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MAHATMA GANDHI NATIONAL RURAL EMPLOYMENT GUARANTEE ACT AND RURAL DEVELOPMENT: A REVIEW

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INTRODUCTION:

India is predominantly an agrarian country with 72 per cent (about 80 crores) of its population living in more than five lakh villages. Agriculture is the predominant livelihood occupation and the rural population largely consists of small and marginal farmers, agricultural labourers, artisans and scheduled castes and scheduled tribes. A large part of this rural population (more than 200 million) is still living below the poverty line and is the focus of rural development programmes. From the pre-independence era of Mahatma Gandhi, every government after the Independence of the country in 1947 has committed itself to rural development with an intention to eradicate poverty by providing an employment.

OBJECTIVES:

The objectives of this paper are;

1. To study about the origin of rural development programmes in India
2. To understand the concept and evolution of MNREGA

METHODOLOGY:

The present paper is based on secondary data collected from various articles, internet sources, journals, reports and government publications, interpreted, analyzed and presented accordingly.

DISCUSSION:

This paper is intended to discuss in detail relating to the evolution of MNREGA in India and Karnataka. It is pertinent to note here that three Articles of the Constitution of India have bearing on the right to work and these are listed in the Directive Principles of State Policy. These three Articles are: (i) Article 39 calls upon the State to direct its policy towards securing for all its citizens, men and women, the right to an adequate means of livelihood. (ii) Article 41 enjoins the state to make effective provision for securing the right to work, to education and to public assistance in case of unemployment, old age, sickness and disablement and in any other case of undeserved want, all within the economic capacity of the state. (iii) Article 43 directs the State to secure to all its citizens, work, living wage conditions of work ensuring a decent standard of life and full enjoyment of leisure and social and cultural opportunities.

Before going to elaborate the historical perspective of Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act, it is more relevant to examine the evolutions of the concept of rural development and rural development programmes in India.

As per the Webster's dictionary rural means 'open land' and according to the United States census rural includes all persons living outside urban area and who live on farm. Agriculture is generally the main occupation in rural areas. Development refers to growth, evolution, and stage of inducement or progress.



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According to Ensminger (1974) rural development is a process of transformation from traditionally oriented rural culture towards an acceptance and reliance on science and technology. Lela (1975) defined rural development as an improvement in the living standard of the masses of low-income population residing in rural areas and making the process of self-sustaining.

According to Agarwal (1989) rural development is a strategy designed to improve the economic and social life of a specific group of people, the rural poor. Rural development can be defined in several ways but for all practical purposes it means helping the poor people living in the villages in their economic development. The major objectives of the rural development programs are:

- To achieve enhanced production and productivity in the rural areas
- To bring about a greater socio-economic equity
- To bring about a spatial balance in social and economic development
- To bring about improvement in the ecological environment so that it may be conducive to growth and happiness, and
- To develop broad based community participation in the process of development

Main Lines of Activity

The activities considered important for rural development can be divided into the Agriculture and related matters, Irrigation, Communications, Education, Health, Supplementary employment, Housing, Training and Social Welfare.

1. **Agriculture and related matters:** The programme includes reclamation of available virgin and waste land, provision of commercial fertilizers and improved seeds, promotion of fruit and vegetable cultivation, improved agricultural technique, supply of technical information, improved agricultural implements, improved marketing and credit facilities, provision of soil surveys and prevention of soil erosion, encouragement of the use of natural and compost manures and improvement of livestock.
2. **Irrigation:** The programme include provision of water for agriculture through minor irrigation works, e.g., tanks, canals, surface wells, tube-wells, etc., the intention being that the agricultural lands be served with irrigation facilities.
3. **Communications:** The road system on the countryside to be developed to link every village up to a maximum distance of half a mile by feeder roads through voluntary labour of the villagers themselves. The main roads to be provided for and maintained by the State or other public agencies.
4. **Education:** The community projects to provide for social education, expansion and improvement of primary and secondary education. Vocational and technical training to be emphasized in all the stages of the educational programme.
5. **Health:** The Health Organization to provide primary health in the Development Blocks and a secondary health unit equipped with a hospital and a mobile dispensary at the headquarters of the Project area and serving the area as a whole.
6. **Supplementary Employment:** The unemployed and the under-employed persons in the village community be provided with gainful employment to such extent as is possible, by the development of cottage and small-scale industries, construction of brick kilns and saw mills and encouragement of employment through participation in the tertiary sector of the economy.



