

Does 100-Day MNREGA work cause decline in agriculture?



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A farmer, in his petition submitted to the Tenkasi District Collector recently, said that as he had paucity of manpower in his occupation, the excess staff at the Collectorate must be sent to the farming work.

The farmer's demand was an open critique of the laborers working under the 100-day work scheme. So, the media had published the news and also brought to light how the workers under the scheme took time off work for diversion activities. The visuals in this regard had gone viral on social media.

The message driven home thus is against the 100-day work scheme, saying that this was the scheme which has caused fall in agriculture, making the farming workers lethargic and lazy.

Job guarantee

The Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Scheme (MGNRES) was introduced across the country in 2005 to ensure employment to each household in villages for 100 days in a financial year. It is women who are working more than men under the scheme (there were 56 per cent of women workers in 2022-23). The total number of farm laborers in Tamil Nadu is 1,31,48,575. Out of 91, 42,246 workers who have got

work cards , the SCs are 38,46,788 and the STs 2,33,923.

About 29 works such as irrigation, road-laying , tree-planting and so on were undertaken in villages. At present the workers are also employed in the government's various construction works. Owing to this rural job scheme, the migration of people in search of greener pastures has come down.

Ground reality

According to the law, a rural family, regardless of its strength, must be given employment for 100 days a year. But this law is not implemented fully because only 49 days' work was given in 2021-22 and 42 days' work in 2022.23.

The annual fund allocation for the scheme has also reduced. The fund allocated in 2021-22 was Rs.98,000 crore; in 2022-23 it was Rs.73,000 crore and came down to Rs.60,000 crore in the current fiscal 2023.24. Hence all card-holders could not get work.

The fund for the scheme plays a vital role in rural economy. This scheme, which helps the rural laborers lead a life of self-reliance, fetches income not only to agricultural workers but also small and micro farming women.

Work must be made a fundamental right and the government must give work for 100 days. In case of no work, a relief by way of compensation for the loss of work must be provided. It is this law (MGNREA) which has made work a right for the first time in the 75-year-old independent India. Its main feature is that it has liberated, to some extent, the villagers from economic insecurity.

Unjust argument

Against this background, it is generally argued that the manpower scarcity plaguing agriculture is caused by this 100-day job scheme. Is this argument correct?

Let us suppose that there are two persons in a family. Last year, on an average, only 42 days' work was given to each family. That meant each got 21 days' work. Deducting the 21 days from 365 days of the year, the remaining days are 344. What work would the beneficiaries of the scheme have gone for in those 344 days? No worker can depend on agriculture alone for livelihood because it is rare to get even 50 days' work in a year. Moreover, the wages in agriculture are less than in other sectors. And the agriculture is fast getting machinized. Machines are widely used for cultivation of paddy, sugarcane cutting and tree-felling. So, the need for farm laborers is getting reduced. Taking all things into inconsideration, it is unjust

to argue that the 100-day work scheme is producing only lazy workers.

The fact is that every day they are doing all types of hard works, engaged in construction, load work, shops, driving, working in other states, in stone quarries, brick kilns, rice mills and so on.

Moreover, the youth of today do not want to do farming work under landowners whose feudal mentality puts the youth off. So, they go in search of other jobs and work more and harder than ever before.

Easy targets

At the same time, it is not our argument that there are no drawbacks with workers under the 100-day work scheme. The degeneration of work culture is there too as it is in all spheres. The same workers toil tirelessly and harder in the private sector because there are supervisors keeping tabs on them at work. But at the workplace under the 100-day work schemes, there are no higher level people for questioning or for mentoring them.

Can you say that the way the government departments work satisfies the people? Even those who are reluctant to criticize the functioning of the government departments are severely critical of the workers under the 100-day scheme. Most of the scheme beneficiaries are women, especially those belonging to the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes. So you can criticize and insult them as much as you want because they are easy targets and will not retaliate easily.

The main reasons for the decline in agriculture are non-profitability of the profession, rising prices of inputs, lack of procurement guarantees, non-fixing of remunerative prices by the government for agricultural produce, non-availability of timely credit, and lack of industries that make use of agricultural produce for manufacturing raw materials. Instead of taking into account all these factors for fall in agriculture, it is not reasonable to put the entire blame on the workers of the 100-day scheme.

Farmers and agricultural laborers are vital parts of agriculture. Pitting the two against each other will only help those who try to bring the curtain down on the project. It will be good for the village, working people and farmers if constructive suggestions are given on how the scheme can be better used for rural development and what changes can be brought about in it.

Translated by V Mariappan.

