

The Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MGNREGS) and Women Empowerment: A Socio-Legal Study

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Abstract

Ever since MGNREGS-2005, the most popular work-scheme in India for the rural wage-seekers is introduced, a number of studies were taken to evaluate its performance and impact by the eminent scholarship. The most important task of the scheme is to gear up employment opportunities to the house-holds that are below the poverty line. The idea is to bring these marginalized sections to equity and justice. This research is carried to evaluate the impact on the beneficiaries of this scheme especially, in terms of female participation and the resultant women empowerment. It is relevant to state at this juncture that the relationship between the participation of the women workforce in the scheme is a measure of the inclusion principle, which is directly proportional to their social empowerment. Viewed differently, lesser participation in the work-scheme leads to lesser inclusion in terms of the social responsibilities that they have to shoulder in their individual capacities as public representatives. This may accrue in the wake of the 73rd and 74th Constitutional amendments of India which have laid the foundation of bringing the woman to the forefront in local politics. The level of confidence in the woman increases more so if her financial situation is improved to the extent that she may be able to rise independently to take such responsibilities. Indian history is replete with such exemplary women who not only were able to rise above others in times of difficulties but also were able to lead the society with best of their abilities. Of course, the contribution of their families cannot be under-estimated in this regard. The Constitutional support to the woman representatives coupled with the employment opportunities in the rural areas is seen as a remarkable development initiative recently in India. In short, the paper attempts to verify whether the success of NREGS can be a measure of the inclusion principle in local self governance. It is hoped that this research may set a trend for future national-level qualitative studies offering insights about rural India from a micro-level perspective instead of providing macro-level generalities.

*“Just as the whole universe is contained in the self”;
So is India contained in villages”
..... Mahatma Gandhi*

Acronyms

MGNREGS Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme

SC/ST Scheduled castes and Scheduled tribes

PRI Panchayat Raj Institutions (Local self governance)

SHGs Self-Help Groups

VRP Village Resource Person

Definitions

‘Gram Sabha’: Article 243 (b) of Part IX, Constitution of India (Seventy – Third Amendment Act, 1992 defines ‘Gram Sabha’ as a body consisting of persons registered in the electoral rolls relating to village comprised within the area of panchayat at the village level.

Panchayat is defined as an institution (by whatever name called) of self government constituted under article 243-B of the Constitution of India for the rural areas. **Panchayat Area:** Means the territorial area of the Panchayat under Art. 243(e) Constitution of India

Population:

Means the population the last proceeding census of which the relevant figures have been published.

‘Village’

Means a village specified by the governor by public notification to be a village for the purposes of this part and includes a group of villages so specified under Art. 243 (A) Constitution of India

Sarpanch:

Means a person elected to be the head of the Gram Panchayat. A Gram Sabha may exercise such powers and perform such functions at the village level as the legislature of a State may, by law provide under Art. 243 (G) Constitution of India.

Self-Help Group A group consisting of only female members who are involved in saving and investing their monies registered under the group’s name is called a self-help group. They also have an elected body for the posts of President and Vice-President of the group. They function autonomously and also associate with the important government schemes.

Dalits are the down-trodden individuals of the society who are discriminated wrongly and deprived of the basic privileges and rights that others enjoy in a similar situation. Most commonly in an Indian setting, they include the SC, ST, Women, Disabled persons, and members of minority religions.

Introduction

The National Rural Employment Guarantee Act of 2005 is a statutory measure that provides unskilled employment to the rural poor on a “demand – basis” for a minimum of 100 days of employment per year. The act integrates the Institutions of Panchayat Raj (political) with that of the executive agencies (non-political). The scheme provides unskilled manual work on demand made by the rural poor during the off-seasons and periods of unemployment thereby, enabling them to maintain the standard and quality of life. The Act requires the action plans for the Panchayats to be prepared according to the felt-needs by the local public representatives. The recent Constitutional amendments made 33.33% reservations for the woman representatives to head the elected offices. There remains much to see, as to how the newly elected woman public representatives are able to exercise the powers inherent to the said office and take decisions in the public interest. MGNREGS is such forum where they can exercise decision -making in preparing action plans for their Panchayats and to monitor its proper implementation.

Concept of Social Inclusion and Exclusion

Social exclusion essentially involves the process through which individuals or groups are wholly or partially excluded from full participation in the society within which they live in this sense, it is opposite of social integration. Social scientists have been interested in understanding the distribution of power in society.

Review of Literature

In literature, one finds two major schools of thought debating this issue during the 1950s and 1960s. They could be identified as elite theorists and pluralists. The elite theorists such as C. Wright Mills (1956) argued that the upper classes always rule. As against this view, the pluralists represented by Robert A. Dahl (1961) and Nelson W. Polsby (1962) and others argued that it was too simplistic a view to assume that upper classes always enjoyed greater power. According to them, the distribution of power in a society was generally determined by the combination of resources and skills enjoyed by people they are many resources other than status and wealth which enabled people to acquire power besides the skills for using one

resources are not evenly distributed, nor are they necessarily acquired by one's status and wealth thus it is not just status and wealth but a plurality of factors that enable people to acquire power. This is the pluralist view¹.

The Indian constitution introduced in 1950 adopted adult franchise thus creating a political resource for all citizens when the Indian Parliament passed the 73rd constitutional amendment in 1992 reserving seats for women SCs and STs in Panchayat Raj Institutions they were in a sense following the pluralist line; they were creating another resource through reservation in the hands of these deprived sections to enable them to acquire some power, if they did not enjoy high status and wealth².

Of course, occupying formal positions of power is not enough that does not make one necessarily powerful, the real test of power as Max Weber told us categorically is one's ability to influence decision-making in public action affecting the community. The formal position only gave an occupant a better opportunity to participate in the decision-making process for this purpose. It follows that if we want to find out whether the process of decision-making by the women, SCs and STs have empowered them or not, we must study the process of decision-making at various levels of PRIs. If we find these sections influencing the decision in panchayats, that would be the proof of their empowerment and a sign of their being included, overcoming their earlier state of exclusion³.

The members should not only participate in the deliberations of the decision-making process of local government bodies but should be able to influence in part, if not in full, the outcome of deliberations. That is the real sign of inclusion and a true indicator of empowerment.

The 73rd amendment, incorporating many path – breaking provisions for effective local self-government, was not automatically applicable to the scheduled areas because of the unique characteristics and special needs of the tribal people. Article 243M (4) (b) extends the provision of the Act to such areas subject to exceptions and modifications as may be specified in such laws and no such law shall be deemed to be an amendment of the

¹ B.S Baviskar & George Mathew (2009) Inclusion And Exclusion In Local Governance Field Studies From Rural India, Institute Of Social Sciences, Sage Publications India Pvt. Ltd New-Delhi, 2009, P.4

² *ibid.*,p.5

³ *ibid.*,

constitution. The provisions of the Panchayat (Extension to the Scheduled Areas) Act, 1996 (PESA) was enacted in December 1996 and it came into effect from 24 December 1996⁴

The Act makes it clear that the organization and functioning of the Panchayats in scheduled areas will be different from that of panchayats in non-scheduled areas while the 73rd amendment visualized panchayats as instruments of participative democracy, the PESA Act conceptualized these institutions as representative democracy. The provisions of PESA extend to the panchayats in the fifth scheduled areas of nine states: Andhra Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, Gujarat, Jharkhand, Himachal Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra, Orissa and Rajasthan⁵

Women enjoy reservation for not less than one-third seats for members and presidents of all the three-tiers of local governments for the panchayats and municipalities. Unfortunately, this enthusiasm among women, partly boosted by their husbands and other male members in the family is not reflected in their active participation. The phenomenon of proxy role performed by elected women's husbands or sons is common across several panchayats. It is a wide spread practice of husbands to carry out the actual day-to-day official work on behalf of their wives heading the panchayats.

Considering the long history of suppression of women under patriarchy, women seem to be on the path to empowerment although at a painfully slow pace. The fact that women come forward to fight elections, come out of homes to attend panchayat meetings and sit with men of different castes and age-groups is itself a step on the road to empowerment. In course of time, this will lead to their active participation in the decision – making process and they will acquire a legitimate share of power. Local government is only the beginning and for many it is a nursery of leadership. With elections every five years, a churning process has begun, and that is the finding of this study to look at it objectively at the same time with the sensitivity of the social scientists.