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7. **Housing:** Apart from the provision of housing under various schemes, provide demonstration and training in improved techniques and designs for rural housing.
8. **Training:** The training of farmers, village level workers, project supervisors and other personnel to be carried out for skill up-gradation and enhanced efficiencies.
9. **Social welfare:** Make provision for audio-visual aid for instruction and recreation, for organizations of community entertainment, sports activities and Melas.

Pre-Independence Experiments in Rural development:

Prior to the independence in 1947, various individuals and institutions made experiments in rural development from time to time. The model village in Sunderban (Bengal) by Sir Daniel Hamilton in 1903, the Sriniketan experiment of Thakur Rabindranath Tagore in 1920, Brayne's Gurgaon experiment in 1921, Krishnamachari's Baroda Reconstruction Movement in early 1930s, Gandhiji's experiment in Champaran (1971) and Sevagram in 1936, and The Firka Development Scheme in madras State in 1946 are a few prominent initiatives that had substantive bearing on the future rural development programmes. The information available on these early projects is scanty and is mostly based on the recollections of the social workers involved in these experiments.

Post-Independence Rural Development Programme:

Etawah Project (1948-52)

Several experiments in rural reconstruction undertaken by official and nonofficial agencies in the past contributed towards new thinking about reorganizing the setup for rural development. Albert Mayer's Etawah project of 1947-48 for Rural Planning and Development played a key-role and can be regarded as a forerunner of the Community Development Projects in India. After an initial period of trial and error lasting over a year and a half, an administrative pattern was evolved which, for the first time facilitated extension activities to percolate to the village level. The activities of different development departments were channelized through one common agency and the concept of a multipurpose Village Level Worker emerged.

Assessment of Early Efforts:

Looking at the efforts made before World War II in individual Provinces and States and the experience gained in later years in Sevagram in Madhya Pradesh, in the Firka Development scheme in Madras, in the Sarvodaya centres in Bombay, in Etawah and Gorakhpur in Uttar Pradesh and other centers, which are perhaps less well known certain broad conclusions emerged. These were:

- i. When different departments of the Government approach the villager, each from the aspect of its own work, the effect on the villager is apt to be confusing and no permanent impression is created. The peasant's life is not cut into segments in the way the Government's activities are apt to be; the approach to the villager has, therefore, to be a coordinated one and has to comprehend his whole life. Such an approach has to be made, not through a multiplicity of departmental officials, but through an agent common at least to the principal departments engaged in rural work, whom it is now customary to describe as the village level worker.
- ii. Programmes that have been built on the cooperation of the people have more chances of abiding success than those, which are forced down on them.
- iii. While the official machinery has to guide and assist, the principal responsibility for improving their own condition must rest with the people themselves. Unless they feel that a programme is theirs and value it as a practical contribution to their own welfare, no substantial results will be gained.
- iv. Programmes largely dependent on expenditure by the Government, in which the elements of self-help and mutual cooperation on the part of villagers are present only in a nominal degree, are short lived. The essential idea should



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be the reduction of chronic unemployment, which is a feature of rural life—through the practice of scientific agriculture and cottage and small-scale industries.

- v. Advice and precept are of no avail unless they are backed by practical aids—supplies of seed and fertilizer, finance and technical guidance for solving the farmer’s immediate problems.
- vi. Whatever the measures of the effort which the Government wishes to make, the best results will be gained if the programmes are pursued intensively, and practically every agriculturist family has its own contribution to make through a village organization.
- vii. The approach to the villager would be in terms of his own experience and problems, conceived on the pattern of simplicity, avoiding elaborate techniques and equipment until he is ready for them.

