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Message

The “*Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act-2005*” has completed five years of implementation. A review of how the scheme has done over the last five years is very much in order. The scheme has largely been able to achieve the objectives it had been started for. I remember my first unadulterated thoughts when I read the Draft Act in late 2005. I was simply amazed as to what could happen; I thought the face of rural India would change. Having been associated with the implementation of the scheme in some or the other capacity, over the last five years, I have a mixed feeling about its outcome.

Whether the scheme has been able to provide guarantee of wage employment to the rural poor in the true sense of the term, whether the scheme has been able to reduce rural poverty, are issues that can be debated because of lack of any concrete figures. However, there are certain aspects impacting rural poor (dependent on wages) which the scheme has been able to change in favor of the poor. The worth human labour has certainly been enhanced by the scheme in most of the not-so-developed-states. The fact that the wages under NREGS were more than the existing wages in the rural area has resulted in overall general increase in wage rate in almost all the sectors of rural economy. There has been an allegation that because of the NREGS the agriculture has become costly as the farmers now have to pay more to the labourers working in their field. From the point of view of the landless poor this is better. One of the most significant aspects that have been achieved by NREGS is the parity in the wage rate of women and men. Traditionally women have been paid less than their men counterparts, even for the same kind of work. With NREGS women now get as much as their male counterparts do. This is in a way a very welcome outcome in respect of women empowerment.

The NREGS has been able to create some good rural infrastructure, particularly in the area of rural connectivity, drinking water availability and irrigation. Some states like Madhya Pradesh have taken a lead in dug well, rural roads, water tanks, and plantation and have been able to do wonderful work. It's true that a lot still remains to be done and there is enough scope to improve the way it's being done.

There are issues facing the implementers of NREGS as we enter the second phase of its implementation. The delay in payment of wages is the most prominent of them all. Due to the compulsory payment of wages through the bank accounts, and the lack of banking network in rural area, the delay in payment of wages is more pronounced. Technology has a plausible solution but it will take time to come. Another major challenge is the lack of visible labour oriented works available in rural areas. A common concern raised by the Gram Panchayats is that there aren't enough labour oriented works left in the villages to be taken up under the scheme. The reduced expenditure in some of the Gram Panchayats can be attributed to this factor. There is a growing demand for more material oriented works in rural areas. This is also justified in many villages whereas there are villages where there are still a plenty of labour oriented works available to be done.

There is a strong argument in favor of the more material oriented works being allowed to be taken up under NREGS. This will necessitate a change in the prescribed labour material ratio of 60:40 in NREGS works. One argument against this would be that if more labour oriented works are taken up, this would change the very nature of the scheme as less and less wages would be generated from the works that are taken up. But considering the fact that the creation of the infrastructure would directly or indirectly help improve the economic activities in the rural area, we shouldn't be averse in taking up more material intensive works of rural importance. That is a way forward also. However, as long as this isn't done, there is much to do within existing guidelines. It's an opportunity to change the way our villages look.

I call upon all officers engaged directly or indirectly in the implementation of the NREGS to use this as an opportunity to do what we have come here to do, that is, contribute our bit in the development of the nation and its people. The better we work the better our country becomes.