Powers, Authority and Responsibilities of Panchayats:

⁴ Ibid., P11

⁵ Ibid.

Subject to the provisions of the constitution, the legislature of a State may, by law, endow the panchayats with such powers and authority as may be necessary to enable them to function as institutions of self – government and such law may contain provisions for the devolution of powers and responsibilities upon Panchayats at the appropriate level subject to such conditions as may be specified therein, with respect to

- (a) The preparation of plans for economic development and social justice;
 - (b) The implementation of schemes for economic development and social justice as may be entrusted to them including those in relation to the matters listed in the eleventh schedule.
- However, one thing is to be noted that under the Amendment Act the establishment of Panchayats and the devolution of necessary powers and authority on the PRIs are vested in the state governments. In view of this, it may be said the success of the PRI as a unit of democracy and thereby ushering an all-round development of rural areas will much depend on the intention of support of the state governments. Without honest intention, these institutions would be misused by rural rich and the poor illiterate masses will remain mute spectators. The Government must ensure that these evils viz., criminalization of politics and the like should not effect the functioning of PRIs⁶.

The ultimate goal should be to move from basic minimum protection to a much more ambitious promise of benefits, adequate and to universally cover all residents because the objective of social protection is not only subsistence, but social inclusion and the preservation of human dignity. As many workers as possible should be brought within the scope of social security schemes based on the solidarity principles of compulsory membership and uniform treatment⁷.

Research Design:

The Qualitative and Quantitative research analysis was carried at a remote tribal area of Visakhapatnam District called Gangaraju Madugula in India. The research findings are presented to study the relation between the success of the scheme (MGNREGS) vis-à-vis woman empowerment in India in the wake of recent development initiatives in India.

⁶ Pandey, J.N.(1995) Constitutional Law of India, Central law Agency, Allahabad, Edn. 28th, pp. 437-38

⁷ Ibid. p. 25.

The Case studies explain the inclusion principle in local self-governance. The degree of woman empowerment is the inclusion in local governance which could be assessed through the extent of their participation in the development work, the scale of their popularity and the degree of power they exercised. Participant observation also formed the core of the methodology. The decision-making processes in the Gram Panchayats (Provincial meetings) and the Gram Sabhas (council meetings) were also assessed through the informal conversations and observations made during these meetings.

Research findings I

A **pilot test sample** of 51 persons was randomly selected from the Palamamidi, Gram Panchayat of G. Madugula Mandal, Visakhapatnam District for conducting a pilot test. An interviewing schedule was administered and the data was measured quantitatively to evaluate and assess the feasibility of this methodology to a large population. The Pilot study was a success and the data obtained provided a sense of direction to the research. It contained 100% of the Indian ST Population. The study reflected the general reaction of the public towards PRIs, the Government schemes and the interest groups.

It could be easily concluded from the research findings of the Pilot Study that the public is happy about NREGA-2005 and its proper implementation at G. Madugula Mandal. Further study revealed the policy implications and the difficulties if any, in its implementation in micro-milieu. The date of interview was 20th of February, 2009.

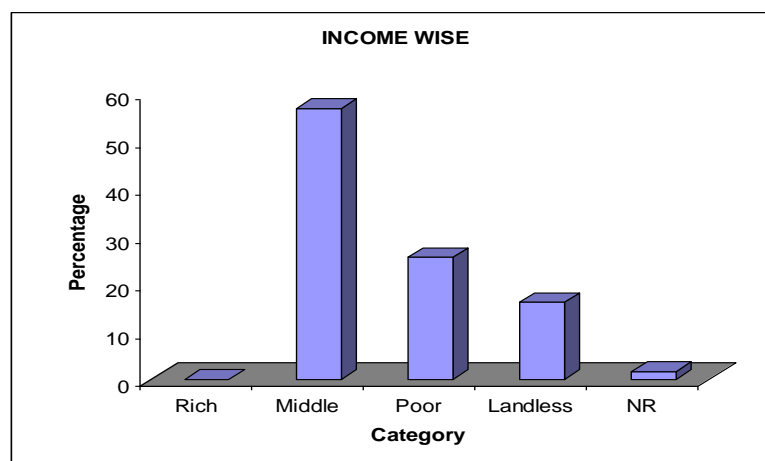
Research Sample of this paper : The selected 192 persons of a random sample consisted of 100% Scheduled Tribes Population of G. Madugula Mandal of Visakhapatnam District in A.,P India. The interviewing schedule was administered predominantly to the wage-seekers of Gemmeli and G. Madugula Gram Panchayats; in order to elicit the responses on the working of MGNREGS in the Mandal. The data was collected in the year 2010. The sample consists of 53.64% of the male population and 46.35% of female population. Of the 53.64% male population, 82.52% are married and only 17.57% are unmarried. 84.26% are married out of 46.35% female population and 15.73% remained unmarried. 48.43% of the sample comes from the lower middle class and the remaining percentage of the sample belongs to the poor and landless class. Therefore, the choice of people for eliciting the response was correct

as 83.33% of the sample selected were married with familial responsibilities. 79.16% of the sample is illiterates, 14.06% studied up to I-IX std., and 4.68% passed the matriculation. 1.56% reached inter-collegiate level and only 0.52% of the population obtained a degree certificate with no person reaching above the degree level.

Table – 1 (INCOME)

Category	0-4	4-8	8-12	12-15	Total	Percentage
Rich	0	0	0	0	0	0
Middle	0	3	106	0	109	56.77
Poor	3	7	38	1	49	25.52
Landless	8	21	2	0	31	16.15
NR	0	0	0	0	3	1.56
					192	100.00

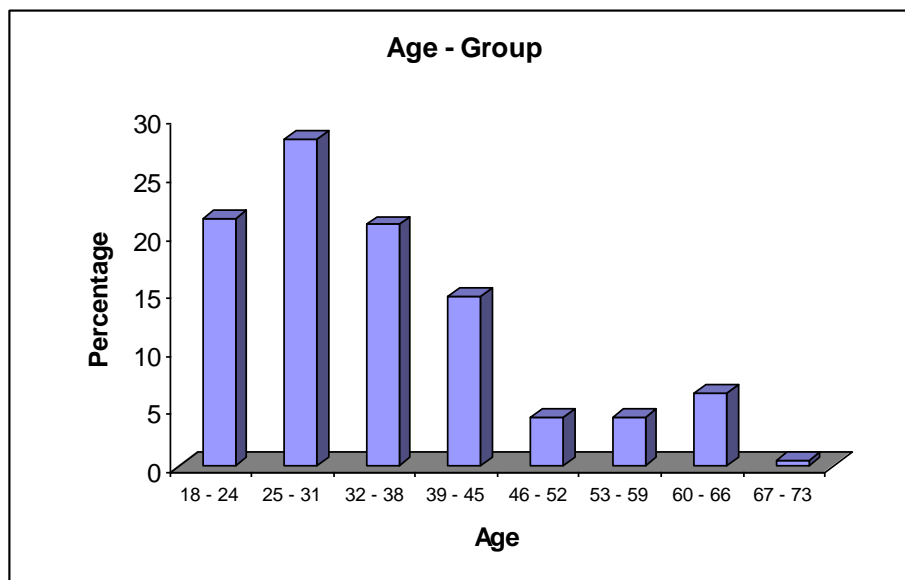
(Rupees in Thousands)



Income:- 5.7% of the sample earn from Rs. 0-4,000/- p.a., 16.14% earn between Rs 4,000/- to Rs. 8000/- 76.04% earn between Rs 8000/- 12,000/- p.a., taken together, 97.88% of the same fall below poverty line with an income less than or equal to Rs. 12,000/- p.a., only 0.52% of the population earn between Rs. 12,000/- 15,000/- p.a.,

TABLE 2 (AGE - GROUP)

Age – Group	Population	Percentage
18 - 24	41	21.3
25 - 31	54	28.12
32 - 38	40	20.8
39 - 45	28	14.58
46 - 52	8	4.16
53 - 59	8	4.16
60 - 66	12	6.25
67 - 73	1	0.5
	192	100%



Age- group: - Maximum people within the age group of 25-31 have reported to work comprising of 28.12% followed by the 18-24 and 32-38 age-groups with 21.3% and 20.8% of the selected population. 14.58% of the sample reported belonged to the age-group of 39-45. The people falling between 60-66 age groups reported relatively higher with 6.25% than the people in the age-groups of 46-52 and 53-59 and it may be noted that the unskilled manual work is quite unsuitable to their ages. The act does not provide any discount to them on this

fact. 0.52% of the population reported from the age-group of 67-73. G. Madugula Mandal has been classified, therefore as category I mandal with regard to work demand.

