reproduction in the time of Neoliberalization: The Role of the Employment Guarantee in India**

### ***1. Introduction***

Social protection policies are increasingly gaining much prominence in non-OECD countries such as in China, Brazil, India, and South Africa among others. In India, the ruling coalition has placed emphasis on public works programs and social security for workers in the unorganized sector in its Common Minimum Program. Most significantly, the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA) passed in 2005 and enacted in 2006, was lauded as a landmark legislation – a “historic opportunity” to transform socioeconomic conditions in the country (Shah, 2004). Given the outbreak of farmer suicides, starvation deaths, reports of high levels of malnutrition and growing inequities, this was indeed a welcome piece of legislation.

Despite skepticism and criticisms about the effectiveness of the program, there is no doubt that it has changed the economic situation of the rural population, at least in some parts of the country. The program has also spurred numerous studies investigating the impact of the program at various spatial levels. How might we view this “landmark legislation” as a contradiction in a neoliberal milieu? Notwithstanding criticisms that this government program is (potentially) prone to rent-seeking, corruption and inefficiencies,

other critics have argued that as a social protection policy it might make neoliberal and structural adjustment policies more palatable (e.g., Li, 2009; Mingione, 1985; Mkandawire, n.d.). Such a view is borne out in the literature that suggests that social protection would allow accumulation of human capital, improve infrastructure to facilitate interlinking of markets, improve growth prospects (Gentilini and Omamo, 2011), or that public works programs such as those facilitated by NREGA would increase market efficiency and productivity and reduce objections to greater flexibility in labor regulations (Keefe and Palaicos,). The inherent merit to providing social protection appears to be subsumed by the larger objectives of productivity, efficiency and growth.

In this paper I review existing literature on the impacts of NREGA using a specific theoretical lens of social reproduction. The paper poses two questions: how has this program fared in providing the means for the reproduction of human life and does it offer a change in existing social relations of production.

## ***2. Social Reproduction***

### *2.1 The Basis for Capitalist Production: Reproduction of Labor*

From a Marxian perspective, social reproduction has to do with the reproduction of the labor force, which is commoditized in capitalist production, and the maintenance of class relations. Labor creates new value but is not created by capital and contributes to the

maintenance of the industrial reserve army of labor, also referred to as the relative surplus population or the laboring surplus population (Mingione, 1985). Labor itself is a “special” commodity (also a fictitious commodity). Social reproduction is associated with conditions of capitalist accumulation both because labor is an important input into the production process and because it affects the consumption capacity. The production of surplus value is dependent on the reproduction of workers. This not requires the consumption of goods to replenish energy and sustain workers life, but also is dependent on activities undertaken to consume those goods as well as the inculcation of social norms etc. Further, this is needed for present workers but capital accumulation is also dependent on the reproduction of future workers. This constitutes all labor undertaken in household tasks and care work. When reproductive work is carried out by members of the household or community and unremunerated then it becomes invisible. Marx recognized the continual process of creating human beings, satisfying their needs, recreating their needs and reproducing human beings as part of a historical process in *The German Ideology* and Engels in the preface to *Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State* identifies materialist production and human reproduction as the basis of a materialist conception. However, the interdependence of production and reproduction was not given much weight in later analyses (Humphries, 1987: 11; Marshall, 1994: 65).

Feminists, on the other hand, perceive social reproduction as not only the social act of not only reproducing labor but also reproducing human life in general, which includes satisfaction of basic needs. In this they have played a significant role in highlighting the historical role imposed on women, and analyzing the importance domestic labor to the

capitalist system. In some cases, however, the discussion tends to be focused on gender relations and sexual division of labor to the exclusion of an analysis of production (Ramamurthy, 2010).

An alternative approach is to adopt a dialectic understanding of the relationship between production and reproduction to analyze social reproduction. Hence in this paper attention is paid not only to the invisible, feminized work carried out by women, but also the reproduction of general features of the relationship between labor and capital (Ramamurthy, 2010; also Marshall 1994). More specifically, the focus will be on the rural proletariat and semi-proletariat – the target of the employment guarantee program, NREGS. Such an understanding of social reproduction analyzes the economic roles of gendered persons in capitalist societies. It also recognizes the role of institutions such as the state, familial and kin relationships, markets, and institutions governing access to environmental assets and resources in facilitating and perpetuating social reproduction. These determine the costs and incomes of labor, economic and human development (also see Mingione, 1985).