Grow More Food Campaign:

An organized effort towards increasing the agricultural production was launched in the year 1947-48 and this was popularly known as the ‘Grow More Food Campaign’. Under this programme additional staff was provided at the District and Sub-divisional (Taluka) levels but after a few years experience it was observed that the system was not functioning properly and cultivators’ response towards the programme was very poor. Moreover, all the departments for rural development were working in isolation and reaching the people directly without any close coordination. The importance of coordinating the activities of the development departments was felt strongly. A committee was appointed to enquire about the working of this programme and suggest ways and means to improve it. The G.M.F. Enquiry Committee Report (1952) recommendations were:

1. The administrative machinery of the Government should be reorganized and equipped for the efficient discharge of the duties imposed on it under the new concept of India as a welfare state.
2. The best non-official leadership available should be mobilized for guiding the 60 million farm families in the villages in their effort to improve their own condition.
3. An Extension organization should be set up for rural work, which would reach every farmer and assist in the coordinated development of all aspects of rural life.
4. The pattern of staffing should consist of a B.D.O., four technical officers and twelve VLWs for a Tahsil or Taluk, with an average of 120 villages.
5. The development activities at the District level will be under the Collector assisted by Specialists. The non-official side will consist of a District Board to which MPs and MLAs should be added as members.
6. At the State level there should be a cabinet and a non-official board for facilitating joint action. The Development Commissioner should be in-charge of the entire rural development programme, and
7. The economic aspect of village life cannot be detached from broader social aspect.

Agricultural development is, in every respect linked up with a whole set of social problems. All aspects of life are inter-related and no lasting results can be achieved if individual aspects of it are dealt with in isolation.

The Community Development Programme (1952)

As a result of G.M.F. Enquiry Committee Report as well as of Etawah Pilot Project and financial assistance from the Ford Foundation, fifteen pilot projects were started for community development. Subsequently, the Indo-American Technical Cooperation Agreement was signed in January 1952 and Community Development Programmes were organized on October 2, of the same year in 55 districts, aiming at the socio-economic transformation of rural people.



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Community Development and N.E.S. Era (1953- 60)

The National Extension Service was inaugurated on October 2, 1953, with a view to provide necessary manpower for the implementation of the community development programme. However, by the year 1956-58, it was felt that people's participation was not forthcoming as desired. An in depth assessment of the past experience led to the recommendations of Balwant Rai Mehta committee and based on these recommendations democratic decentralization (Panchayati Raj) was introduced. The system consisted of three tiers of Zila Parishad at District level, Panchayat Samiti at Block level and Gram Panchayat at the village level. Thus, there were three constituents in the administrative system at this stage:

1. Panchayati Raj;
2. Direct line staff, such as Collector, Block Development Officer, and VLWs, and
3. Specialist staff, such as Extension Officers of different departments.

National Extension Service

The Grow More Food Enquiry Committee, after examining the results of the campaign for increased food production stated that 'No plan can have any chance of success unless the millions of small farmers in the country accept its objective, share in its making, regard it as their own, and are prepared to make the sacrifices necessary for implementing it. The lesson to be derived from the working of the G. M. F. programmes thus, were that all aspects of rural life are interrelated and that no lasting results can be achieved if individual aspects of it are dealt with in isolation'. This analysis led the Committee to propose the establishment of a 'National Extension Organization' for intensive rural work, which could reach every farmer and assist in the coordinated development of rural life as a whole.

Finally, it was pointed out that extension workers have to be supported effectively by research workers to whom they can bring their problems and whose results they carry to the people. Special arrangements are, therefore, needed to ensure the closest cooperation between extension and research.

The Nalagarh Committee Report (1958)

At the initial stage there was considerable confusion and conflict about the roles and responsibilities of the three units of the programme implementation set-up. An Agricultural Administrative Committee (Nalagarh Committee) was set-up in 1958 and it reported that technical departments like agriculture have not been developed to the extent they were required and, therefore, have not been able to deliver the goods as they existed under unsatisfactory conditions of work. The committee concluded that a streamlined agricultural administration is an urgent necessity and the food situation of the country can be appreciably eased if positive steps are taken to achieve this objective.