Table 3 Responses of the Research Sample

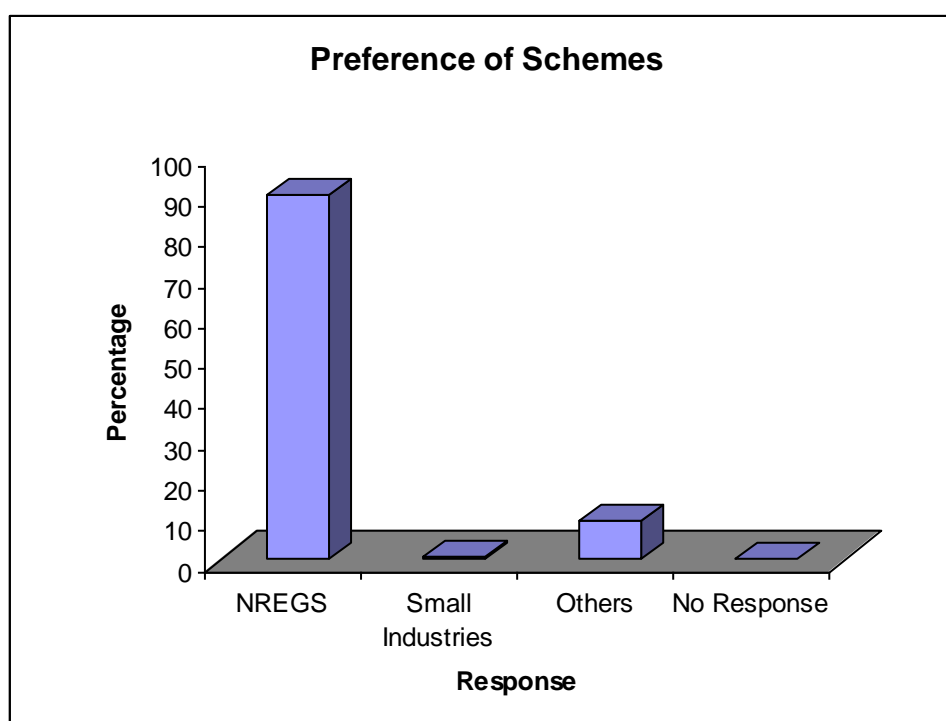
S.No	Question	Yes	No	NR	Yes%	No%	NR%
1	Are you aware of NREGS?	182	5	4	95.3	2.6	2.08
2	Did you participate in the scheme?	187	1	4	97.3	0.52	21.05
3	Is the transparency in payments good?	125	0	67	65.1	0	34.89
4	Did you participate in any other scheme?	2	150	40	1.04	78.12	20.83
5	Are you aware of the first-aid box at work-site?	136	35	21	70.83	18.22	10.93
6	Are you provided with the shade facilities at work?	102	57	31	54.16	29.68	16.14
7	Do you have water facilities at work?	150	20	22	78.12	10.41	11.45
8	Are you aware of sarpanch reservation?	22	136	34	11.45	70.83	17.70
9	Are you aware of sarpanch rotation?	0	124	68	0	64.58	35.41
10	Do you Participate in gram sabhas?	77	93	22	40.01	48.43	11.45
11	Should the sarpanch be literate?	140	1	51	72.91	0.52	26.56
12	Is NREGS Management helpful?	155	3	34	80.72	1.56	17.70
13	Are you a member of SHG?	129	28	35	67.18	14.58	18.22
14	Is NREGS beneficial to you?	169	36	122	17.7	18.75	63.54
15	Do you temporarily migrate for employment?	34	36	122	17.7	18.75	63.54

The research findings present that 95.3% of the sample responded affirmatively, 2.6% said they were not aware of MGNREGS and only 2.08% did not respond. The scheme is in operation since 1st April 2008 in the Mandal, it is not surprising that the majority of the people are aware of it. 97.3% of the sample was happy to admit that they did participate in the scheme, 0.52% said they did not participate and 21.05% opted not to respond. 65.10% of the sample said transparency in the scheme was good and 34.89% did not respond. 78.125% of the sample said that they did not participate in any other program, 1.04% said they did

participate in Food-for-Work program earlier and 20.83% did not respond. 88.02% said ‘YES’, 1.04% said ‘No’: and 10.93% did not respond. Obviously, this scheme has come as a timely succor to these poor people. 70.83% said they were aware of the First-Aid –Boxes kept at the work site, 18.22% said they are not kept at the work site and 10.93% chose not to respond. 54.16% of the sample said ‘Shade Facility’ was available at the work-site, 29.68% of the population gave negative response and 16.14% did not respond. It should be noted here that where there are plenty of trees available, no extra shade is required and the negative responses may be ignored. Most of the habitations are nearer to the work- sites and the wage-seekers bring their own drinking water pots. The negative response may be ignored. 78.12% of the sample said ‘Water Facilities’ was available,10.41% gave a negative response and 11.45% did not respond.

TABLE 4 PREFERENCE OF SCHEMES

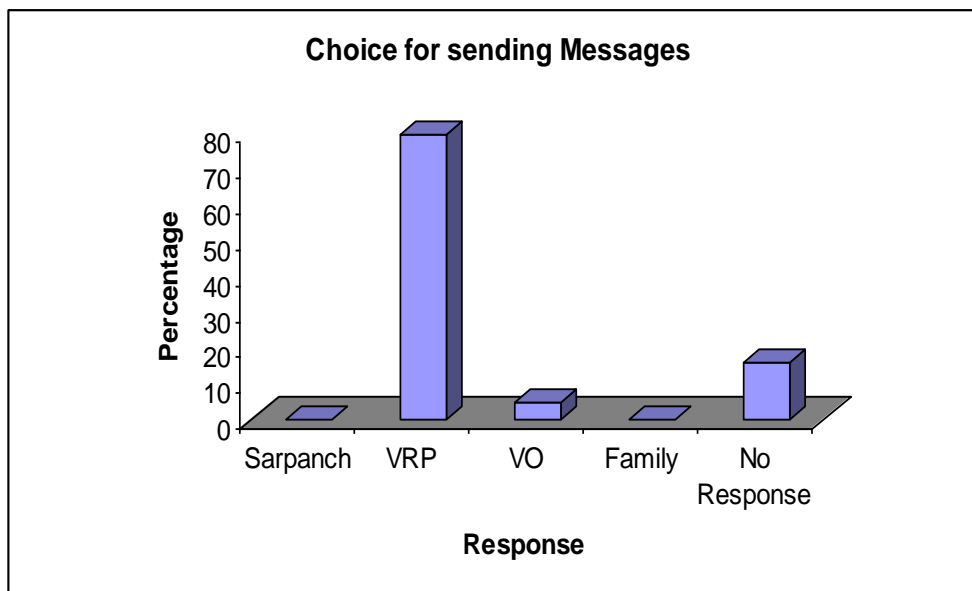
Response	Population	Percent
NREGS	173	90.1
Small Industries	1	0.5
Others	18	9.37
No Response	0	0
	192	



Some 90.1% of the population voted for NREGS whereas 0.5% preferred small industries and 9.37% opted for other works.