## *2.2 Social Reproduction under Neoliberal Capital*

In discussing social reproduction, Mingione (1985) suggests two contradictions that arise from the structures of demand and social reproduction and result in a specific wage/income structure and a specific capacity for commodification of goods and services

(these relate to the costs of production and the consumption capacity in the economy).

A) Capitalist accumulation under the condition of high degree of commodification is likely to increase the costs of labor reproduction undesirable to capital. B) Accumulation under the condition of a disproportionate expansion of surplus labor is likely to lead to insufficient commodification and strong overproduction tendencies. He further adds the second contradiction in “developed” countries was previously hidden due to shifting of this contradiction to “developing” countries. However, under the current conditions of globalization it is no longer possible for countries to be protected against these contradictions.

With a high degree of surplus labor and until recently a high dependence on subsistence and own-account production, India could be said to be suffering from the second contradiction. Under a neoliberal milieu, the country has been experiencing high growth but low labor absorption and high degree of rural dispossession due to land grab by the state or state-supported private entities, inability to withstand competition in international agricultural markets, and closing of forests and other natural resources for conservation (Li, 2009) or “green” markets. The surplus population, relative to its utility to capital, is thus viewed as a potential reserve army of labor that is an important condition for capital accumulation. But acknowledging the need for a surplus population does not address how this population will be kept alive in order to be useful to capital when needed (Li, 2009).

Some have rightly argued that the highest costs of structural adjustment programs under neoliberalism are paid by countries of the global South and even within these countries

on those who exist on the economic, social and political margins of society (e.g., Floro, 1995; Floro and Hoppe, 2008). Despite the slew of fallouts from privatization, and informalization, these policies are part of the new labor-capital and people-state contracts (see Bakker and Gill, 2008). Yet it is during this time that there has been an increased push toward safety nets, employment schemes and a rhetoric concerned with sustaining human life as reflected in the Beijing Platform for Action and Millennium Development Goals.

Gentilini and Omamo (2011) provide a brief history of investment in programs with welfare implications. They note that institutions such as the World Bank began advocating for “adjustment with a human face” approach and inclusive growth in the late 1980s and early 1990s as a response to the effects of market-oriented and trickle down growth policies. The Asian economic crisis, rising food prices and energy crises further shaped what is now referred to as social protection policies, which take on a broader and more “holistic” approach toward poverty alleviation and welfare programs (Devereux, 2003; Ravallion, 2003). This has percolated to policy making in individual countries. For instance, the 11<sup>th</sup> Five Year Plan in India has advocated for social protection programs as a key to reducing poverty, increasing equity and engaging in inclusive growth (Dev, 2011). This provides a context for the implementation of the NREGS beginning 2006.

### ***3. NREGS and MGNREGS***



India has had a history of diverse and patchy welfare arrangements with only an allusion to a coherent social policy (Palriwala and Neetha, 2009). These programs were put in place to mitigate the inability of markets or the family (Palriwala and Neetha, 2009) to provide for social reproduction. Compared to the presence of welfare states in high-income countries of the Global North, the Indian state plays a smaller role in welfare provision in countries of the Global South. Gough (2004) thus refers to it as welfare regimes rather than welfare state regimes as an analytical term.

The National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA) of 2005, later modified to Mahatma Gandhi NREGA (MGNREGA) is a right to work scheme that promises 100 days of work to one member of all rural households willing to participate in unskilled manual labor at the statutory minimum wage for the program. According to the legislation, work has to be provided within 15 days of receiving an application to work barring which the household/ individual is entitled to unemployment allowance. Provisions in the Act mandates at least one-third of the workers should be women. The place of work is also mandated to provide childcare services if more than five children under the age of six are present. Additionally, NREGA projects are to be undertaken to improve infrastructure and facilities within the villages after consultation with the villagers. The legislation is a result of efforts by different groups to draw attention to the food crisis and lack of employment faced by rural poor in India (Khera and Nayak, 2009). Even though the initial demands of the citizen's draft were diluted in the final enactment of the legislation, Khera and Nayak (2009) claim that it is a significant step forward in creating a social security mechanism for the poor.

