

## **Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act: A Novel Parliament Guaranteed Employment Programme of India for Rural Households in a Long-Term Stagnant Agricultural Economy**

**Dr. Om Mahala<sup>1</sup>**

The Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act, 2005, popularly known as MGNREGA, was a major legislative innovation in the long history of Indian villages. Villages had remained a vibrant store-house of India's ancient traditions and medieval continuity upon which the British governance had tried to put its own stamp of revenue laws. But, the lakhs of Indian villages continued to plough their economic energies within a web of social continuity and economic stagnancy which left untouched the stagnancy of Indian agriculture even though the British scholar-administrators have left behind a roseate image of Indian villages as 'self-governing communities'. This image, directly or indirectly, influenced the developmental policies of the Republic of India, but its stalwart political leaders, economic policy-makers as well as a large army of village-level workers (including those specifically designated as VLWs) failed to realize it.

When the innovatively drafted MGNREGA was conceived and implemented, it began to make a dent in the large number of Indian agriculturalists' families. These families contained many persons who were, ostensibly, 'employed in agricultural operations' but, actually, made a small (or even zero impact on productivity of food-grains and may have even become a drag or negative burden) on account of the phenomenon called by Economists as 'under-employment'. This sometimes resulted in 'disguised employment', which added virtually nothing to the productive efficiency of Indian agriculture. Agriculture remained virtually under-Capitalized or un-mechanized, producing low yields per farmer who was engaged in agricultural activities round the clock for generation after generation. On the other hand, the urban towns were becoming hubs of capital-intensive production, which improved, widely and deeply, the economic fortunes of the urban population of the Republic of India.

### **Rural India down The Ages and The Dawn of MGNREGA**

Since great antiquity, India was, undoubtedly, a continent of villages which developed ancient and medieval techniques and systems of social reciprocity and self-management of local affairs. But, as human civilization moved ahead towards urbanization and industrialization (of which ample evidence can be brought forward from the Mauryan and the Imperial Gupta empires even if the extraordinary affluence of ancient 'mythical' cities of Ramayana and Mahabharata is ignored) its villages gradually became encapsulated into larger administrative systems of kingdoms and empires. Then, these empires started adopting sophisticated systems of land revenue taxation from all foodgrain agriculturists, leaving alone the cultural customs and social beliefs associated with rural life-styles.

These traditions of (minimal) state-village relations lasted for a long time in India. But it certainly kept the villages and village-based foodgrain cultivation locked into a stagnant mould for centuries after centuries. Although, some technological changes certainly occurred with time, especially, after the advent of Muslim rulers at Delhi in 1192 and the gradual blanketment of India by the Pax Britannica post 1757, when the Mughal emperor conferred the *Divani* (i.e. Land revenue collection rights) upon the British East India Company in 1757. This was replaced by 'Direct British rule by the London-based Parliamentary governance in 1858 which further led to emergence of the Indian National Congress (INC) in 1885. Within next 62 years, the INC ensured the termination of British Raj.

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<sup>1</sup> Associate Professor, Department of Public Administration, University of Rajasthan, Jaipur - 302004 (India)

Then, it went into the formation of, firstly, the Dominion of India in 1947 and, eventually, in establishment of the Republic of India, the largest, the most populated and the most developed state in the Third World. As of then, Japan's economy had been devastated in the 1939-1945 war and the new 'revolutionary' regime which gained dominance in China in 1949 was still trying to find its moorings. China was being fabricated as a State in accordance with the canons of Marxism as practised in the USSR under Lenin and Stalin, who had emerged as the most powerful rulers outside 'the West' post 1945. This resulted in the majority of Indian villages entering the Dominion of India in a high state of stagnancy in 1947. For mitigation or removal of this stagnancy, practically nothing or very little had been done in the long era of ancient and medieval India (the more important innovations and improvements are duly noted below). However, the British administrators introduced many timely changes based on their studies in the light of the Political-Economic theories developed in England just before the Industrial Revolution and during its course. The objective of these changes was to further out-migration of agriculturists to the new factory towns.