Table 5 Choice for sending messages

Response	Population	Percent
Sarpanch	0	0
VRP	153	79.68
VO	9	4.68
Family	0	0
No Response	30	15.63
	192	

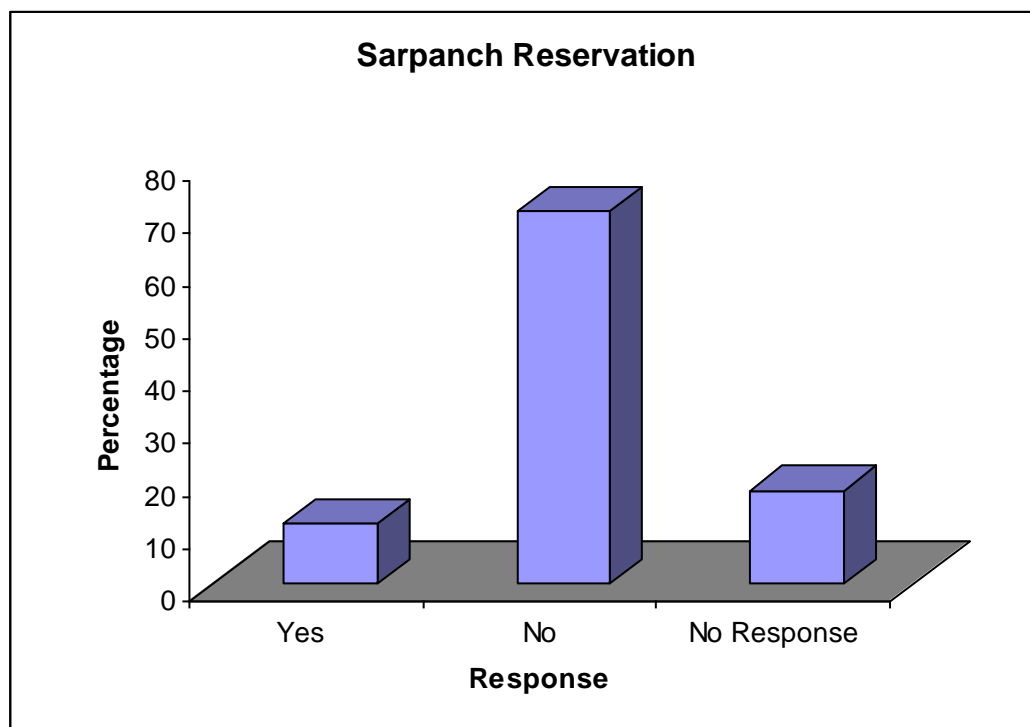


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Assistants for messages: - 79.68% of the sample has opted for VRP (Field Assistant) for sending and receiving messages for the smooth working of the scheme and 9% wanted the messages through village organizations. Surprisingly, no one gave a positive response in favor of the sarpanches - the ones who are supposed to be the real motivators of public and 15.62% opted not to respond.

TABLE 6 Sarpanch Reservation

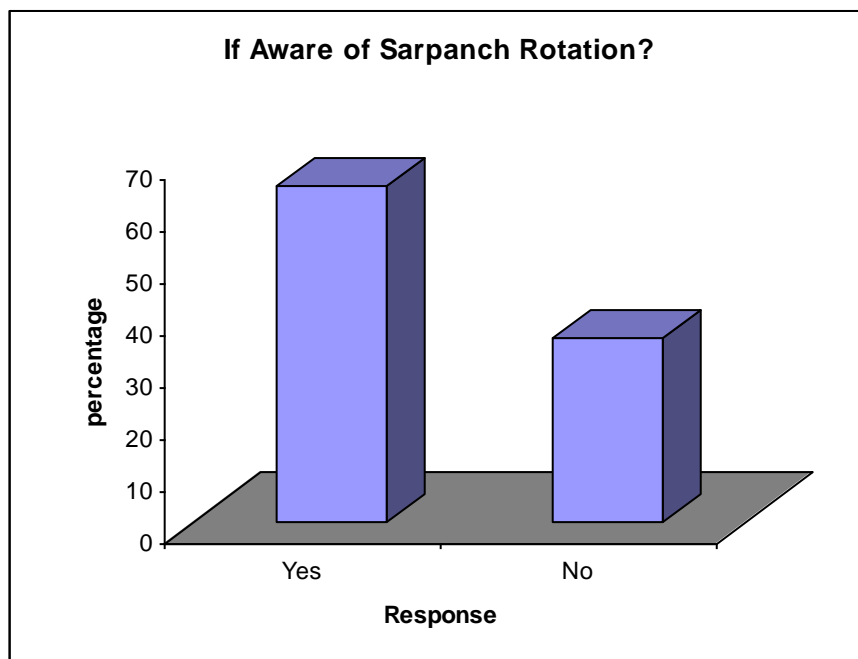
Response	Are you aware of it?	Percent
Yes	22	11.45
No	136	70.83
No Response	34	17.70
	192	



Only 11.45% of the sample said that they were aware of sarpanch reservation. 70.83% of the population said they were not aware and 17.70% did not respond. The extent of illiteracy and poverty even today reflects the low level of political understanding among the people.

Table 7 Sarpanch Rotation

Response	Sarpanch Rotation	Percent
Yes	0	0
No	124	64.58
No Response	68	35.41
	192	



Sarpanch Rotation was a totally new subject for them, 0% said they were aware of it, 64.58% honestly said they were not aware of it and 35.41% opted not to respond.

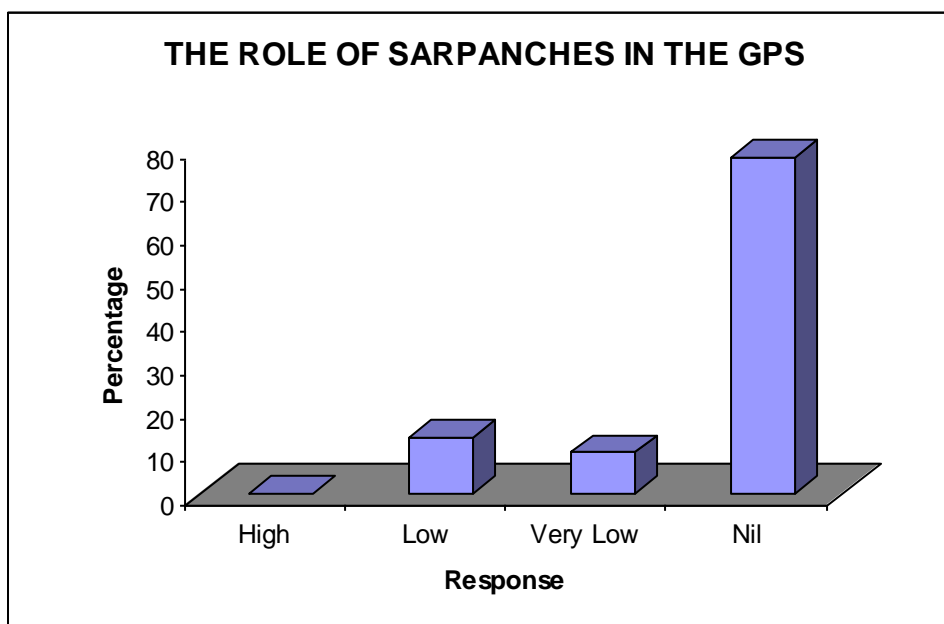
Table 8 : Who participates actively with you in the scheme?

Response Category	Population	Percentage
VRP	160	83.33
VO	0	0
Sarpanch	0	0
Family Member	1	0.52
No Response	31	16.14
	192	

When asked who actively participates with you in the NREGS at the village level, 83.33% unanimously said field assistants, 0.52% said family members. However, the research finding that Sarpanches and VOs are not participating actively is a sorry figure. The non-participation or reluctance on the part of the Sarpanches in the best of the government schemes is a sorry state-of-affairs. Once again 16.14% chose not to respond.

