



Empowering women through MGNREGA

'I shall work for an India in which the poorest shall feel that it is their country, in whose making they have an effective voice, an India in where there shall be no high class and low class of people; an India in which all communities shall live in perfect harmony. There can be no room in such India for the curse of untouchability, or the curse of intoxicating drinks and drugs. Women will enjoy the same rights as men. We shall be at peace with all the rest of the world.'

This is the India of my dreams.' Mahatma Gandhi



सत्यमेव जयते
Government of Assam

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Guwahati, Assam, India
November, 2014



Tarun Gogoi



**Chief Minister, Assam
Guwahati**

Dispur
6/09/2014

MESSAGE

I am happy to know that the Department of Panchayat & Rural Development is going to publish a booklet titled “Empowering Women through MGNREGA in Assam” in collaboration with UNICEF Assam Field Office.

In the recent past, Assam has witnessed a significant advancement in all sectors and it would not be possible to attain unless women across the state and all social groups participate equally in the development process. Now 50 percent of our PRI members are women and their active participation in various government flagship schemes, including MGNREGA is commendable. The MGNREGA, one of the most strong and largest flagship schemes has given ample scope to the women to strengthen their economic growth and livelihood.

I convey my best wishes for successful publication of the booklet.



(TARUN GOGOI)

RAKIBUL HUSSAIN

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MESSAGE

It makes me happy to hear that the Department of Panchayat & Rural Development is going to publish a booklet titled “Empowering Women through MGNREGA in Assam” with the association of UNICEF Assam Field Office.

Under MGNREGA scheme, Assam has been doing very good in enhancing the livelihood securities in rural areas particularly for the women through guaranteed wage employment. Through the raising of awareness among the rural masses and active women’s participation in local governance the involvement of women in MGNREGA - one of the largest schemes of Government is praiseworthy.

On this occasion I congratulate the Department of Panchayat and Rural Development and UNICEF for this publication which reflects how women in Assam are taking the lead towards change and becoming empowered.

(Rakibul Hussain)

SAMEER KUMAR KHARE, IAS.



**PRINCIPAL SECRETARY
GOVERNMENT OF ASSAM**
Assam Secretariat
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MESSAGE

I am extremely happy that a booklet of success stories regarding the impact of MGNREGA on women titled “Empowering Women Through MGNREGA” to be released by the Commissionerate, Panchayat & Rural Development with the support of UNICEF, Assam field office. The MGNREGA in Assam is one of the most strong and largest flagship schemes which have given a wide scope to the women to strengthen their economic growth and livelihood. The Panchayat & Rural Development Department, Govt. of Assam has prioritized the provisions in its policies and programs for active women’s participation in development process in rural Assam.

I wish this booklet will disseminate the good works towards women’s empowerment and will encourage the women, PRI members to deliver their duties in effective manner which will bring changes about the well being of the rural people of Assam particularly for women and children.

I congratulate the Department of Panchayat and Rural Development and UNICEF for this publication which illustrates how women in Assam are taking the lead towards becoming empowered.

Place: Guwahati, Assam
Date : 15.09.2014

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MESSAGE

“Empowering Women through MGNREGA in Assam” is a humble initiative to publish the success stories and best practices under MGNREGA with the support from UNICEF Assam Field Office. Initiatives of women for growth and development in various sectors in rural Assam has been documented in the booklet. It shows how MGNREGA has brought positive changes in the lives of the rural women by enabling and empowering them economically and socially. Community infrastructures created under this scheme have given women better access to many of their needs such as health, education, livelihoods, etc.

This booklet on women’s empowerment through MGNREGA will provide insights and understanding of the related issues to the PRIs, policy makers and other stakeholders. I would like to extend our thanks to the UNICEF, Assam for appreciable support for bringing out the booklet and look forward for other joint initiative for betterment of the rural people of Assam.

Dr. K.K Dwivedi, IAS
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FOREWORD

UNICEF is pleased to collaborate with the Department of Panchayat and Rural Development, Government of Assam to bring out this booklet.

The Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Act (MGNREGA) has played a critical role in the State in generating employment, enhancing livelihood security and in transforming the lives of communities. It has also played a substantial role in empowering women and ensuring that women take a significant and active role in the planning and implementation of scheme.