An employment guarantee program such as the NREGS is expected to mitigate problems of livelihoods and employment generation. It is expected to generate income and increase consumption levels of those willing and able to participate in unskilled manual labor. Hence it could reduce poverty and improve food security, and thereby help achieve MDG goals (Antonopolous, 2007). It could also improve social infrastructure, depending on what projects are undertaken. Drawing on the views propounded by development economists such as Nurkse and Hirshman, Hirway (2007) also suggests that investing in productive assets by expanding employment opportunities would crowd-in investment. By generating employment and essentially instituting a wage floor through the guarantee of a certain wage, it could improve the bargaining position of individuals and households and reduce labor market distortions (Dutta et al., 2012). Just as importantly, it could go a long way in creating a sense of entitlement rather than charity thus empowering a significant majority of the Indian population (Dutta et al., 2012).

### *3.1 Effect on Relative 'Surplus' Population -- NREGA Participation*

In February 2006 NREGS was implemented in 200 of the most economically backward rural districts in the country, employing 21 million households and generating 905 million person days of work. An additional 130 districts were brought under the purview of the scheme in April 2007, benefiting a total 33.9 million households and generating 1.4 billion person days of employment. Under phase III beginning April 2008, the

program was operational in 596 rural districts in the country (Ministry of Rural Development, 2010).

Data from the 66<sup>th</sup> NSS<sup>1</sup> Round show that except for five states (Assam, Bihar, Punjab, J&K, U.P.), the female share of employment in NREGS (48.1%) is higher than the mandated 33 percent (Dutta et al, 2012). These aggregate figures correspond to data obtained from fieldwork. Khera and Nayak (2009) surveyed 1060 NREGA male and female workers in 98 work sites across ten districts in five states (Bihar, Chhatisgarh, Jharkhand, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan and Uttar Pradesh). Their sample consisted of 32 percent female workers. Their survey revealed that only 30 percent of the female respondents had reported earning cash income prior to NREGA work. Most of this was casual, insecure, irregular, hazardous, and most of all reinforced gender biases at the place of work. A study of NREGS workers in three states Karnataka, Orissa and Madhya Pradesh revealed that 59 percent of female workers belonged to the poorest quartile, while over 80 percent of male workers belonged to the second poorest quartile (Dev et al., 2006 cited in Dev 2008). Joshi et al. (2008) also find that the NREGS has also encouraged women of upper castes with limited mobility and low participation in the wage market to work under the aegis of NREGS. This indicates an increase in female participation in formal wage work and a mitigation on “invisible” constraints faced by many women workers (also, Azam, 2012; Pankaj and Tankha, 2009)

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<sup>1</sup> NSS or NSSO stands for National Sample Survey Organisation.

Based on 2009-2010 NSS data, Dutta et al. (2012) find that households of all consumption quintile have job cards, demand NREGS work and participate in NREGS work. While the demand rate of the poorest consumption quintile is 0.609, the demand rate for the richest quintile is 0.309. However, participation rate of the poorest quintile is 0.335 whereas that of the richest quintile is 0.138. Thus, participation rates of the poor are higher than that of the non-poor overwhelmingly due to the demand for NREGS work by the former but non-poor households also demand NREGS work. Based on a survey based on ten districts in six north-Indian states in 2008, Dreze and Khera (2009) report that 81 percent of the sample households lived in *kaccha* houses, 71 percent did not have electricity and 61 percent were illiterate. Pankaj's (2008) study of districts in Bihar and Jharkhand finds that landholdings and the value of assets held by beneficiaries is lower than non-beneficiaries across all caste categories, though the asset base of SC and ST households is even lower than that held by beneficiaries in other caste categories.