TABLE 9 THE ROLE OF SARPANCHES IN THE GPS

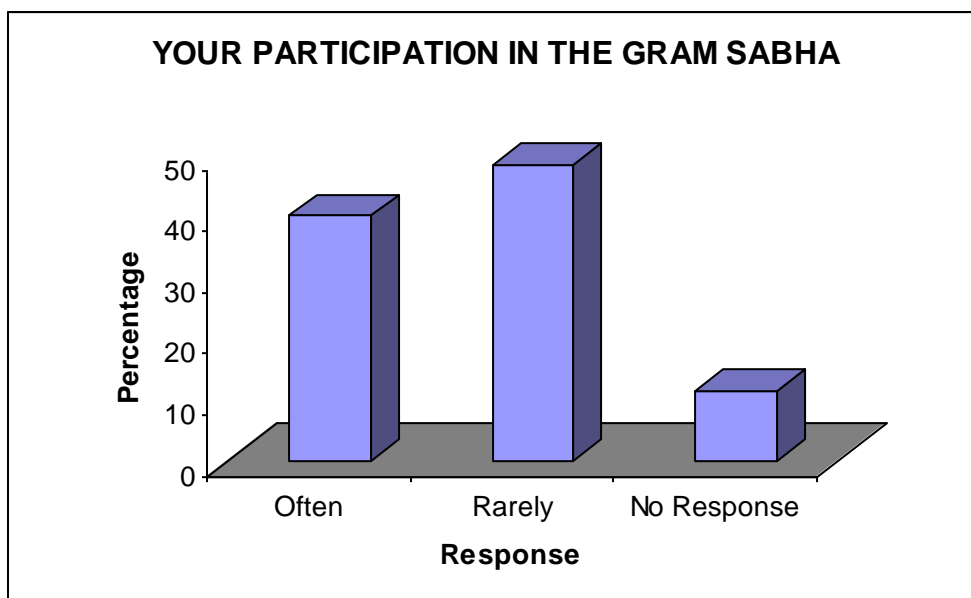
Response	Population	Percent
High	0	0
Low	25	13.02
Very Low	18	9.37
Nil	149	77.6
	192	



The role of Sarpanches in GPs rated to be negligent. 77.6% of the sample said the sarpanch’s participation was nil, 13.02% said it was low and 9.37% said it was very low.

TABLE 10 YOUR PARTICIPATION IN THE GRAM SABHA

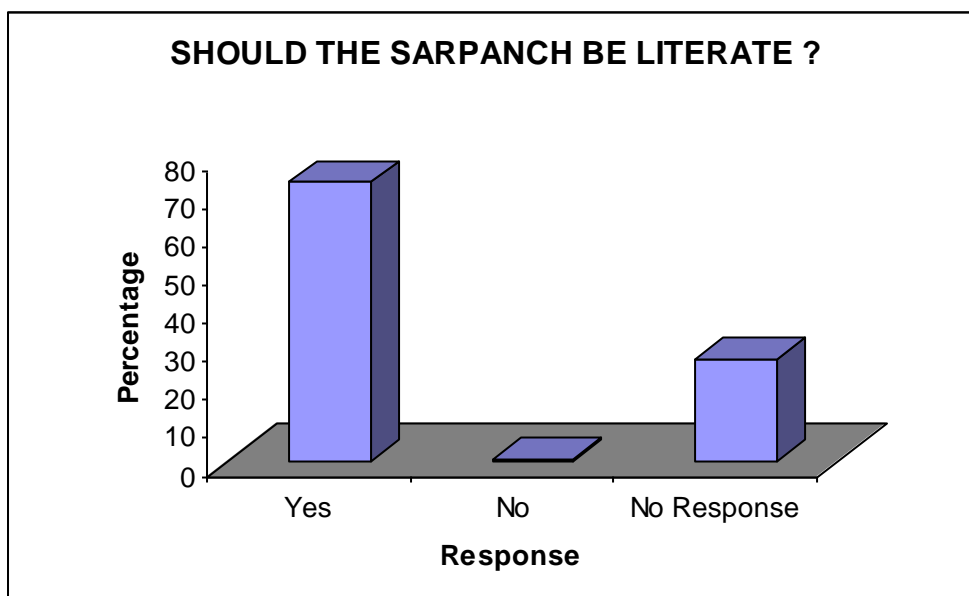
Response	Population	Total %
Often	77	40.1
Rarely	93	48.43
No Response	22	11.45
	192	



When asked what was their frequency of participation in Gram/Ward Sabhas, 48.43% said rarely, however, 40.1% said ‘often ‘and 11.45% opted not to respond.

TABLE 11 SHOULD THE SARPANCH BE LITERATE?

Response	Population	Percent
Yes	140	72.91
No	1	0.52
No Response	51	26.56
	192	



72.91% of the sample said that the sarpanches should be literate, 0.52% negatived it and 26.56% did not respond.

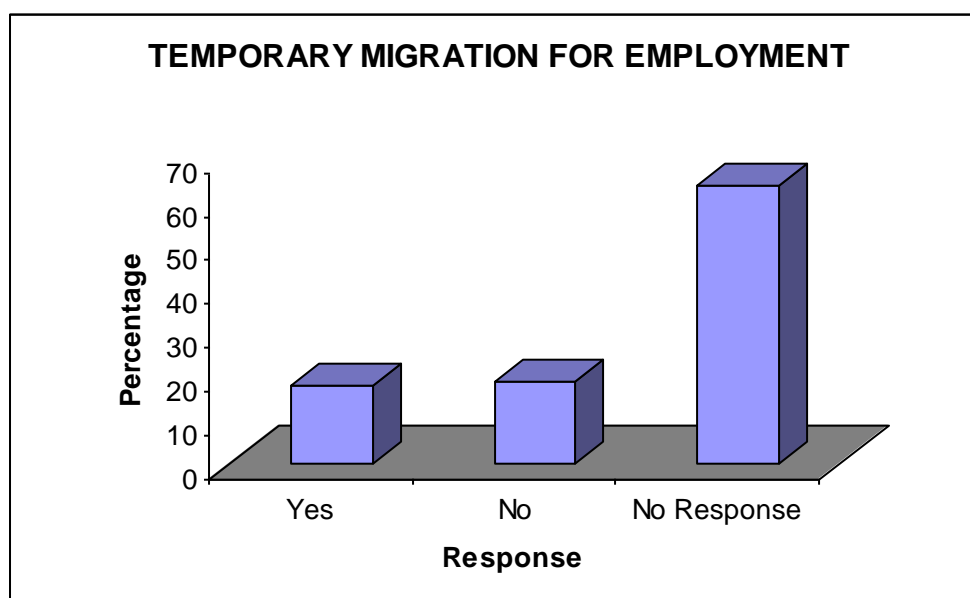
TABLE 12 NREGS – STAFF IS HELPFUL

Response	Population	Percent
Yes	155	80.72
No	3	1.56
No Response	34	17.70
	192	

80.72% of the sample said that the staff of the NREGS in the Mandal is helpful, 1.56% said 'No' and 17.70% opted not to respond.

TABLE 13 (TEMPORARY MIGRATION FOR EMPLOYMENT)

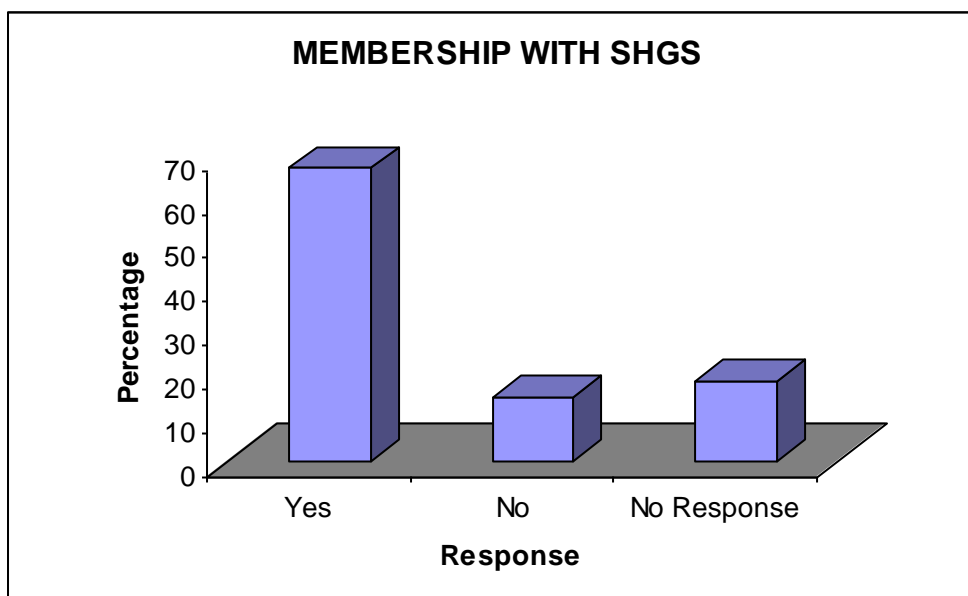
Response	Population	Percent
Yes	34	17.7
No	36	18.75
No Response	122	63.54
	192	



About temporary migration for employment, 17.7% of the sample said they used to migrate once or twice earlier for employment 18.75% said ‘No ‘ and 63.54% opted not respond.