This booklet on Empowering Women through MGNREGA is a celebration of the successes achieved so far. It also reflects the challenges ahead. On behalf of UNICEF, I offer my congratulations to the Department of Panchayat and Rural Development on their achievements and their efforts towards empowerment of women under MGNREGA which has ensured the overall economic growth of the State.

Dr. Tushar Rane
Chief, Field Office for Assam

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Preface

Women's empowerment essentially refers to empowering women to change power relations between them and men in their favour in the different spheres of life such as economical, political, social, and spiritual. Active participation of any community in the development process is recognised as a tool for its empowerment. The Panchayat & Rural Development Department, Govt. of Assam has emphasized to ensure the adequate provisions in its policies and programs through which it is to be ensured that the women folk are not only empowered but also taking active participation in the development process in rural Assam.



The Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) was passed by Indian Parliament in 2005 and scheme was expanded gradually in phase manner. In case of Assam MGNREGA was introduced in the state in 2005-06 in 7 districts as the first phase. The coverage was extended to 6 more districts in the second phase i.e. in 2008-09 and since 2009-10 all 27 districts are being covered under this scheme. The performance of MGNREGA has improved considerably in the recent years. The number of households provided job card in Assam has increased from 36.12 lakhs in 2009-10 to 41.28 lakhs in 2013-14. The total households demanded employment has gone from 2.14 lakhs in 2009-10 to 6.20 lakhs in 2013-14 which reflects the extent of people's participation. During 2013-14 total 298.53 lakhs person days were generated among which 24.74% man days were generated by women. As regards women's participation in MGNREGA in Assam is encouraging as percentage of women's participation has increased from 24.10 % during 2009-10 to 29% in 2013-14. Regarding women's participation, performance of Dhemaji, Baksa, Chirang, Dima Haso is praiseworthy. Under Panchayati Raj Institutions 50% of the members at all level are women and Gaon Panchayat is the main implementing agency of MGNREGA at the village level. Besides this other enabling environment of employment such as unskilled manual works around the village, good wage rate which is equal to men, working together in groups of women from their own vicinity, etc. has increased their participation. This scheme has boosted up their capacities in collective

bargaining of the issues related to them, their development and empowerment. It could be assessed from the mode of participation by women in Social Audit, Gram Sabhas. In many districts women participation is more than 50% in social audit and gram sabhas. The women folk prefer MGNREGA work as the work is available locally; wage rate is good and equal for all men and women, which gives them the opportunities to have some cash of their own and enables them to spend for necessities as well as some goods for children and themselves. Many works taken under MGNREGA has decrease the drudgery of women in collecting water for domestic purposes as well as for drinking, collection of fuel wood, etc. MGNREGA has brought in a large number of women in to the labour market. In Assam it has been proved to be a stepping stone for women to progress as it has strengthened their economic activities as like SHGs which made them to take up income generating activities at higher order large scale.



Introduction

From homemaker to changemaker, rural Assamese women have travelled a long way indeed. With her steady determination and innovative use of traditional knowledge, such women have shown the path of growth and development in various sectors in Assam.

The modern Indian woman has been the centre of much discussion. How she has stormed into previous male bastions to carve out a niche for herself, how she has reclaimed her right over her own body, how she is shaping a new India and raising the progress curve of the nation is well-documented. But most of these stories have been about the success of the urban Indian woman—the one with the suave car and the trendy sunglasses, in a well-cut salwar kameez or suit entering a glass building. But what about the other India—the one that doesn't make headlines, but, is equally, if not more important to the nation's development?

Rural Indian women are often thought to have no voice and no rights either, let alone contributing to the State's advancement. Travels to the villages of Assam and listen-

ing to their success stories, however, reveals that schemes such as MGNREGA have played a huge role in empowering them and furthering their goals. Under MGNREGA, priority is given to women such that at least one-third of the beneficiaries are women, who have duly registered and requested for work.

This expansion in everyday women's lives ability to make strategic life choices in a context where this ability was previously denied to them can be loosely termed as empowerment. For women in India, this suggests empowerment in several realms: personal, familial, economic and political.

Impact of MGNREGA

- MGNREGA has brought about a positive transformation in the lives of many Assamese women, especially workers who were solely dependent on agriculture produce earlier.
- As many women have become economically independent, it is now possible for them to not only contribute financially to running the family but also have a say in how the family runs
- Women Self Help Groups (SHGs) have been strengthened through MGNREGA. SHGs enable women to grow their savings and to access the credit which banks are increasingly willing to lend them.
- Education for children has also received a boost in many poor families thanks to this radical rural employment guarantee scheme.
- By ensuring equal pay for all genders and equal opportunities at work, MGNREGA has contributed to leadership development among Assamese women and encouraged them to be vocal about their rights
- With an increase in income and purchasing power, there has been a consequent increase in women MGNREGA workers spending on their health and nutrition. This, in turn, has boosted the overall health of women in the State.