Pankaj et al. (2008) reveals that in Bihar the beneficiaries are overwhelmingly SCs (53 percent), landless (80 percent) and casual agricultural workers (78 percent). In Jharkhand, the same study found that households that benefit the most are STs (48 percent), landless (30 percent), small and marginal farmers (49 percent), and casual workers in agriculture (40 percent) and non-agriculture (35 percent)<sup>2</sup>. These results are generally corroborated by data from other field studies that find high participation rates by SCs, STs and OBCs

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<sup>2</sup> SC (scheduled castes), STs (scheduled tribes) and OBCs (other backward castes) have historically borne the brunt of caste oppression.

(e.g., Dutta et al., 2012; Dreze and Khera, 2009; Pankaj, 2008; Pankaj and Tankha, 2009) though Azam (2012) finds no evidence of higher labor force participation by SCs and STs and Jitendra (2013) reports that participation by SCs and STs may be declining.

The empirical literature, suggests that availability of wage work has increased for able-bodied women, SCs and STs. Moreover, MGNREGS also offers higher wage opportunities to those in the lowest consumption quintiles and hence are likely to be the most poor. The program thus appears to fulfill one of its objectives of offering the possibility of wage work to the “surplus” population. While official data from the MGNREGS website suggests that 99.4 percent (52.53 million) of the total 52.865 million households that demanded work in 2009-2010, Dutta et al. (2012) note that this data may not accurately reflect “true” demand. Instead they employ data from NSS 66<sup>th</sup> Round (2009-2010) to estimate participation rates.

Despite its generally positive performance, NREGS faces some limitations that have implications for social reproduction. First, the participation rate<sup>3</sup> calculated by Dutta et al. (2012) certainly indicates a higher level of participation by the marginalized SCs and STs at 42 and 33 percent respectively, which is higher than the participation rate of the “other” caste category (15 percent). Nevertheless, that only 42 and 33 percent of SCs and STs are able to get NREGS work given that it is intended to be a demand driven program is of concern.

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<sup>3</sup> Dutta et al. (2012) calculate participation rate as  $(1-R_i)D_i$  where  $R_i$  = proportion of households that demanded work but did not get it and  $D_i$  = proportion of household who wanted work in the scheme. Participation rate itself is interpreted as share of rural households working in MGNREGS.

Second, while the NREGS allows for a maximum of 100 days of work, the average number of days worked under the scheme has been very low. Dutta et al. (2012) based on NSS data calculate the average number of days for all rural households in 2009-2010 was nine days. The mean for the poorest consumption quintile was 11.3 days and for the richest quintile was 5.5 days. However, the mean person days of NREGS work for the poorest quintile participating in NREGS is 33.7 days, it is slightly higher for the richest quintile at 40 days (Dutta et al., 2012). Based on government's own reports on the NREGS, Jha and Gaiha (2012) report that average person days of employment under NREGS per household decreased from 39.06 in 2009-2010 to 30.63 in 2011-2012. The mean percentage of households that completed 100 days of work also showed a slight decrease from 3 percent to 2.27 percent.

Third, NREGS work more often than not excludes separated or divorced women living in their natal homes, female headed households, the elderly and the handicapped. Further, due to the provision of one job card per household, it normalizes heteronormative households. Fourth, high productivity norms exclude the elderly and disabled from participating in NREGS work (Palriwala and Neetha, 2009).

Thus, despite the relative success of providing jobs to women, SCs and STs, groups that typically constitute the marginalized population in the country, the MGNREGS does not provide jobs for all of the population that might be considered surplus relative to their utility to capital. Thus, not only is the demand for NREGS jobs unmet, but even for those

with jobs, the mean number of days is less than the promised 100 days of work. Furthermore, the exclusion of some members of society such as the elderly and disabled excludes what Marx referred to as the stagnant part of the relative surplus population. This suggests that despite the rhetoric, social protection is being extended only to able-bodied persons who constitute the floating or latent parts of the relative surplus population. In other words, it appears to provide for those who might be able to participate in a capitalist labor market with its demands on productivity and efficiency.

One way to understand the contradiction of social protection such as MGNREGS at a time when the state is increasingly abdicating its role in development and making welfare provisions would be to suggest that social protection that is offered is minimal - a way to avoid the embarrassment of under-consumption that is plaguing a significant proportion of the Indian population. Another way to understand the contradiction is to suggest that it is an attempt to mitigate the possibility of widespread social unrest and create “dangerous classes” (Chatterjee, 2008), a Polanyian ‘double movement’. Neither seems implausible in the Indian context though it would be disingenuous to view these as the only explanations.