On account of the massive participation of the rural people in the 'Freedom Struggle', all the stalwarts of the Indian National Congress were quite informed about the stagnant plight of Indian agriculture. Yet, their 'nation-building' agenda gave primacy to capital-heavy industries, which had very little input-output relationships with foodgrain production and distribution. But, the need for large quantities of crop outputs was evident for consumption by the industrial workers as well as the large population of rural India. Also, by then, a large chunk of India's irrigated acreage went to Pakistan after 1947. Another contesting situation was the fact that most of the Indian villages were inhabited by less than 1000 residents as compared to the large urban population concentrations in cities like Bombay (Mumbai), Calcutta (Kolkata), Madras (Chennai), Delhi and New Delhi. Economy of these cities was glowing with urban amenities and industrial projects. In 1950, agriculture in India still contributed to over 75% of its gross product. But, its productive efficiency was low, as no projects were prepared for its techno-economic reforms. Even as a 'Grow More Food' campaign was launched to fulfill the need for foodgrains, almost no attention was given to study and change the high dependency of agriculture on small holdings by large households. Deep roots of such households in the villages prevented them from moving to the towns and cities and they remained tied to their small holdings. These holdings were too small to allow large-scale investments in production-boosting machineries and other inputs like insecticides, pesticides and high quality seeds.

This chapter makes an attempt to survey the stagnancy prevalent in the techno-economic conditions prevailing in Indian villages since antiquity, with special reference to the administrative changes introduced from time to time. The changes thus introduced essentially left Indian agriculture in a state of stagnancy and it resulted into the great economic poverty of the bulk of the agriculturists, whose population began to grow faster under the British dispensation. But, with the accompaniment of techno-economic changes in agricultural systems, the typical families of agriculturists were left with lesser and lesser amount of cultivable land under conditions of great monsoonal insecurity. Their situation aggravated by growing poverty of agricultural incomes i.e. impoverishment of the bulk of Indian agriculturists being under serious threat of impoverishment even if they strove hard round the clock for twelve months in a year.

Strange as it may sound, the plight of Indian farmers continued to be pitiable even under the British Raj, while amazing as it may sound, India's 'Freedom-winning political party', the Indian National Congress (hereinafter INC), adopted a very high priority for industrialization. This left very little 'Plan funds' for investment in technological reforms in Indian agriculture, while the rural population continued to grow steadily making the bulk of peasantry workmen cultivating very small holdings. These holdings could hardly absorb all the labourers, who were engaged in a foodgrain agriculture producing a modicum of 'disguised unemployment', which even more astonishingly, remained virtually un-addressed till the Parliament enacted the MGNREGA Act in 2005.

### **MGNREGA: A Parliamentary Statutory Innovation in Rural India**

While the contents and the merits and de-merits of the MGNREGA are discussed throughout this study, it is imperative to take note of three most extraordinary features of the Act: *First*, it is **demand-driven**; *second*, it provides **guaranteed amount of 'Employment' every year** and, *third*, the key **employment choices are to be made by each rural Household** which has family members willing to undertake un-skilled labour at a site convenient to them. All these three features have been never-before entered the policy-portfolio of any State or Governance system in the long history of India, including the Republic of India, till the dawn of the '21<sup>st</sup> Century' about which a young INC Prime Minister, Rajiv Gandhi, had started talking about in the second decade of the 20th century.

The prolonged stagnancy in agricultural production technologies in rural India had actually begun to take a toll of the communitarian character of village social life as the ancient philosophies of 'common property resources' began to wither under the impact of new laws of Zamindari and Mahalwari proprietorship evolved under the Mughal and the British rules. More and more land revenue began to be collected in cash by a new breed of Patwaris and Tehsildars, who were not accountable to the village community or their traditional institutions of self-government. Even though many British administrators had sung paeans of praise in favour of the survival capacities of village communities.

More especially, as the modernization of British administration resulted in the emergence of the famous 'steel-frame' idea, the cohesion of the village communities began to deteriorate and the 'cash-nexus' began to dominate the state-village relationships. This further diluted the ancient and medieval bonds of cooperation and mutual assistance in the Indian villages and weakened even the ties that made the rural households in India an ideal institution of self-sustainment in times of all natural calamities and economic emergencies.

Although students of Public administration do not, ordinarily, focus their academic attention on the households, whether urban or rural, but the very form of the MGNREGA Act has given an extraordinary 'Household' character to the administration processes in rural India. Because the MGNREGA Act makes the Household the decision-making unit for its implementation as it vests the authority upon each household to exercise its choice of employment as a collectivity. The Act specifies that each rural household will be entitled to hold an entitlement to demand a certain amount of remunerated employment every year for its own member at a time and place of their choice. Most certainly, this is a welcome novelty to restore the unity of rural households which are breaking apart in the times of individualized economic transactions.