WORKER EXTRAORDINAIRE

Sobita Doloi
Morigaon District

If resilience could be personified, it would surely be named Sobita Doloi, a 35-year-old manual worker in Dandoya Panchayat. By dint of her perseverance and hard-work, she is today an independent, self-sufficient woman able to lead life on her own terms. But things weren't always so easy for her. 'Five years back, I wasn't a MGNREGA funded worker. With no education and financial support, life was indeed an uphill battle. I barely managed two square meals a day for me and my family by toiling in three different households a day. I also remember feeling bone tired all the time, and often thought of giving up,' Sobita recalls, her eyes welling up with unshed tears.

Today, things could not have been more different. It is difficult to picture the robust happy-

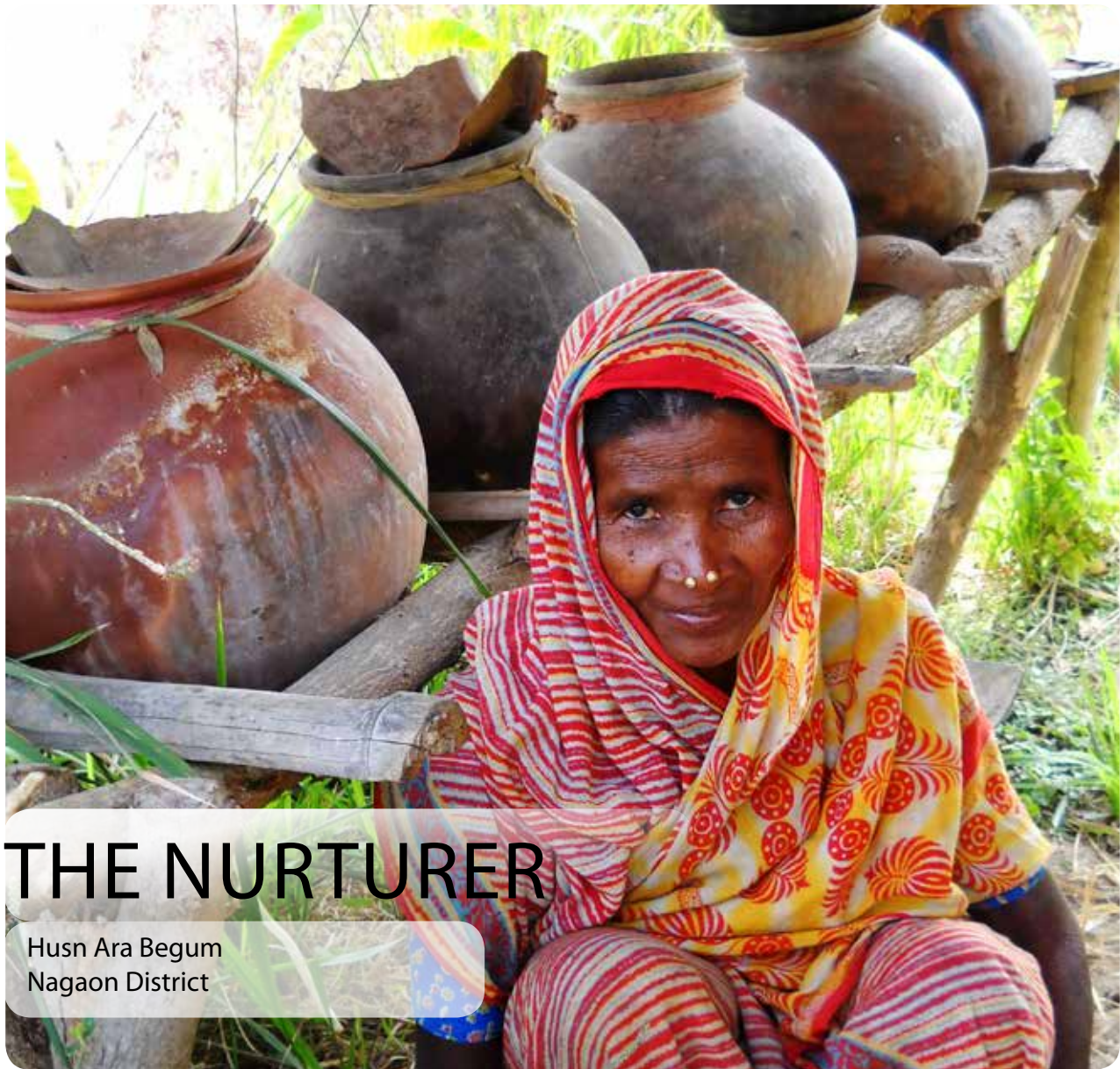


looking Sobita in a state of such despair. On being asked how MGNREGA had changed her life, she explains enthusiastically, 'My family is made up of my blind mother, my aged father and myself. As such, I am the sole earning member and without the opportunity for work provided by MGNREGA, we would all have perished. I have been working in different projects under MGNREGA such as road construction, embankment building and irrigation canals for the past five years, and not only sustaining my family but also contributing to the growth of my village. Earlier, I could hardly think beyond filling my belly, now I have a savings account with the local post office.

For someone in my circumstances, this is a way of life that would have been unthinkable without the support provided by MGNREGA.'

Also, as Sobita remarks, the work site doesn't only mean toiling day in and day out. It gives her an opportunity to work with others like her, share their joys and sorrows, and work towards a collective vision that is worth working for. Not many of us can boast of such a feeling of purpose and fulfilment at work!





THE NURTURER

Husn Ara Begum
Nagaon District

The villagers living along the banks of the Brahmaputra River near the Laokhowa Forest Reserve faced a continuous threat from floods and rampant erosion of river embankments, particularly during the monsoon season. This also affected their livelihoods. Thus, taking note of the situation, a comprehensive flood proofing project was designed by the Nagaon Zilla Parishad based on a demand by inhabitants residing in the gram panchayats surrounding the south bank of the Brahmaputra River. The project was implemented in a phased manner with the aim of restoring rural livelihoods by constructing sustainable flood proofing structures and strengthening agricultural irrigation channels.