### *3.2 Wages and Entitlements*

It is expected that the creation of jobs will not only reduce the amount of “surplus” population, but MGNREGS wages will act as a price floor. The latter is significant

because MGNREGS jobs are mandated to be at least at minimum wage. This would increase the wages of both male and female workers by improving their bargaining capacity. Further, many women workers have expressed a preference for working at NREGS worksites because many worksites are situated in their villages, and because in non-public casual work they often face sexual and other forms of harassment. However, the results from existing studies provide mixed results.

Based on investigation of a district each in four states, Pankaj and Tankha's (2010) study reveals that despite some success in Himachal Pradesh, actual wages of women workers is less than the prescribed minimum wage. However, it was greater than the market wage in the districts surveyed in the four states. Pankaj's (2008) study in Bihar and Jharkhand also reveals a similar pattern wherein except for Supaul district, worksites in the remaining five districts in Bihar paid lower than minimum wage. In Jharkhand, none of the three districts surveyed worksites consistently met the minimum wage requirement even though wages were close to the minimum wage. Similarly, Dutta et al (2012) find that a comparison of average wage rates for NREGS work (obtained by MGNREGS spending on unskilled labor divided by total person days of employment) with average wages in private casual labor (obtained from NSS reports) does not yield a clear positive picture. While at the all India level, rural wages and MGNREGS wages are close, for half the states MGNREGS wages are lower than the average wage rate for casual labor. Given the extent of rationing where demand for jobs is greater than participation, they argue that it is not possible for casual non-public works wage rate to be higher than MGNREGS due to competition for labor (also see Ravi and Engler, 2013 who obtain similar results).



Azam (2012) finds that real wages have increased but only because of an increase in real wages for women whose market wages tend to be much lower than minimum wages. Except for HP, Kerala, TN and Uttarakhand, NREGS wages are much higher than market wages for women in the remaining states.

Nevertheless, the existence of an employment guarantee program is likely to have an effect on labor-capital relations in favor of labor. It offers an alternative to exploitative wage relationships if the NREGS stipulation banning contractors is followed. In states where MGNREGS wages are above the market wage, under certain conditions of increased labor demand it could cause an upward revision of rural wages. Another important aspect of the MGNREGS is that while it highlights the role of a “benevolent provider” (Dreze and Khera, 2009), it has created awareness of entitlements and politically mobilized people, thus likely changing the state-people relation.

### *3.3 Impact on Incomes and Consumption*

NREGS departs considerably from previous workfare programs implemented in post-Independent India in few respects. One distinguishing feature is that it is demand driven and implicitly accepts that the problem of under-consumption is endemic and not just restricted to times of natural disasters (Palriwala and Neetha, 2009). Despite the low number of average days of work under MGNREGS, income derived from this work is not insignificant for some states and some sections of the beneficiaries. In a survey of 11

villages and 15 NREGS worksites in two blocks in Villipuram district (Tamil Nadu), about 41 percent respondents declared that NREGA had been their only source of income during the lean agricultural months. These included agricultural labor but also marginal farmers who were disinclined to work uncultivable land (Narayanan, 2008). Chhabra et al. 2009 (cited in Dev, 2011) finds that the share of NREGS income in total wage income was substantial for the districts surveyed in Madhya Pradesh - 18.6 per cent, 25.8 per cent and 16.6 per cent in the *kharif*, *rabi* and summer agricultural seasons respectively; the share of NREGS income to total income, however, was less than 10 percent. Pankaj's (2008) study also produced similar results. The contribution of NREGS income to total income was 8.4 percent in Bihar and only 2.4 percent in Jharkhand. The contribution of NREGS income was highest for SCs (11.74 percent), landless households (8.9 percent) and marginal farmers (7.9 percent) in Bihar. In Jharkhand however, the contribution of NREGS income was less than 4 percent across all land and caste categories. In their study of four states (Bihar, Jharkhand, Rajasthan and Himachal Pradesh) Pankaj and Tankha (2010) find that NREGS income in total earning of households with women workers ranged from 13 percent in Gaya (Bihar) to 27 percent in Dungarpur (Rajasthan). On average NREGS had a share of 18 percent for all four states. It should be mentioned that Dutta et al (2012), using aggregate NSSO data find that despite expectations and the fact that poverty rate at the all-India level is positively correlated with demand rates ( $r = 0.5$ ), state-wide and national data show that rural poverty rates are only weakly correlated (0.13) with participation and MGNREGS spending per capita ( $r = -0.02$ ) for 2009-10 and 2010-11 (Dutta et al., 2012).