In recent years, most Indian villages have seen considerable out-flow of rural youth to the towns and cities in search of remunerative employment. The house-holders have been unable to check even by pointing out the obvious deficiency of the village leavers viz they possessed no skills demanded by employment markets in the big towns and cities. But, the provisions of the MGNREGA Act make it possible for the family elders to make a persuasive case for using MGNREGA projects as worthwhile opportunity or deploying their un-skills to earn a steady remuneration every year. Alternatively, the household can persuade their elderly members to avail of such remunerative employment or they can evolve a 'mix' to suit the household needs to vary the employment schedule of each and every rural household which can spare their family members to earn the statutory MGNREGA entitlements guaranteed by the Parliament of India.

Being a Parliamentary guarantee of remunerative employment for a fixed quota of annual earnings each year, for each and every rural household, the MGNREGA is, undoubtedly, a direct attack of the rural employment deficits prevailing for several centuries and growing steady onslaughts of the decreasing size of the land holdings of the agriculturists. As the benefits of the Sanitation and Nutrition percolate into the villages of the Republic of India, the MGNREGA is both novel and potent to make a dent upon the problem of unemployment prevailing amongst all the rural agriculturist communities which results in 'Disguised Unemployment' in each and every farming household. This is a kind of economic drain which causes incalculable social tensions in every rural household. The statutory structure of MGNREGA promises to ease the household by turning its un-skilled agricultural workers into un-skilled earners of MGNREGA entitlements. For this, the MGNREGA adopts the well-known Keynesian policy of remunerating unskilled labourers to 'dig up and fill holes', which produced wonders in England to kick-start a stagnant economy in the 30s of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

### **The Political Background of Employment Legislation**

There is no doubt, that when the MGNREGA was being schematized there was no demand for such a legislation from any rural lobby or even Left-leaning intellectuals associated with longtime demands for farmer welfare including Land Reforms, some of which had been generated during India's long 'Freedom Struggle' and had been partially incorporated in the 1950 Constitution under the 'Right to Work' chapter in the 'Directive Principles of State Policy'. However, even this provision had been forgotten in the debates on Plans for capital formation for the Heavy Industries. The idea of application of 'Right to Work' for agriculturists and their households was nowhere on the agenda of the INC, which had returned to power in the 2004 elections. Then, what was the motivation for enacting a right to remunerated employment to un-skilled villagers for a number specified of days every year for every rural household?

Rural India has had a long exposure to Public Works employment in which the work was distributed by Government PWD Engineers. These engineers had very little use for un-skilled labourers and they were notorious for various methods for under-payment for the services rendered by even skilled workers who were hired and fired at their sweet will. Contrastively, MGNREGA was a carefully drafted legislation for demand-driven employment of unskilled persons willing to undertake manual labour for a specified period every year at a site of their own choice.

Nothing in India's century-long history of Public Works had offered such a remunerated employment of unskilled workers made available by demand-driven rural households. So, when the MGNREGA Act, 2005 was being prepared and debated in the Parliament, no lobby or professional body of Public Works Engineers came forward to evaluate this novel scheme and offer constructive suggestions. Eventhough crores of millions of rupees must have spent on Public Works in the Republic of India alone since 1950, not taking into account the crores and crores of rupees having been spent on Public Works wages for unskilled and semi-skilled workers since the British Raj was established in India.

The actual political motives and motivations which actuated the INC-led Government of India for enacting a MGNREGA-type legislation are not yet in the public domain, but MGNREGA can easily be regarded as a very appropriate reward for the massive participation of India's poor and hungry rural citizens in the India's 'Freedom Struggle'. During the freedom struggle tens of thousands of impoverished rural farmers were thrown into jails and were subjected to several types of atrocities as well as legal-formal punishments for agitating for an objective far away from their grim life in small and isolated villages. Their lives were limited to take out subsistence outputs from over-used soils and uncertain quantities of rainfall whose timing as well as volume was subject to unforeseen fluctuations. The enactment of MGNREGA was, virtually, a most unexpected gift to Indian villagers since it provided the agency and choice to the members of every rural household who could no longer undertake the pains necessary for crop cultivation, but were yet 'willing and ready' to provide their labour for many back-breaking tasks in and around the villages. Sometimes they used to undertake job of sleeping on their fields and standing watch over ripening crops and at other times protecting these from animal predators of various types which infested every field and were capable of even destroying a high percentage of the crop yields even after they had been stored for their own use in their own homes.