Husna ara Begum, a 45-year-old widow who lived hand-to-mouth hardly found any agricultural work during the monsoons. She had no children to support her in the struggle for existence and her husband had died many years ago. Her health was failing after years of hard manual labour. It was at a time like this that MGNREGA came to her rescue. She found work as a water carrier in an embankment maintenance project nearby. In her own words, 'In a long long time, I remember looking forward to waking up every day and going to work. The work that I do doesn't take a toll on my health, rather I enjoy serving water to my co-workers as they toil all day. After all, what more noble work can you do than serving



water to someone thirsty? And the best part is that I can come home to cook a nutritious meal for myself instead of eating gruel and water'. Husna even finds the time to plant a few vegetables in her little yard nowadays and enjoys watching her plants grow. Her favourite is the brinjal plant as she is partial to the bengena bharta—a concoction of roasted brinjal with a few green chillies, sliced onions, salt and mustard oil.





SANITATION GURU

Anu Baruah
Morigaon District

Anu Baruah can't cycle her way through her native village of Bhurbanda without someone stopping her to ask about a toilet for her/his home. After all, this frail 40-something woman has helped build a whopping 2400 plus toilets so far. Not only has she dedicated her life to the 'Total Sanitation Campaign' that aims to eradicate defecating in the open, she has also personally made sure that many whose names do not feature in the Sarkari BPL holders list also have access to these toilets. To that end, she has provided a survey of her area which recommends non-BPL families for BPL cards based on their economic condition.

The Total Sanitation Campaign (TSC) is a community-led programme launched by the Government of India in 1999. It is a demand-driven and people-centred sanitation programme where Rs 2700 is provided by the government and Rs 300 is added by a particular householder. The main goal of the Total Sanitation Campaign is to eradicate the practice of open defecation by 2017. As rural sanitation related works come under the ambit of MGNREGA, this campaign has been duly -converged with the former in rural India. Also to ascertain that the TSC campaign is carried out on a sustainable basis, at least the labour and some of the material component of the scheme is met out of MGNREGA. Thus, MGNREGA has contributed extensively in ensuring that the TSC campaign is met with success.