Income, alone, does not indicate how important NREG employment is to rural households. This is relevant due to the debate on whether there is indeed a crisis of social reproduction. While some have argued that decreasing caloric consumption in India and that the increasing incidence of casual work in rural India indicates a deepening crisis and rural distress, others have argued against it (e.g., Deaton and Dreze, 2009; Patnaik, 2007, 2010; also see Himanshu, 2011; Thomas, 2012). While a discussion on the structure of rural employment is beyond the scope of this paper, a high expenditure on food would suggest that non-NREGS wage income is insufficient to guarantee a minimum level of consumption, i.e., the basic needs of social reproduction. On the other hand, if NREGS income allows households to potentially break out of a low income- low savings cycle or at the very least have sufficient to withstand economic shocks then it is telling of a very different economic scenario

Ravi and Engler (2013) collected data from 1064 households from 198 villages in Andhra Pradesh in 2007 and 2008. Their study reveals an increase of monthly per capita expenditure on food by Rs. 25.8 (9.6 percent) and on non-food consumables by Rs. 11.17 (23 percent). They also found that NREGS households were consuming one additional meal and at least one member of a NREGS household was consuming 3.2 additional meals per week. This suggests improved food security for NREGS household though it would be useful to know the gap that needs to be bridged to consider these households food secure. Further, Uppal (2009) found a weak but positive association between participation in NREGA by parents and anthropometric scores of children under the age of six. These measures taken as indicators of health outcomes suggest the possibility of

higher consumption by children though the results were not robust across econometric specifications.

Chhabra et al (2009, cited in Dev, 2011) reports that respondents in Gujarat and Andhra Pradesh did not perceive NREGS income playing a role in addressing the issues of hunger, migration or illness. Other fieldwork studies suggest otherwise. A high proportion of NREGS workers spent the income earned on food, medical expenses and education (Dreze and Khera, 2009; Pankaj, 2008; Joshi et al., 2008). NREGS income was expended in categories that constitute the range of activities associated with social reproduction.

Citing the case of seemingly successful programs such as the Maharashtra EGS and SGRY, Palriwala and Neetha (2009) note that while they enabled survival as opposed to a fate of starvation, they did not push people out of poverty or ensure economic independence, especially for women. They attribute this “crisis” to inadequate labor commodification and “familialism”. Ravi and Engler (2013), however, find that the probability of savings for NREGS households increased by 21 percent and savings by Rs. 18.6. However, they conducted their survey in Andhra Pradesh, one of the states in which MGNREGS wages are greater than market wages, participation rates are among the highest, mean number of MGNREGS days worked is high, and per capita expenditure is also very high. It is unclear if MGNREGS has increased the savings capacity of households in other states. Further, despite the rationale of an endemic crisis underlying the MGNREGS, in reality implementation often takes on the character of a temporary

relief measure (Hirway, 2008; Ghosh, 2008)

While NREGS work constitutes constructing assets that would be beneficial to the community, its intention is to ensure livelihoods and a minimum level of consumption. Studies based on fieldwork provide a wide variety of responses with respect to the impact of NREGA. Rural India is primarily agrarian, providing close to 52% of total employment and suffers from economic disarticulation. However, in field study sites, for a high proportion of respondents non-farm wage income constituted the major portion of their income and were yet highly dependent on NREGS income (e.g. Joshi et al., 2008; Pankaj and Tankha, 2010).

