



GENDER BASED UTILIZATION OF MGNREGS GENERATED COMMON PROPERTY RESOURCES: A NOTE FROM THE FIELD

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ABSTRACT

Rural livelihood and common property resources (CPRs) are interrelated and the degree of utilization of CPRs varies as per social and cultural context. This again creates a complex web when it comes to the point of gendered discussion. This paper is based on the empirical observation carried in a remote village of Burdwan district, West Bengal as a part of a UGC sponsored research project. CPR utilization and access to CPR is highly varying for male and female. A successful policy should recognize women's constraints to get the full benefit and policy makers should address women's voices and interests while formulating a policy. This paper draws conclusion on the basis of the empirical observation, literature support and on the essence of the data collected so far.

Keywords: CPR, Gendered access, gender and disaster, gendered utilization of CPRs, CPRs and rural domestic life.

The significance of common property resources in rural livelihood is a matter of concern in present day development studies, especially in the field of inclusive development. "Jodha's (1986) pioneering work on CPRs resulted in a spate of literature that illustrated the importance of CPRs not only as regular sources of income and employment but also as safety nets in periods of drought. Moreover, while Jodha's work focused primarily on the semi-arid zones, subsequent literature has provided evidence that CPRs are important in other regions as well, namely hilly forest tracts and even predominantly low land agriculture dominated belts of the country. Moreover, implicit in much of the discussion around the commons is that

improved CPR management will lead both to more benefits for those who depend on CPRs and improved management of CPRs for conservation purposes”. (Menon & Vadivelu, 2006) This paper attempts to provide an analysis of gender based utilization of common property resources created by MGNREGS. Women’s access to resources has remained the focal point of discussion in social science research. However, there is a dearth of literature which seeks explanations about gendered use of common property resources in rural India .Common property resources are having significant impact on rural livelihood. “ A study in seven states of semiarid regions showed that common property resources accounted for 9 to 26 percent of household income of landless and marginal farmers, 69 to 89 percent of their grazing requirements, and 91 to 100 percent of their fuel requirements” (Bandyopadhyay, 2008 cited in Jain and Elson, 2011) . It has been argued by various scholars that gender plays an important role in access and control of CPR. “Restriction of access to community resources not only robs women of opportunities for diversification into livestock and collection of non-timber forest products, but also adds to their work burden by increasing the distance traversed and time required for collecting fuel for cooking and water for drinking. For women, agricultural work, informal work, landlessness, discrimination, and poverty, mesh into a connected web”. (Jain &Elson, 2011) This paper looks into issues related with gendered access to common property resources created by MGNREGS and women and men’s use of these common property resources, together with the importance of these resources for the livelihoods of people in rural West Bengal. This paper provides comprehensive notes on the issues emerged in the field, while doing a field survey in a rural part of the Burdwan district (Silampur village of Amlajora G.P. of Kanksa Block) as a part of the research project on “Gendered utilization of MGNREGS created CPRs in rural West Bengal. The work draws empirical observations from the field. As a part of the research, MGNREGS generated CPRs in the village area were identified first. These were a) village roads with metalled coating b) village ponds c) plantation grounds d) levelled land for playing e) re-constructed religious places f) earthen embankment.

A total of 259 samples (including individual respondents and FGD respondents) are taken so far. A total of 165 individual samples were taken from the various parts of the village to assess the gendered pattern of utilization of these CPRs. A total of 94 respondents attended focussed group discussions in three phases. The study is ongoing with more FGD s and close talking to village people and observational recording of CPR utilization hours. The research so far, yields some interesting observations:

First, the intensity of CPR utilization is largely age specific across gender. Female respondents in the age group of 15-35 years has reported lowest utilization of all CPRs. The reason, as revealed by respondent survey and FGD, the access is highly controlled by the gender relation within the household. Male headed households are predominantly restricting the women of this age group to move outwards and hence imposing the restriction on the utilization of CPRs too. Contrary to this, women of the female headed households are having more access to outer sphere and similarly their CPR utilization is more intense than the first category. Women of the male headed households reported almost daily utilization of CPRs (roads and ponds) when their male counterparts migrates temporarily in search of work. There is further scope of investigation on the interrelationships between female headship and access to common property resources in the developmental context of MGNREGS. Anyway, this area remained untouched in current research to maintain its mentioned objectives. The access is poor for teen age girls, newly married women and women of child bearing age or women having infants. Though a large part of the women are dependent on these CPRs for their domestic life, (especially on ponds) the access is highly localized and time specific to avoid the meeting with strangers and village males as much as possible. According to Howard & Smith (2006) “access by the poor to natural resources (land, forests, water, fisheries, pastures, etc.), is essential for sustainable poverty reduction. The livelihoods of rural people without access, or with very limited access to natural resources are vulnerable because they have difficulty in obtaining food, accumulating other assets, and recuperating after natural or market shocks or misfortunes”. Hence the conclusion supports the fact of women’s misfortune related with their restricted access to these resources furthermore.