Villages that achieve the 'open defecation free' status receive monetary rewards and high publicity under a programme called Nirmal Gram Puraskar. Anu hopes she will soon live to see that day. How she got associated with the campaign is a story in itself. 'I had initially started a dairy farm which could not be marketed well and as such suffered losses. Dejected and in debt, I was left with little option but to let it go. It was then that I realized my strengths lay more in activism than in business. I threw myself heart and soul into the TSC campaign and I have never looked back since', says Anu. Even after the toilets have been built and handed over to a householder, Anu revisits the household to make sure the nearest water source is 20-30 feet away or if the toilets are actually being used. 'Some people call me the latrine lady, I do not mind that. Now that I have realised that a toilet near a house is as essential as the house itself, such names tell me that I am on the right path'.





DAIRY QUEENS

Biju Das & Usha Das
Kamrup District (Rural)

Verghese Kurien, the father of India's white revolution, would have been happy to witness the silent cooperative dairy movement that is sweeping many districts of lower Assam. Two years ago, around 100 women of Choigaon had come together to form a mahila federation (with an assistance grant of Rs 2 lakh provided under National Rural Livelihood Mission by the Govt. of Assam) to supply milk to their neighbouring towns. Biju Das and Usha Das, two energetic women, have been leading the group. 'We had been trying very hard to be economically independent. Earlier, middle men used to take away a huge share of profit from us. Now, we are supplying milk directly through our federation's centre. Our federation's cattle shelter, constructed under MGNREGA, laid the foundation for the centre. Also, a proper urine tank and fodder trough for the cattle was provided under the scheme. With the generous assistance that we received under





MGNREGA, there has been no looking back,' beams Usha Das.

It was Biju Das who had started a dairy farm at her home five years ago on a very small scale. Inspired by her success, other women of her village also took it up as their profession. And, after forming No 2 Balasidhi Mahila Federation two years ago, they now daily supply over 2,000 litres of milk through their cooperative. Women empowerment at its best, one would say!

'In the beginning, we could supply only 21 litres of milk. However, with the support of our local Panchayat, we successfully expanded our business. If we continue getting support from the government, we can really make it big,' shares Biju Das.

It's heartening to see that apart from managing their households, these women have gone the extra mile to make things happen for themselves and their communities. Their sincere efforts have paid rich dividends. 'Our dairy selling centre is at Dupjoni and we supply milk to neighbouring towns of Choigaon and Boko. We hope we will be able to supply milk to Guwahati someday,' says Usha Das.





THE EDGY ENTREPRENEUR

Sobita Tamuli
Nalbari District

She is a stickler for being on time. 32-year-old Sobita Tamuli has never been late in her life, a quality that has served her well. Heading a flourishing establishment that specializes in making vermi-compost, Sobita has been in the business for 12 years now. When she started out in 2002 in Telana village, a married woman from a small village as hers with little formal education aspiring to be an entrepreneur was something unheard of. But Sobita always knew she had to be one, a hundred innovative business ideas would swim in her head as she went about with her daily chores at home. Until one day, she decided to test one of them.

Together with a handful of other women from her village, Sobita started making vermi-compost with the support provided to her under MGNREGA. The making of vermi-compost is something actively encouraged under the dynamic scheme. As such, she was duly provided an initial assistance of Rs 50,000 to jumpstart her initiative. Her brand of manure was simplicity itself—a mixture of cow dung, banana plant, earthworms, haar and fallen leaves. All materials were