### **MGNREGA: Off-farm Un-skilled Employment at Rural Work-Sites at Guaranteed Rates**

MGNREGA has, therefore, opened a permanent window of demand-driven employment for un-skilled members of every rural household at convenient sites. These sites are not overloaded by technical staff of the Public Works Departments, but are managed and supervised by elected Panchayati Raj Institutions like the Panchayats and the Gram Sabha. The Gram Sabha prepares, from time to time, the shelf of projects on which the unskilled labour is remunerated at the Parliament-prescribed rates. This created a major dent on the rural impoverishment which required a separate window of off-farm employment opportunities for the growing number of members of VILLAGE HOUSEHOLDS WHOSE CONTRIBUION TO THE FARMING ACTIVITIES WAS/IS LOW OR EVEN NILL. This is a never-before policy innovation for mitigating the miseries of a growing number of rural citizens of the Republic of India.

In order to appreciate the full novelty of the MGNREGA legislation, it is necessary to understand that even during the last one thousand years of Indian history, the productive agricultural owner-cultivators and landless workers had been undergoing steady immiserization and this period covers the first 50 years of the Republic of India.

### **Decline and Economic Stagnation of Indian Agriculture, 1000AD-2000AD**

The sub-continental economy of India, a large fertile and irrigated region of Asia with many scattered drought-prone areas, had evolved sophisticated techniques of foodgrain production at more than a few million villages over more than 3000 years before Vasco De Gama landed at the shores of Calicut in 1498 and opened it to the entry of European commercial institutions. Soon, it eroded its global dominance as an economy accounting for nearly 25% of the global GDP for over a thousand years during 1AD to 1000 AD. The Indian economy was fairly prosperous, by world standards, till 1000 AD. But, this agricultural economy was undergoing a slow decline as no new crops or new farming technology was coming-in. The powerful states like the Imperial Guptas (330 AD- 550 AD) were engaged in constant warfare to pay less attention towards farming technologies.

But, the sturdy Indian peasantry remained almost unmindful of the political turbulence which saw the emergence and fall of the Guptas as well as of the numerous raids conducted by two Ghajni rulers during 900AD-1200AD. This eventually resulted in the defeat of Prithviraj Chauhan at the hands of Mohammed Ghori and the establishment of the Delhi Sultanate in 1192.

The lack of impact of these political perturbations upon the Indian villages can be explained in terms of the fact that at this point of time, the customary subdivision of land in rural households was more than offset by the plentiful availability of cultivable land all over India. Professor Irfan Habib noted this citing evidence that spoke of 'Land abundance' in north India in c.1354 AD. He also notes that under Delhi Sultanate, Muhammad (1325AD-1351AD) had started to advance loans to peasants for digging wells in order to extend agriculture while a century before him Ghiyasuddin Tughluq (1220AD—1225AD) had uninitiated schemes for digging canals for promoting agriculture while Firoz Tughluq (1351AD-1386AD) created the biggest canal network for irrigation which was not surpassed till the nineteenth century AD.

### **GDP Growth-Rate Decline During 1500-1858**

The Delhi Sultanate was, by means, neither a technology-minded regime nor did its power radiate all over the Indian sub-continent and it certainly did not leave much of an imprint on agricultural stagnation. Even its positive attitude towards Indian villages was lost in the wars of conquest associated with the formation of the Mughal empire after 1526. Mughals were far more interested in military spending and greater production of 'luxury' artisanal goods in villages and towns. As far as the rural economy of Monsoon-dependent agriculture was concerned, they did precious little with the result that the Mughal empire during its long tenure of 250 years in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries clocked a pitiable annual GDP growth-rate of less than 1% per annum. This growth-rate scarcely moved upwards even after the establishment of *Pax Britannica* after the British East India Company acquired *Divani* of Bengal in 1765 with even the Royal Proclamation of 1858 vesting Indian governance directly under the British Cabinet responsible to the Parliament. New governance formation hardly imparted a significant momentum to the GDP growth-rate although the period between 1858 and 1947 witnessed many economic changes, institutional innovations and technological improvements. But, the GDP growth-rate, as calculated by Alan Heston during 1868-98, 1882-98 and 1900-46 remained steadily very low at 0.99%, 1.29% and 0.86%<sup>i</sup> respectively.

With even the overall GDP growth-rate stagnating over nearly half a millennium, the plight of Indian agriculture can be imagined and the necessity of providing a minimum of solace to the agricultural households can be felt, especially since the British Raj had certainly improved the sanitation and nutrition services even in big towns and big cities lying close to a large number of villages. Thus, according to Kingslay Davis, while the Indian population remained stagnant at 125 million during 1600 AD to 1800 AD, it surged ahead to 255 million in 1871 and further to 285 million in 1901 AD, thereby increasing the population pressure on each and every foodgrain producer. The size of agriculturists' households must have nearly doubled in this period decreasing the marginal product of the extra hands working on the farms, thus laying down the seeds of long-term emergence of under-employment or even negative employment amongst agriculture cultivator's households.