Intensive Agricultural Development Era (1960 onwards)

A Ford Foundation Team (1959) in its report titled 'India's Food Crisis and Steps to Meet It' urged selection of certain crops in certain areas for more intensive efforts. The team also recommended that the agricultural extension programmes should be based on local conditions, village production system and problems, and village potentials.

The I.A.D.P:

Though the Community Development Programme created conditions for socio-economic transformation of rural people and adoption of modern practices for improving their farms, home and communities in an integrated manner, its impact on agricultural production was not felt. Under the Community Development Programme the production efforts and available resources were widely diffused over the entire country. It was, therefore, agreed that in the interest of increasing agricultural production quickly, pilot projects should be initiated in selected areas having favorable conditions for maximizing food production. In 1960-61, seven districts were selected for this and the programme was popularly known as 'Package Programme'.



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The Intensive Agricultural Area Programme (1964)

The mid-term appraisal of the Third Five Year Plan emphasized that much greater emphasis should be given to the development of scientific and progressive agriculture in an intensive manner and 20-25 per cent of the cultivated area of the country should be selected for intensive agricultural development. The IAAP, which came into operation in March 1964, also followed the package approach.

The High Yielding Varieties Programme and Multiple Cropping Programme (1966-67)

These two programmes constituted the two major planks of the new agricultural strategy under the Fourth Five year plan, which aimed at attaining self-sufficiency in food by the end of 1970-71. The Programmes were initiated in areas having necessary organization and facilities, which were considered essential pre-requisites to rapid agricultural growth.

Hill and Tribal Area Development

With a view to removing regional disparities, particularly in less endowed or disadvantaged areas like the hill and tribal areas, special sub-plans of development were introduced in the mid seventies. Special financial and fiscal concessions, credit on softer terms and subsidies were made available to under-developed areas to attract increased industrial investment. A Minimum Needs Programme was designed to secure to the rural areas within a reasonable time frame certain basic amenities in the field of education, health, drinking water, electrification, roads and house-sites.

Small Farmers Development Agencies (1971)

The Small Farmers Development Agencies (SFDA) programme, aimed at the target group of small and marginal farmers and agricultural labourers, began in 1971 to assist persons specifically identified from this target group in raising their income level by helping them to adopt improved agricultural technology and acquiring means of increasing agricultural production like minor irrigation sources, and on the other hand, to diversify their farm economy through subsidiary activities like animal husbandry, dairying, horticulture etc.

IRDP (1976)

The concept of an Integrated Rural Development Programme was first proposed in the Central budget of 1976-77. This programme was intended to 'assist the rural population to derive economic benefits from the developmental assets of each area. Though conceptually this programme was comprehensive in scope and sought to secure, through a process of block level planning, fuller exploitation of the local growth potential with a view to making an optimum impact on the local poverty situation.

Drought Prone Area Programme

The need for a Drought Prone Area Programme (DPAP) was felt in mid seventies, from several considerations. The drought prone areas accounted for nearly 19 percent of the total area of the country and 12 percent of the population. Their overall productivity was low. There was frequent migration of the inhabitants along with their livestock. These areas are considered to be a continuing source of strain on the financial resources of the nation, by way of drought relief etc. The main thrust of the DPAP in the fifth Plan was to restore a proper ecological balance in the drought prone areas. The important elements constituting the strategy for such ecologically integrated development are listed below:

- i) Development and management of irrigation resources;
- ii) Soil and moisture conservation and afforestation;
- iii) Re-structuring of cropping pattern and pasture development;
- iv) Changes in agronomic practices;
- v) Livestock development;



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vi) Development of small and marginal farmers and agricultural labour through subsidiary vocations.

The main elements of the strategy of integrated agricultural development in drought prone areas are not the concern of one single existing department of Government but concern at least five main Departments namely, Agriculture, Irrigation, Animal Husbandry, Forestry and Cooperation. There was a real danger that any integrated plan of development of a drought prone area may flounder on the rock of departmentalism. To get over these problems it seemed necessary to opt for an organizational innovation.