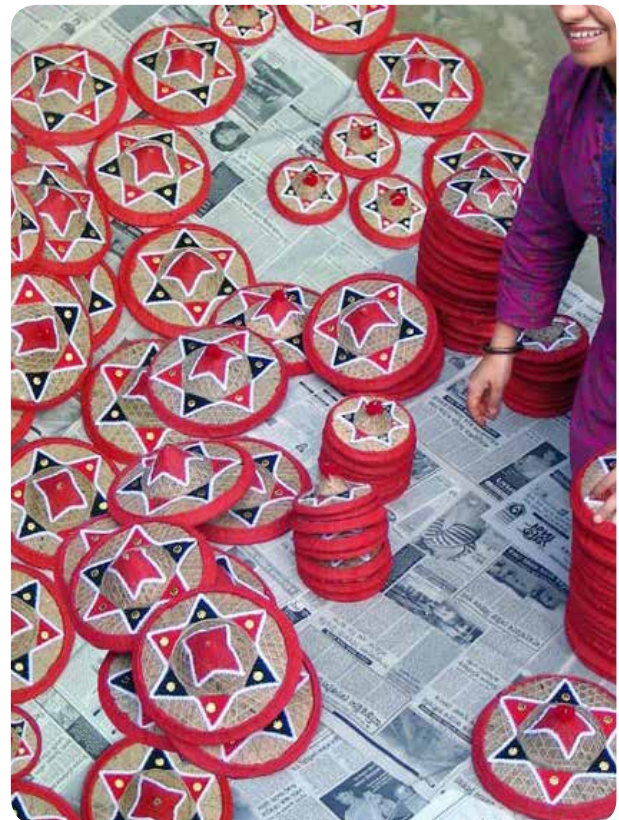


locally available as well as financially viable. Today, this brand of organic manure (also called kesuhaar or earthworm manure) is in great demand owing to our consciousness towards growing healthier food products. A 5 kg packet costs Rs 50, roughly the price of a burger in the city.

Deciding not to rest on her laurels, Sobita ventured into the traditional market of japi making as well with a financial grant of Rs 30,000 provided under NRLM. Assam's japis are arguably the most important cultural icons of the State. The japis that Sobita and her group make are often customised according to an individual or an organisation's request. Thus, their little workshop is choc-a-bloc with japis of all shapes, sizes, and designs. Not only do the women manufacture the japis themselves, they also sell them in the neighbouring market. 'Instead of relying on middlemen, we deemed it wiser to do the selling

themselves. Also, our main motive is to attract visitors to smaller markets such as ours, and not the other way round,' says Saboti.

When customers buy their produce from their doorstep or the neighbouring market, it augurs well not only for Sobita and her group, but also for the community at large. 'A decade back when I had started, there was hardly any encouragement for me. Now, things are different thanks to visionary schemes such as MGNREGA and NRLM. The whole village is involved in the organic manure and the japi making. They have realised how possibilities live in even seemingly small ideas.' Next in line for Sobita is an exploration into the agarbatti market, after all, true entrepreneurs hardly catch a breath in between!





DREAM WEAVER

Magdali Ekka
Dibrugarh District

There are very few people in this world who prefer to opt out of the rat race and nurture their inner creativity. Magdali Ekka, who runs a weaving centre called Jeuti, is one among them. Taking inspiration from her elder sister, Ekka imparts weaving training among rural women to help them become self-reliant. 'We impart weaving training to 20 women at one time. We give it free-of-cost to those who can't afford it. Our aim is to make women of our adjacent villages financially independent,' says Magdali Ekka.

Since 2003, Ekka has been running her weaving centre at Timona village in Dibrugarh district. 'Initially we used to make dolls, bags, scarves, etc. on a smaller scale. Once our products got due recognition, we designed a calendar showcasing our products. Seeing our quality products, the government very generously came forward to help us,' says Ekka, her eyes shining with pride.

Now, they provide hostel facility for those women who come from far-flung areas. The exclusive products of the weaving centre have been exhibited at many places in Assam. Some artisans from Jharkhand had also come down to her place to learn from her skill of weaving. But Ekka modestly says, 'I took a two-month government training in the year 2006. And after the successful completion of my training, the government offered us a loan of Rs 2 lakh under the visionary NRLM (National Rural Livelihood Scheme). Thus, they financially helped us in constructing our weaving centre's building'. 'Also, under MGNREGA, the roads in our village have improved immensely. Now, visitors/workers/trainees coming to our village do not face any problems at all. Improved communication has led to brisk business,' she says with a smile. Though weavers are not presently covered under MGNREGA, the textile ministry is working on a proposal to include handloom weavers under the

scheme so that they can be entitled to higher wages. But, in Assam, the additional assistance that MGNREGA has already provided seems to have won the day for Ekka and her ilk.

Earlier, the City Foundation recognised the talent of Magdali Ekka's elder sister and rewarded her with the best Micro Entrepreneur Award. The award citation, proudly displayed at the weaving centre reads, 'Augustine had to drop out of school at the age of nine because her parents could not afford it anymore. But she was determined not to tread the beaten path. With neither capital nor experience, Augustine through sheer determination and adequate government aid overcame poverty and adversity to become the role model for her village.'

Carrying forward the legacy of her elder sister, Magdali has been dreaming big now, a reflection seen aptly in her work. In peak season, she earns over Rs 25,000 per month. And, as she is debt-free now, Magdali wants to expand her business. 'We are so popular here and so accessible thanks to MGNREGA that we don't need to go outside to sell our products. During Bihu, we are usually flooded with orders,' says a visibly happy Ekka.