The inability of the capitalist system to provide a living wage to the dispossessed has been termed by Bernstein (2004) as the central agrarian question. Thus a subsidy is required either through household production, charity, state provision, petty commodity production etc. (Gimenez, 1995). While previously subsistence or own-account production of agricultural or natural resource goods in rural India might have provided a wage subsidy, the attrition of such production to land grabs, competition from international markets and enclosure of forests and other natural resources makes such a subsidy less likely. Thus while rural households can no longer subsist purely on the basis of an agrarian economy, the wage system does not provide for the rural households either. In other words, the real wage is less than what is required to reproduce labor and labor power. Under this situation, NREGS income becomes a likely source of subsidy to the capitalist economy system, in addition to domestic work, household production and

care work. Visible and invisible work provided by men and women takes on the costs of socially necessary labor and accepts a subordinate position in the process of capital accumulation (Bakker and Gill, 2003; Gimenez, 1995; Peterson, 2002; Ramamurthy, 2010).

### *3.4 Effect on care work and gender relations*

There has been considerable concern in India about the declining female labor force participation rate in India after an increase in the period 1999-2000 to 2004-2005. It has been argued that the earlier increase in female labor force participation was a result of agrarian distress. Thomas (2012) offers the following explanation. During a period of grave agrarian distress, with negative incomes as high as 19% and 36%) 16.9 million women of the total 18.5 million joined the rural agricultural labor force to alleviate decreasing household income. The just as sharp decline between 2004-05 and 2009-2010 when 22 million women withdrew from the agricultural labor force, Thomas (2012) argues is indicative of improvement in India's rural economy and is suggestive of the impact of MGNREGA. This is a view held by many others (e.g., Himanshu, 2013; Jatav and Sen, 2013).

However, MGNREGA, in the period 2004-2005 to 2009-2010 was only able to employ 2.5 million workers. At the same time, India is still under the throes of the agrarian crisis. An estimated 14,462 farmers committed suicide on average in the period 1995 to 2000 and the period between 2001-2011 averaged 16,743 suicides for a total of 270,940 in the

period 1995-2011 (Sainath, 2013). So while the U-shaped female labor force function may have some merit, it cannot be the only explanation. In light of jobless growth, especially inadequate employment opportunities for rural women, NREGS work has offered many women the possibility of engaging in paid work, sometimes for the first time because NREGS work is associated with regularity and predictability, there is a lower chance of exploitative work, being a government job confers it some dignity; and since NREGS worksites are mandated to be within five kilometers of residence, it is socially and feasible work for women under existing gender norms (Khera and Nayak, 2009). While in some cases NREGA is associated with the enforcement of gender inequities, it nevertheless allows the possibility of economic and “personal” independence (Khera and Nayak, 2009; Narayanan, 2008; Pankaj, 2010)

Another significantly different aspect of the NREGS compared to its public works predecessors is its commitment to incorporate at least one-third women workers and provide childcare if the number of children under the age of six is greater than five. Despite the progressive legislation, however, the abysmal lack of crèche facilities at MGNREGA worksites in contravention of provisions of the program is a significant deterrent to the participation of women workers since childcare is gendered work (Dreze and Khera, 2009; Joshi et al., 2008; Pankaj, 2008). Yet another negative fallout of lack of childcare facilities is that when women with infants or very young children are forced or opt to participate in NREGS work, education of their older school-going children, sometimes as young as five or six years, may be disrupted so that they may perform care work instead (Bhatty, 2006; CESS, 2009; Narayanan, 2009). In some other cases, women

reported leaving the child alone at home unsupervised (50 percent of the respondents in the survey conducted by Narayanan, 2009) or brought to the site and left unprotected in harsh weather condition (Bhatt, 2006), or sent to anganwadis, balwadis<sup>4</sup> or school depending on the age of the child and availability of such facilities close the village (Narayanan, 2009). Many respondents complained of experiencing stress and anxiety when childcare was unavailable. While some have argued against the necessity of providing a crèche on the worksite if the village has an anganwadi or school, such an argument does not account for the care of infants or very young children. Narayanan's (2008) survey of mothers with young children in Villipuram district in Tamil Nadu reveals that close to 65 percent of the respondents were not even aware that NREGS work entitles them with access to a crèche.