TABLE 14 (MEMBERSHIP WITH SHGS)

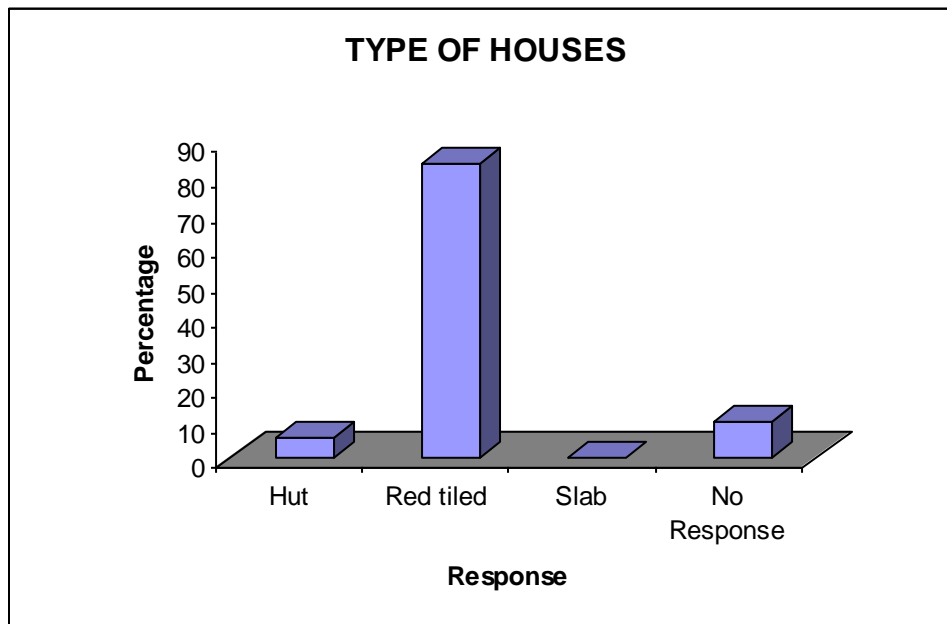
Response	Population	Percent
Yes	129	67.18
No	28	14.58
No Response	35	18.22
	192	



67.18% of the sample said they were the members of Self-Help-Groups (SHGs) like DWACRAs and have incurred some loans, 14.58% said they will become members, if possible, 18.22% did not respond

TABLE 15 (TYPE OF HOUSES)

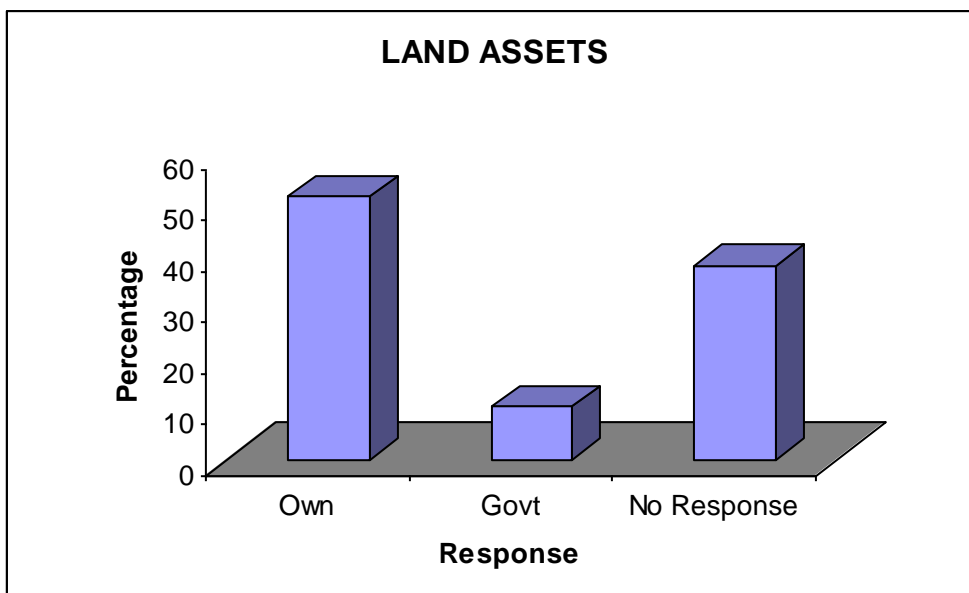
Category	Response	Total %
Hut	11	5.72
Red tiled	161	83.85
Slab	0	0
No Response	20	10.14
	192	



83.85% of the population is living in Red Tiled roofed houses, 5.72% are living in huts, 0% has slab houses and 10.41% did not respond.

TABLE 16 (LAND ASSETS)

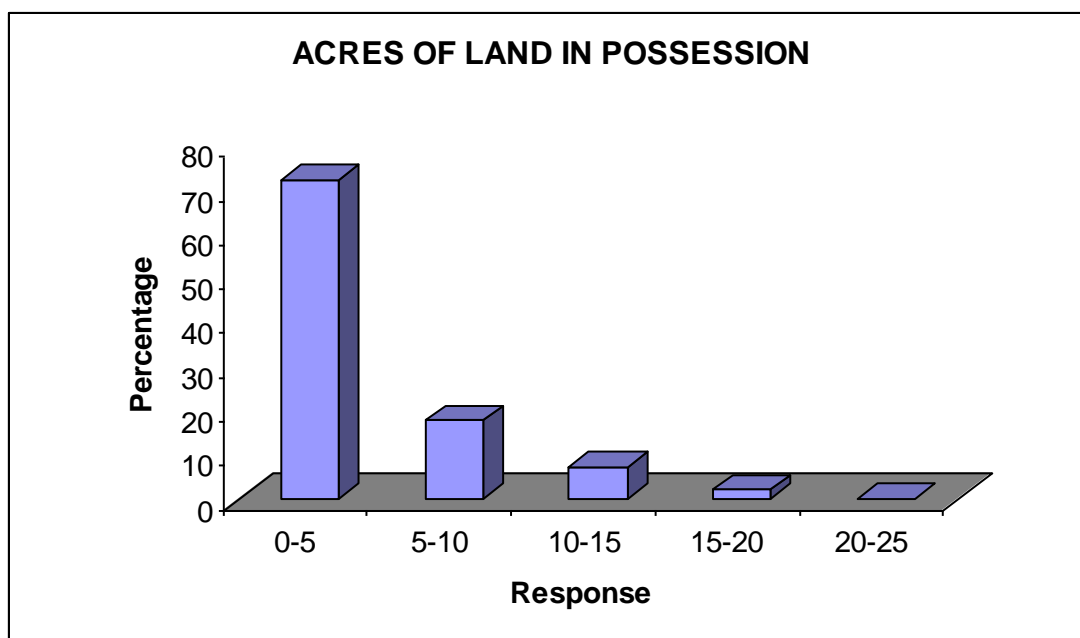
Category	Response	Total %
Own	99	51.56
Govt	20	10.41
No Response	73	38.02
	192	



51.56% of the population has houses constructed on their own lands, 10.41% has constructed houses on government lands (with land possession certificates in their own names) and 38.02% did not respond.

TABLE 17 (ACRES OF LAND IN POSSESSION)

Class – interval (in acres)	Response	Total %
0-5	139	72.3
5-10	34	17.7
10-15	14	7.2
15-20	4	2.0
20-25	1	0
	192	



Majority of the population, i.e., 72.3% possessed 0-5 acres of dry and wet land, 17.7% have 5-10 acres of lands. 7.2% had 10-15 acres of land assets 2% mostly from upper middle class farmers possessed 15-20 acres of land and only 0.5% has 20-25 acres of land. Although majority of the population has 0-5 acres of land assets. Their family size, rain-fed hilly fields and more number of dependents explain their position below the national poverty line.