POULTRY POWER

Bina Topno
Dibrugarh District



In the Adivasi Sadri dialect, epil means star. Under the same name, BinaTopno leads a team of 10 women at a village called Chetiajaan in Dibrugarh district and they are rising like a star in the field of poultry farming.

'Earlier as seasonal tea garden labourers, we worked for about six months in a year plucking leaves and remained idle for the rest of the year. In 2005, we started a Self Help Group with a mere contribution of Rs 50 from our members. Again, we collected Rs 30 from each member to start a poultry farm in our village. And we haven't looked back after that,' says Topno.

In 2010, the SHG got a government assistance of Rs 25,000 under NRLM (National Rural Livelihood Mission) and expanded their business. Once they returned their debt, they received another loan of Rs 2 lakh from the government, which boosted the confidence of the group. To strengthen the positive synergy between MGNREGA and agriculture & allied rural livelihoods, poultry shelters came under the purview of the scheme. Thus, under MGNREGA, assistance was provided for building the farm using local labour. Also, a hand pump was duly granted as part of the convergence. This took their dreams closer to reality!

'Now, if we invest money on 200 chickens, we can earn upto Rs 15,000 in 45 days. We help our fellow members when they are in need of money. That is a big relief for us as we don't need to look to others in times of crisis,' asserts Topno.

It's a well-known fact that despite the tea industry being the most well organised industry of the country, the labour sector associated with it is the most unorganised. 'Earlier, we found it difficult to run our families even. But things have changed now what with all the government help that we have received. We have very good markets in Duliajan and Dibrugarh for our products. I believe one should dream and chase it. Nothing is impossible



It's heartening to see a mother of five children managing a botanical garden for the past 10 years at Besimari block in Darrang district. Dilzjan Begum, who leads a Self Help Group called Santara, has helped other women of her village cross economic barriers in life. There are 10 members in the group, out of which seven women have been actively looking after the garden.

'We received land from the forest department as well as the necessary seedlings and we consequently developed the garden. Resources jointly pooled from MGNREGA, SGSY and Forest Dept under MGNREGA and horticulture and plantation convergence further assisted us in our goals. On 29th October 2013, we showcased our plants at a mela organised by the Darrang administration,' says Begum.

The unique operating style of the SHG has reaped surpluses and the group members are now financially sound. 'Our monthly income is around Rs 5,000. Earlier, our male counterparts raised questions about our creditability. But we have shown them the power of women,' says one of the members. The members are also happy that employment could be provided to local job card holders through their plantation.

During the past seven years, the Santara botanical garden has been growing by leaps and bounds. It boasts of a wide range of flowers, plants and orchids, and rare and endangered species have also been conserved. The success of the garden has inspired many other women of the area to take up something on their own. 'We have a great responsibility of looking after our children. But, thanks to the anganwadi centres constructed under MGNREGA, we could share the younger children's responsibility with our capable anganwadi workers. We no longer needed to worry about their health, nutrition or early education, but could afford to give our time and energy to the nursery. For the average village woman, these centres are a boon,' Begum asserts.



EARNING LIVES

Swati Rabha
Kamrup District (Rural)

Born to a family of weavers, Swati Rabha honed her weaving skills at a very young age. Withdrawing her savings of Rs 10,000 from the local post office, she bought her first handloom set in 2008-09. After that, as they say, the rest is history. 'My mother used to create beautiful designs over the Gamosa, Pat and Muga garments. And, I have always tried to emulate her designs,' says the talented weaver.

Swati expanded her handloom sets to three within no time. 'I also undertook training from the Ministry of Handloom and Textiles in 2010 and they awarded me with an all new handloom set. That inspired me to impart training to the women of our village,' she explains. In 2010, Swati formed a Self-Help Group named 'Tribeni' along with other 13 women of her village and they received a loan of Rs 2 lakh from the Boko Block Development Office. The financial aid helped her a lot in expanding her weaving enterprise. 'While I was working on my own, I was earning about Rs 5,000 per month. Now, my income has almost doubled. Also, I am happy to be able to provide employment opportunities to many rural women like me,' asserts Swati.