Desert Development Programme

The Desert Development Programme aimed at checking further desertification of the desert areas and raising productivity of the local resources to raise the income and employment levels of the local inhabitants. The programme was implemented both in the hot and cold arid zones of the country. The emphasis was on arresting desertification through activities, which restore ecological balance, stabilizes sand dunes, and facilitate soil and water conservation. Plantation of shelterbelts, adoption of water harvesting measures and development of pastures to sustain the livestock economy was to be vigorously pursued. Exploitation of the natural resources of these areas has to be closely linked to replenishment of these resources.

Watershed Development Programmes

The Ministry of Rural Development is administering the watershed programme to check the diminishing productivity and loss of natural resources. Projects are implemented by District Rural Development Agencies/Zilla Parishads (DRDA/ZP) through Project Implementing Agencies (PIA). PIAs could be a Line Department (of the State Government), Panchayati Raj Institutions or a reputed NGO. One PIA normally handles 10-12 watershed projects covering an area of about 5000-6000 hectares. The PIA is required to maintain a technical team of 4 experts called Watershed Development Team (WDT) and individual projects (500 hectares) are planned and executed by the local people living in the watershed area called the Watershed Association (WA) through an elected body called Watershed Committee (WC).

Pradhan Mantri Gram Sadak Yojana

The Pradhan Mantri Gram Sadak Yojana (PMGSY) was launched on 25 December 2000 as a 100 per cent Centrally Sponsored Scheme. The prime objective of the PMGSY is to provide connectivity to all the eligible unconnected habitations of more than 500 persons in the rural areas (250 persons in the hilly and desert areas) by good quality all-weather roads.

Rural Drinking Water Supply Programme

Clean drinking water is a basic necessity of life. Supply of clean drinking water in the rural areas has always been one of the highest priorities of the government. A Technology Mission on drinking water named 'National Drinking Water Mission' (NDWM) was launched in 1986, which subsequently was rechristened as 'Rajiv Gandhi National Drinking Water Mission' (RGNDWM) in 1991 with three key objectives:

1. Providing safe drinking water to all villages,
2. Assisting local communities to maintain sources of safe drinking water in good condition, and
3. Giving special attention for water supply to Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes.

Rajiv Gandhi National Drinking Water Mission (RGNDWM) adopts an integrated approach so that conservation and augmentation of water sources is interrelated with rural water supply schemes to provide sustainable supply of safe drinking water to the rural population. The Mission seeks to provide supply of 40 liters of safe drinking water in rural areas.



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Poverty Alleviation Programme

The focus in the 6th Plan was on the alleviation of rural poverty and it was emphasized that an increase in the productive potential of the rural economy was an essential condition for finding effective solutions to the problems of rural poverty. At the same time, recognizing constraints that limit the scope for higher growth rate in medium-term, more direct means of reducing the incidence of poverty and destitution would have to be employed. The hard core of poverty is to be found in rural areas and the poorest sections belong to the families of landless labourers, small and marginal farmers, rural artisans, Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes and socially and economically backward classes. Households below the poverty line require to be assisted through an appropriate package of technologies, services and asset transfer programmes. The strategy and methodology for accelerated rural development to be followed was as follows:

- Increasing production and productivity of agriculture and allied sectors;
- Resource and income development of vulnerable section of the rural population through development of the primary, secondary and tertiary sectors;
- Skill formation and skill upgrading programmes to promote self and wage employment amongst the rural poor;
- Facilitating adequate availability of credit to support the programmes taken up for the rural poor;
- Promoting marketing support to ensure the viability of production programmes and to insulate the rural poor from exploitation in the marketing of their products;
- Provision of additional employment opportunities to the rural poor for gainful employment during the lean agricultural season through a national rural employment programme (NREP);
- Provision of essential minimum needs; and
- Involvement of universities, research and technical institutions in preparing a shelf of projects both for self-employment and NREP and in preparing strategies for the scientific utilization of local resources.