Research findings II

Case studies of female representatives of the Panchayats

Case Study 1:

Kumbidisingi is the smallest Gram Panchayat of the Mandal with a total of 8 revenue villages. Agriculture is the principle source of income and employment of the people. Although, economically, the Sarpanch (XYZ) is very poor and educationally an illiterate, she was interacting well with the MGNREGS field assistants and was happy about the works that are being carried in her gram panchayat. However, because of her illiteracy and economically poor status, she hardly speaks in the meetings.

For all these women coming to the Panchayat office, sitting with men of different castes and age groups and having tea with them is itself a new experience. No village women ever come to the Panchayat office alone. She will send a male member if she had any work. Given the tradition, active participation by these women is difficult in public offices.

If the Women and Dalits succeed in acquiring some of the resources and skills, they will be successful in their march on the path of inclusion and empowerment. Gender disabilities are a major obstacle to overcome. Same is the case with other Dalits. The obstacles they face in being accepted as community leaders are equally formidable.

Case Study:-2

WXY is the sarpanch of Gemmeli Gram Panchayat, an extremely shy and illiterate person. As the Block Development Officer, I know not of any occasion where she has made an independent decision on her own on the matters relating to the sarpanch office. She is totally dependent on her husband or her brother –in –law to carry out the works. All she knows is just to sign wherever the rubber stamp is affixed. Her husband therefore, always carries the rubber stamp in his pocket and even calls himself the sarpanch and almost exercises de-facto authority in the panchayat as sarpanch. It seems like he has trained his wife not to sign on any paper without the rubber stamp affixed on it. Obviously, he used to keep it away from her from fear that she might start taking decisions of her own independently. He

engrained in her mind to the extent that she started thinking that her signature will have no value without that rubber stamp.

At one occasion, I as the Block Development Officer told him not to claim such a false status as the position of sarpanch belonged to his wife. For which he squarely replied that she does not know anything and he is the one who is doing all her work, that too, in front of her!!

For a Dalit woman to learn putting a signature is a great achievement, because without which her husband could not have done anything in spite of his boasting. It is there that the sign of women empowerment can be noticed to have emerged.

The women Sarpanch hardly speaks in the meetings. The phenomenon of proxy role performed by the elected women's husband or sons is common across several States. It is a widespread practice for husbands to carry out the day- to- day official work on behalf of their elected wives heading the panchayats.

Case Study 3:

In contrast, VWX is the Sarpanch of Gaduthuru Gram Panchayat and is found to be very active in conducting the meetings and raising objections. If these elected members are able to influence the decisions in Panchayats, that would be a clear proof of their empowerment, sign of being included in the rural power structure and overcoming their earlier state of exclusion.

Case Study 4:

UVW, the Sarpanch of Nurmathi is again an illiterate woman with a meager income of Rs.10,000/- p.a., and land assets of 1.00 acre. Her husband attends and conducts meetings, meets all outsiders in connection with panchayat works and obtains his wife's signatures on the panchayat papers.

Case Study 5:

TUV of G. Madugula Head-Quarter Gram Panchayat also entrusts all works to her husband. As a Block Development Officer, once in the Gram Sabha I told him to let her understand the

position as a Sarpanch, at least that is the least every one out there, is expecting of her. They all had voted for her and they have a right to listen to her own views.

Incidentally, it so happened that for one of the works executed in her Panchayat, the cheque was not cleared at the Sub-Treasury for lack of sufficient funds. Notwithstanding the difficulty in front of her, she came straight to my office for help rather than approaching any other person for due clearance of the cheque. It was explained to her that there were not sufficient funds in her (the Sarpanch's) account and therefore, she has to present another cheque with the available funds. Her husband remained outside and she understood the position of the account when the Panchayat Secretary explained the expenditure details. And how her office was misused by her own husband. After few days she came with another cheque with a reduced amount and got it cleared herself. I am sure the Panchayat Secretary must have helped her to overcome the hurdle. What is important is that she understood what is happening in her office though late. This surely is a step towards empowerment, a dalit and illiterate woman learning to surmount the practical difficulties herself is really significant. Whereas, her husband was wailing off his time in drinking and was found to mis-appropriate public funds trying to carry out works without proper resolutions of the Panchayat, that too in the name of his wife (the Sarpanch) is not legal.

Case Study 6:

STU , the member of MPTC, Palamamidi is another illiterate woman who was been catapulted to that position by her party-activist husband. Though, he does not command much popularity and good-will, his party affiliations has made him a de-facto authority in the Gram Panchayat.

The MPTC member also has no independent thinking. She complained once that her husband does not let her know the works executed by him and he only used to come whenever, he needed her signatures on the cheques. The villagers and Sarpanches stand witness to this fact.

Case Study 7:

RST from Vanthala is the member of MPTC of the Mandal. Though very meek, shy and illiterate woman, she is seen in the meetings, participating in the works of the sarpanch and affixing her signatures on the papers.

Case Study 8:

QRS also follows the same pattern followed by the other women sarpanches as described above. She is the MPTC member of Gaduthuru. I have noticed her raising some objections during the Gram Sabhas requesting for some information, although the papers were prepared by her trust-worthies.

India is on the crest of a new transformation. In the next decade or so the SCs, STs and women are found to make further progress in their social status, leadership role, economic position, educational level and political awareness. This will enable them to claim and acquire a legitimate share in the power structure. Local Government is only the beginning and for many it is a nursery of leadership.

Research findings III

Object: To determine whether the NREGS-AP at G. Madugula Mandal is a success or not, a 3*3 contingency table was constructed with the data collected and two tests were employed, viz., Chi Square test of independence and Co-efficient of Correlation Test.

Chi Square Test of independence: At 5 per cent level of significance and for your degrees of freedom, the value of x^2 is 9.488 as the calculated value of x^2 falls in the acceptance region. The null hypothesis is accepted i.e., I concluded that at five percent level of significance, the Poisson probability model gives a satisfactory fit to the given data; so we conclude that the preference pattern is independent of income level, and NREGS –AP @ G. Madugula Mandal is a popular scheme there⁸.

⁸ Akella Manju Vani, 'A Success Story of the MGNREGS at a remote Gangaraju Madugula Mandal of Visakhapatnam District of Andhra Pradesh in India', Volume 3, Issue 2, IJISRT18FB10, 2018 (In Press).

Co-efficient of Contingency

The contingency coefficient is used to find out the association between two attributes and is defined as-

$$C = \sqrt{\frac{X^2}{n + X^2}}$$

Where n is the total frequency. The value of c lies between 0 and 1; it is also called Pearson's Coefficient of Contingency. Thus, the Coefficient of Contingency for the MGNREGS is given by.

$$\begin{aligned} C &= \sqrt{\frac{3.26208}{192+3.26208}} \\ &= \sqrt{\frac{3.26208}{195.26208}} \\ &= \sqrt{0.0167061} \\ &= 0.12952 \\ &= 0.13 \end{aligned}$$

To calculate whether this value indicate a strong or a weak association. The calculated value is compared against its limits. The upper limit of the Contingency Coefficient is a function of categories. For a 3x3 contingency table, it is 0.816, calculated value is 0.13. This suggests that there is a weak association between the two attributes viz., the income level and the participation in the scheme. The scheme is the most popular one in the mandal and wage-seekers participated irrespective of the income level.

Conclusions

Including the excluded

What the 73rd Constitutional Amendment has done is to unleash the tremendous energies for social transformation in the Indian society. The Strong Political institutions at the grass-root level are a necessary condition for carrying out the new possibilities of the post-73rd Constitution amendment. The field studies and cases cited in this research, point precisely towards this conclusion. As the process for inclusion of the hitherto excluded groups continues through the active participation of positive social forces, the very dynamics of these changes and the grass roots democratic institutions can usher in progressive changes in these backward regions.

In the Next decade or so, the SCs, STs, and women are bound to make further progress in their social status, leadership role, economic position, educational level and political awareness. This will enable them to claim and acquire a legitimate share in the power structure. Local Governments is only the beginning and for many it is a nursery of leadership. With elections every five years a churning process has begun, and that is the finding of this study.

The provisions of 73rd amendment are common to all the panchayats. Then how to explain the differential responses?