This problem highlights the importance of socialized childcare (including crèches, anganwadis and school) in the physical and mental wellbeing of many workingwomen, on whom the double burden of wage work and social reproduction is imposed. The relative low importance accorded to the provision of crèches suggests the continuing invisibility of care work and the impact of women and children who are drawn into this work. It also suggests the continued sexual inequities under capitalism reflected in the lack of access to the material conditions requisite for “daily and generational reproduction (Gimenez, 1982). The NREGS work provided by the state occurs under an economic system in which capitalism is the dominant mode of production. Women and

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<sup>4</sup> Anganwadis and balwadis are government-sponsored and often government-run organizations providing child and infant care.



children are thus recruited in the care work of the surplus population of which the reserve army of labor forms a constituent part.

### *Conclusions*

The reduced viability and destruction of other modes of production in a dominant capitalist society has made social reproduction difficult and migration more desirable. Further, labor absorption has primarily resulted in precarious work, which is usually low paying and insecure. The destruction of rural industry and agriculture and forest based activities means that it is no longer possible for these activities to subsidize wage labor. Under this economic situation, NREGS offers significant support to the business of social reproduction. This is clear from responses obtained by interviewing beneficiaries. However, NREGS falls short of provisioning for daily and generational reproduction and transforming gender and class relations in the following ways.

First, despite being provided by the state, NREGS work, its contribution to basic consumption of the household and the care work that is provided by working women and children is invisibilized and continues to be subordinate to capitalist accumulation. Nevertheless, due to the historical specificity of institutions in the rural economy, along with spread on neoliberal ideologies, NREGS is viewed as an impediment to the development of the Indian economy, thus giving rise to a potential contradiction.

Second, income derived from NREGS work has definitely contributed to satisfying basic needs of households though it has not solved the problem of underconsumption both owing to inadequate work and inadequate income generated from this work. Moreover, due to the significant deficit in employment generation, NREGS even as it plays a role in social reproduction, due to the demands of capital appears to incorporate rural peoples in the calculus of capitalist cost-benefit analysis. This would suggest the maintenance of some portion of the population as the reserve army of labor.

Third, in addition to the work carried out at NREGA sites, women continue to carry out care work, which increases their double burden, as is the case in different forms of market work. This is true despite the provisions of the act that mandate childcare facilities. Where women are not the primary care givers, the burden shifts to older children of the family, thus either making them responsible for their own care but also that of their siblings. It also reduces the possibility of graduating from secondary and higher secondary school and could reduce the possibility of “improved” avenues of social reproduction.

Fourth, where employment is provided, it is provided to the traditional heteronormative household. Female-headed households, and those disabled, may be at considerable disadvantage because the NREGS fails to account for those who are not able-bodied and potentially useful for capital. Thus they still have to rely on the extended family for their reproduction. Further, because of the subordinate role that NREGS work assumes vis-à-

vis capital it does not inherently challenge gender norms via the production process.

Rather to the extent that women are able to break out of gender stereotypes, it is due to the social nature of the work.

It is clear that despite the “rollback” of the state in some avenues, the state has not disappeared and continues to participate in economic and social life. Mingione (1985) differentiates between two potential interventions by the state. The first pertains to the direct provision of collective services such as health, education etc. These socialize the costs of “better reproduction patterns of the labor force”. Under neoliberalism, the state has increasingly pulled away from such functions. A second set of interventions by the state involves contributing money or basic consumption to ensure the survival of the population that is surplus to the demands of capital. Mingione suggests that this section of the population is maintained in a “frozen” state so that aggregate demand does not fall sharply and at the same time political consensus is maintained. This argument suggests that policies such as the NREGS are attempts by the state to seek legitimacy. However, such arguments offer little space for the impact of political mobilization and the political space created through progressive legislation. For instance, it is known that NREGS has been more successful in those states and districts with a degree of political mobilization. Further, even with the state there are contradictory tendencies that may operate at odds with each other. Therefore, following Li (2007 cited in Li, 2009), one could approach the contradiction between dispossession and protection as evidenced in countries like India is to “take live aspirations at their word, while acknowledging the contradictions that cause them to fall short. There is, from this perspective, no master plan, only assemblages

pulled together by one set of social forces, only to fragment and reassemble”. What this paper offers is a preliminary analysis in the ways that MGNREGS falls short of provisioning for social reproduction.

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