The 7th Plan viewed the poverty alleviation programmes in the wider perspective of socioeconomic transformation in the country. In view of this it was felt that while the present strategy of direct attack on poverty through specific poverty alleviation programmes is justified on account of insufficient percolation of benefits to the poor from overall economic growth, it should be appreciated that the strategy of direct attack on poverty cannot be sustained and would not yield the desired results, if the overall growth of the economy itself is slow and the benefits of such growth are inequitably distributed. For one thing, the resources and the capabilities needed for running such programmes cannot be generated in the system unless the economy itself is buoyant and there is a sustained increase in output.

Secondly, the demand for goods and services produced by the poorer household enterprises rises significantly in response to the overall increase in incomes in the country so that the viability of these household enterprises depends critically on the sustained increase in national income. The programmes for poverty alleviation should thus be regarded as supplementing the basic plan for overall economic growth, in terms of generating productive assets and skills as well as incomes for the poor.

The success of the anti-poverty strategy can be gauged from the decline in poverty levels from 37.27 per cent in 1993-94 to 27.09 percent in 1999-2000 in the rural areas. This decline in poverty has, however, been uneven. Haryana, Bihar, Himachal Pradesh, Karnataka and Rajasthan experienced a sharp reduction in poverty levels (a drop of more than 12 percentage points between 1993-94 and 1999-2000). Uttar Pradesh, West Bengal and Tamil Nadu also registered significant reduction in poverty (8-12 percentage). However, Orissa and Madhya Pradesh have shown virtually no reduction in poverty levels. In fact, these are the states where the absolute number of poor has actually gone up between 1993-94 and 1999-2000. At the beginning of the new millennium, 260 million people in the country did not have incomes to access a consumption basket, which defines the poverty line. Of these, 75 per cent were in the rural areas.



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Rural Landless Employment Guarantee Programme (RLEGP)

RLEGP was introduced from 15th August, 1983 with the objective of (a) improving and expanding employment opportunities for the rural landless with a view to providing guarantee of employment to at least one member of every landless household up to 100 days in a year and (b) creating durable assets for strengthening the infrastructure so as to meet the growing requirements of the rural economy. An outlay of Rs. 500 crores to be fully financed by the Central Government was provided under this programme in the Sixth Plan. The implementation of the programme was entrusted to the States/UTs, but they were required to prepare specific projects for approval by a Central Committee.

People's Participation—the Crux of the Programme

The participation of the people in the planning and execution of rural schemes is an essential feature of the movement and it is observed that where a correct approach has been made on behalf of the administration the people have come forward readily to play their part. The importance of ensuring, right from the start, the people's participation, not merely in the execution of the Community Development Project but also in its planning was emphasized as this is the very essence of the programme. The Community Development Programme made a provision for the setting up of a Project Advisory Committee, which should be as representative as possible of all the non-official elements within the project area.

The Planning process in a democratic country can acquire fuller meaning and depth if the people not only associate themselves in planning for their development but also participate consciously in plan implementation. Experience suggests that the task of educating and mobilizing the people in this direction is more effectively accomplished when it is institutionalized. Individual action though important can only be sporadic in nature, whereas institutionalized action can be distinctly more effective in mobilizing local resources, articulating needs and coordinating the developmental tasks which are undertaken by the people. The following are some of the forms of institutionalized action.

1. Youth and Women's organizations operating at different spatial levels, particularly for promoting eco-development and environmental sanitation.
2. Voluntary organizations engaged in general developmental work in an area or on a specific activity like education or health or a combination of a few such activities.
3. Organizations of specific beneficiary or interest groups like self-employed women, or farmers or of people who have common economic interest such as marketing.
4. Organization of the farmers living in command area of irrigation project catchment areas in the hills and watershed areas in un-irrigated regions into cooperatives for improving land and water management without affecting the individuality of holdings.
5. Religious, social or cultural organizations or clubs (Rotary, Jaycees, Lions etc.), which often undertake developmental activities in selected areas.
6. Professional organizations or educational institutions, which take up study, research and social action programmes as part of their professional or social commitments.

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