She has showcased her products in different exhibitions across the State. 'I displayed my collection at Sankardeva Kalakhestra, Maniram Dewan Trade Centre (Guwahati) and many other places in Assam. I am glad that people appreciate what I have been doing. More importantly, I feel a kind of gratification when I see my products selling like hot cakes in the market,' expresses Swati. It is worth mentioning that Swati doesn't even need to go out of her village to sell products as buyers throng her home to buy those. Her trademark mekhela sadors have created a market for themselves. 'We have already repaid our P&RD loan on time. Now, if we get loans under new schemes, we can plan out something new. Pat and Muga garments have a huge demand in our State. As such, we want to expand our small initiative further,' Rabha concludes.



Five Recommendations to Ensure Women's Participation in MGNREGA

Mahmood Hassan, Project Director, Nalbari

'MGNREGA is a milestone in the history of poverty alleviation initiatives in India'

The Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) initiated in 2006 is considered to be a milestone in the history of poverty alleviation initiatives in India. As the national flagship programme intends to provide employment to both men and women during the lean agricultural season, it has brought about significant improvement in the lives of the rural population. However, there is scope of improvement in participation of women on a larger scale and I put forward some recommendations for ensuring better participation of women in MGNREGA:

- MGNREGA has been successful in the creation of employment opportunities in rural areas and has helped mitigate migration to urban areas. In the 66th survey of National sample Survey Organisation, it was found that MGNREGA attracted women as it gave work opportunities to them within a 5 km radius. The Rojgar Divas organised by the Gram Panchayats should invite more women and women Self Help Groups (SHGs) should also raise awareness about the benefits of the scheme.
- There should be more emphasis on IBS (Individual Beneficiary Scheme) works in order to enhance the sustainable livelihood activities of the rural families under the scheme. The vulnerable sections of society including women and marginal farmers must be provided ample opportunity to participate in the programme.
- As the women's SHG movement is picking up in most districts of the State, the NRLM (National Rural Livelihood Mission) scheme run with the objective of ensuring economic self-dependence of women by taking up livelihood activities should be converged with the MGNREGA works. Women specific projects can be taken up where few MGNREGA works should be solely carried out by women. Such experimentation has been done by the undersigned at a few blocks as Project Director of Nalbari very successfully dispelling the belief that women folk work lesser than the men folk.
- More women should be trained as masons for construction works like building latrines. They can also be engaged in construction of boundary walls or IAY buildings apart from MGNREGA works.

- Active participation of women in the all the block or district level meetings is crucial. It is often observed that many elected female PRI members do not attend the Gram sabhas or important meetings to have their say and are instead represented by their husbands who take all decisions, including preparation of the schemes in lieu of their wives. This tradition prevalent in most of the Panchayats has to be done away with in order to empower the women on actual terms.



Nazrul Islam, CEO-Zilla Parishad, Morigaon

'A scheme that builds a nation'

The visionary MGNREGA scheme is not just an employment guarantee scheme as deemed by many; rather it is a village building initiative that ensures equal participation of both men and women. The re-construction/maintenance of the Lahori Ghat embankment under MGNREGA is a case in point.

The embankment not only prevents the waters of the mighty Brahmaputra from flooding the area, it also acts as the lifeline of communication between three Gram Panchayats. Thus, MGNREGA workers are participating in the noble work of nation-building by creating infrastructure, be it roads, fisheries, or irrigation canals.

As far as women's role in MGNREGA is concerned, MGNREGA offers 33 percent employment to women, guarantees child care facility at the worksite and provides scope to women to participate in planning and implementation of MGNREGA and in conducting social audit as members of Gram Sabha and of Gram Panchayat. All-in-all, the scheme ensures that women are equal partners in the progress and development of their communities in particular, and the nation in general'.



Niroo Das, Anchalik Chairperson, Mayong Block, Morigaon

'MGNREGA has transformed the lives of many rural Assamese women'

I can safely say that MGNREGA has transformed the lives of many rural Assamese women. Women were lagging behind because they did not have the power to change their inferior status, but now that power lies in their hands. They can demand employment from the government and this in turn has led to financial stability and asset

generation. They no longer need to re-locate to nearby towns in search of work; work is now available near their homes. The children of migrant labourers, unsurprisingly, have very little access to education and health care. Here, in our villages, mothers do not have to worry about such things.

On a more personal level, my political participation has instilled a confidence in me that didn't exist earlier. Being a decision-maker has made me more responsible and aware of the changes required to build a better society. The society's perception, in its turn, has also changed towards me. I am offered my own chair at functions now!

For further information

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