First, let us understand that the process of empowerment is not one quantum jump. You do not jump from a zero power situation to an all power one. Empowerment is a long journey and there are several stages on its path. Let us try to identify these stages⁹.

1. Opening up or coming out: - When women who never came out of their homes acquire enough coverage to come out sit in a public office along with relative strangers belonging to different castes and age groups. It is a first step in empowerment. This applies also to all SCs/STs men and women who come out and occupy seats as equals in a panchayat meeting.

⁹ Ibid. P.39-41

2. **Acquiring Symbolic features of Power:-** A women or a Dalit man may not take decisions and may accept decisions taken by other. However, presiding over a meeting and signing the papers as an office bearer is also a sign of empowerment, however limited it may be. The woman sarpanch may be putting a thumb impression on papers, but for an excluded one it is empowerment.
3. **Using Power for one's self or one's family:** - It made them to learn the process of acquiring tangible benefits by using one's position of power.
4. The next stage is to use power for the benefit of one's own community, for example, using power for a higher purpose. Finally, when the Women and Dalit members are able to work for the village community as a whole: which is the ultimate test of empowerment that is, when they transcend the boundaries of their limited constituencies and work for the community as a whole. It also implies acceptance by the community of their larger role. One should note that these stages need not occur discretely or sequentially.

How to explain the differential responses of panchayat members to the process of empowerment. It really depends on the nature of obstacles one has to overcome and the degree of favorable conditions available to the panchayat members.

- Gender Disabilities are a major obstacle to overcome. Same is the case with Dalits. The obstacles they face in being accepted as community leaders are equally formidable given the long history of oppression of women and dalits in our society it will take quite some time for these sections to acquire and exercise power again by the constitutional amendment.
- Poverty is another obstacle. A panchayat member get only Rs. 10/- as sitting fee for attending a meeting. If he is an agricultural labourer, he will lose Rs. 50/- as his daily wage. How will he feed his family with ten rupees no wonder he decides not to attend the meeting.
- Education makes a lot of difference greater the education, the greater is the possibility of empowerment. No one opposes reservation for women or SCs and STs. The minimum education as an eligibility condition was a universal demand.

- Social Background of a member also counts a lot such as education, social reform, employment, cultural achievements and political organization. When they sit in panchayat meetings their background enables them to perform their role confidently and effectively as compared to the illiterates.

All the factors listed above boil down, to acquiring resources and skills. If women and dalits succeed in acquiring some of these skills and resources, they will be successful in the path of social inclusion and empowerment.

Awareness and access to information are necessary for transparency in local government. It is essential, therefore, to work towards strengthening of the Gram Sabha. It is ultimately only a strong gram sabha that can lead to strengthening of the negotiation process and thereby, the inclusion of excluded communities. This deepening process is a long drawn out one, where the different stake-holders bargain with each other, in different areas of social life.

In order to meet the demands of the new members from the hitherto excluded groups in the Panchayat Raj Institutions, the privileged groups have co-opted either the dominant members, members from the hitherto excluded groups in the Panchayat Raj constitutions, who could protect their cast-class interests or the loyal and faithful members who could act as namesake representatives. Participation in the election process, becoming representatives, attending meetings and expressing view-points at various levels shows a change in level of members of the hitherto excluded groups. On the whole, the provision of inclusion of the members of these groups in Panchayat Raj Bodies has enhanced their participation in the decision- making process at the local level, but it is inadequate for their empowerment.

As required by the 73rd amendment, reservation to posts in gram panchayats is being implemented on a rotation basis. It constrains the opportunities for weaker sections of society, as a person who gets elected as sarpanch once will not get a chance for another fifteen or twenty years in a reserved category. Often this would lead to discontinuation of the work commenced by an out-going sarpanch¹⁰.

¹⁰ Ibid, p.74.

Another important consequence to note here is that if an SC/ST/OBC person gets elected as a sarpanch. He or she is aware of the fact of having to return back to their earlier role as a laborer or small farmer. Therefore, they may not be able to take decisions independently without implicitly taking into account the local elites. also their occupation makes them vulnerable once they finish their term as Sarpanch of the Gram Panchayat. We did not find even one case where, a sarpanch elected through reservation, challenged the overall control of local elites, Thus, the substantive dimension of democracy continues to be weak, although many new political spaces have been opened for the hitherto excluded communities.

Gram samsad meetings express the weaknesses in people's participation. After attending these meetings as an observer, one would come to the obvious conclusion that neither the gram panchayat nor their peoples are ready yet to prepare village development plans. The villagers perceive that the panchayat raj exists to fulfil their demands. And by fulfilling at least some of the demands, the resourceful panchayat members try to safeguard their own interests, as well as their party's popularity. This attitude kills the ultimate purpose of the Panchayat Raj Self Governance through mass participation. The villager's presence was insignificant because they did not expect any benefit out of it.

If the trend in the Panchayat Raj institutions continues to be like this, then it can be asserted that without proper mass involvement, self-restraint of political parties and their leaders, the 73rd constitutional amendment will remain virtually ineffective.

The social empowerment of women and other disadvantaged sections still remains far from adequate. A comparative study of 8 panchayats with female sarpanches suggests that owing to the distinctive social and political milieu prevailing in the region, the gender or caste identity of the panchayat president does not necessarily play a crucial role in the overall functioning of the council. The most active agency of grass roots power in these villages is still the political party, whose ideological orientations as well as sensitivity towards the questions of gender, caste and empowerment determine the functioning of the panchayat raj institutions.

It seems that rather than the marginalized being included in the system. *It is the powerful that have been excluded from the system, albeit for a short period of time.* And if a community is part of a power structure, even for a short period of time, it helps it in the long term in other affairs.

The brighter side of the view, tells us that upper caste leaders accept the reservations provisions in PRIs without much opposition. With regular elections, deprived sections have gained confidence and learnt the art of electoral politics. They have begun to assert their rights, though in a small way. Women representatives do find some space to put forward their view and agenda. There is total lack of understanding about provisions of the Panchayat Act, among the SCs, STs and women representatives. However, one noticeable change among the excluded community representatives is about their awareness with regards to their status and position in society.

It was also observed that still economic dependency of weaker sections on the village dominant castes, force them to work for them, or work under them even after occupying the elected post. It is necessary to create employment avenues to weaker sections in order to effectively include them into PRIs or else they will remain acting at the behest of one or the other. MGNREGS –AP is one such avenues which has provided a timely succor to these sections and an opportunity to work for the village community as a whole by transcending the boundaries of their limited constituencies, implying acceptance by the community of their larger role.

The social assistance legislations in particular, NREGA found expression of the voice and spirit of the ILO for promoting social justice and for creating new values and philosophy as well continually adopt state policy towards weaker sections in keeping with contemporary social climate and in view of this, the Judiciary has liberally and harmoniously construed the labor legislations for the cause of social justice and welfare by reading the Directive Principles of the State Policy with the Fundamental Rights of the Constitution of India, because the objective of social protection is not only subsistence but **‘social inclusion’** and **the preservation of human dignity.**

The objective of the NREGA -2005 is to provide livelihood security to the households in rural areas of not less than 100 days of employment of guaranteed nature in every financial year to every household whose adult members volunteer to do unskilled and manual work. And secondly, in the creation of durable assets and strengthening livelihood resource base of the rural poor. The research findings suggest that NREGA scheme is a success at G. Madugula Mandal of Visakhapatnam district. The interviewed sample testifies to this fact stating that it is truly a beneficial program for the rural poor and that they have participated in far greater number in the scheme than in any other government schemes in India.

The participation of the sarpanches in the scheme is very low. It could have been a greater success, had the people's representatives, the NGOs, the VOs and the members of PRIs participated keeping aside their partisan interests. An important observation of the research findings is that there was a unanimous vote for the literate female representatives of the Panchayats. Everyone agreed to the fact that educated public representatives is still wanting in our society.

Experience and the lessons learned

1. The project has been itself a capacity-building process for all those who were involved in it.
2. The participatory approach brought the local level decision-makers face-to-face with the beneficiaries of the scheme at the same forum.
3. It was increasingly realized by all those who participated in the scheme that economic development will deem to follow in due course of time.

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