Second observation is related with the benefits of newly created MGNREGS CPRs in the domestic life of village women. 74% of women FGD respondents agreed with the fact that these newly created CPRs are playing good role in helping their domestic life. They are now enabled to collect water from the newly created ponds for their domestic use, like bathing of cattle, fetching water to kitchen garden, bath of their own and other domestic uses. Though none of these ponds are that deep which can provide drinking water and supply water throughout the summer, but major part of the year is served by these ponds. Ponds are turned to be most beneficial CPR for village women. These are saving time and hardship of water collection, as most of the households in observed village is having no personal water source like well and tube well. Roads, on the other hand, has increased the access to the teen age girls to the school, who often, avoided school specially in the rainy season to avoid the

harassment of changing cloths after reaching the school. Only high school in the area has no facility of separate toilet for boys and girls. Roads are in some way helping the village women to do their outside work in more easy way, within their limited access.

Third and the most important observation is related with the MGNREGS created CPR (earthen embankment) and disaster management. “Research on the effects of ecological disasters on rural communities showed that there is a direct relationship between a community with balance and synergy among the capitals and a functioning ecosystem that provides and supports the resources required for a healthy human community”.(Gutierrez & Montes,2005). UNDP (2003) has made a conclusion that “Women, girls, boys and men belonging to different age and socio-economic strata have distinct vulnerabilities, and this shapes the way they experience disaster, and also their ability to recover from it. In countries where gender discrimination is tolerated, women and girls are particularly vulnerable to natural hazards”. The fast facts, related to disaster and women as put forward by UNDP (2003) is as follows:

- “Disasters lower women’s life expectancy more than men’s, according to data from 141 countries affected by disaster between 1981 and 2002.
- Women, boys and girls are 14 times more likely than men to die during a disaster.
- Most of the victims trapped in New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina were African-American women and their children, the poorest demographic group in that part of the country.
- Following a disaster, it is more likely that women will be victims of domestic and sexual violence; many even avoid using shelters for fear of being sexually assaulted”.

MGNREGS has rendered a great influence on flood mitigation and women’s protection in the study area. An earthen embankment has been made along river Damodar to check the severity of flood. This CPR has reported maximum benefits of villagers across gender. It has helped to reduce the effect of the flood to a great extent. About 98% of the village respondents responded in a positive way while questioned about the utility of this CPR. 93% of the female respondents has expressed their reduced vulnerability level as a result of the creation of the embankment. Basanti Devi (54) has reported, “We live so close to river that it was our fate to struggle with flood in almost every year. For me, this was the most hectic and tiring period of my life as I had to cook within and to look after my children who often fall

sick in that season. After creation of that embankment, we are saved from hectic schedule of monsoon days, saved from going to temporary shelter and to arrange for livelihood in a mess for almost one month”. Though the embankment is not fully capable of restricting flood in optimum level, but it has got the recognition of best CPR in the village created through MGNREGS for saving human lives together with livestock. It has helped to drastically reduce the domestic hazard of the village women in monsoon season in last five years. Now the agricultural lands are no more submerges and temporary migration of village men is not obstructed by entrapped situation due to flood water.

Fourth and the last observation is related with the frequency of utilization of MGNREGS created CPRs. Male villagers are recorded to use these CPRs more frequently than their female counterparts. A specific point on a village road (built by MGNREGS) has recorded 77% utilization by males and 23% utilization by females. (on the basis of total number of passers on that point on a 12 hours’ time frame) Ponds are more or less equally utilized, 53% by males and 47% by females but the utilization hour is much more for males than females. (Spending time on a particular pond on a 12 hours’ time frame). Plantation ground is merely utilized because of its very young age. This issue of utilization is crucial while addressing the gender dimensions of MGNREGS created CPRs. For addressing the issues, a well-defined strategy of gender analysis should be adopted as “ gender analysis helps clarify the specific and often different needs, vulnerabilities, and coping strategies of women and men, so that they can be more adequately addressed in response to the impacts of climate change and variability”(World Bank,2009).

On a conclusive note, it can be said that the safety net programmes like MGNREGS should include women’s voices and interests keeping in view the social relations, family structure and existing cultural norms. These programmes should seek to enhance women’s access to the newly created resources as well. Creation of explicit awareness about women’s access to CPRs will enhance their control on it and hence will ensure the long term preservation as women has naturally got the preservation attitude towards nature much more than men. Recognizing women’s participation constraints and their role in manging CPRs may result the best benefit out of it. According to World Bank report, “programmes that affect access to and management of common property, such as natural resource management programme, should recognize women’s dependence on these resources and accommodate gender differentiated management practices”. It is concluded from the field survey that the awareness and empowerment of villagers across gender will reduce the vulnerabilities of their own to a great extent together with the enhancement of livelihood opportunities. This will

again boost up the women's access to the CPRs. A broader understanding of gender dimensions of CPR management will help the policy makers to formulate a more effective policy for sustainable development.

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