While the economic impact of the simultaneous increase in population upon the increase of households size remains to be examined in detail, the political impact of the ensuing resource crunch in a stagnant economy was immediately visible in the sudden eruption of political violence by the restless peasantry towards the terminal years of the Mughal empire. It was evident from the attacks mounted on the Mughal empire by the Sikhs, Jats and Marathas, who were even able to loot Agra, desecrate the grave of Akbar and ultimately, shake the might of the Mughal empire. This paved the way for emergence of the British East India Company into a 'Company Sarkar' which started re-writing the State-Village relations by tinkering with the land revenue administration without developing any plans for provision of agricultural inputs or promoting non-farm employment in the Indian villages for the persons whose presence on the crop farms was either minimal or negative.

### **The Modernization of the Indian Economy under Pax Britannica**

The plight of Indian villages in the post-1707 era can be easily gauged by the fact that Indian agriculture was increasingly becoming incapable of even feeding the rural population of India, whose diet and nutritional needs were increasing under the impact of the globalization wrought by British East India Company during 1757-1858. This gained further momentum during 1857-1947, the result being greater financial and commercial integration of the Indian economy with the rest of the world.

The Railways provided better connectivity to the coastal port-cities like Calcutta, Mumbai and Madras to all the farthermost corners of the inland India than that had been available to the Mughal emperors during 1530-1707. Also, the introduction of the Universities, the Posts and Telegraph and the Rule of Law furthered the institutional integration of Indian administration. But, the locus and focus of the most techno-economic modernization wrought under British auspices remained fixated in the (emerging) big and medium-size cities, while the medium-size towns and big villages got only a very small proportion of what may be called new foreign goods and techniques. A very large percentage of villages with a population of less than 500 to 1000 are languishing without all-weather connectivity even to the nearby towns even today.

### **The British Shift towards Cash Crop Cultivation**

During the nearly two hundred years of British paramountancy, the woes of the Indian villages were exacerbated by the introduction of a series of wide-ranging institutional reforms, which near-totally changed the ancient and medieval economic exchanges between the government and the villages. These were subjected to several tenurial and taxation reforms besides the imposition of new norms and forms of proprietary laws even though the British stopped well short of encouraging a 'market' in landed property under cultivation. Under the emerging British paramountancy, India lost its world domination in Textile trade. This huge shortfall was only partially made up by exports of Indigo, Silk, Opium, Tobacco and Cotton, all cash crops with a miniscule presence before arrival of the British. A very large proportion of Indian village population was impoverished by these economic shifts and the potency of Indian village economy was further hit hard by the decline of demand for the hand-crafted 'luxury' goods. This demand threw a large number of village artisans into the camp of peasants, whose purses were already cramped on account of the usurious money-lenders and agrarian merchants. The merchants started adopting a variety of unfair means in the absence of regulated markets for agricultural production credit, while the villagers' needs for consumption loans added to their miseries to which the British rulers paid no attention at all.

### **The Roseate British Accounts of the Indian Village**

The steep decline in the economic fortunes of the Indian villages was somewhat paradoxically, accompanied by the emergence of a roseate image of the Indian villages as social idylls where life was bonded by strong community ties reinforced by economic self-sufficiency and political institutions of self-rule under the auspices of village panchayats. Here, all types of local disputes and conflicts were resolved by the people's assemblies deriving their sanction from institutions like *sabha* and *samitis* which were mentioned in the Vedas. The communitarian image of political autonomy and economic self-reliance prevailing in the Indian villages was further held to be bolstered by the fact that the production-consumption loops were typically small, so that bulk of the outputs of village artisans and peasants were consumed in the village itself. Thus, the peasants and the artisans were bound by the barter system of *Jajmani* in which the food grain producers (peasants) and the foodgrain consumers (artisans and others) exchanged their products and, in fact, most rural residents acted as 'prosumers' i.e. the persons who consumed their own products.

Paradoxically, this idolized portrait of Indian villages was generated by a series of British scholar-administrators who were delving into the history, philosophy and anthropology of ancient Hindu culture of India in order to find out some basis for framing laws and administrative regulations for rural governance in terms of taxation, property rights in land and management of the 'Commons'. In general, they wanted to understand the customary notions of State-Village relations in ancient India and their gradual modification by the thousands of later Rulers who, initially, left the villagers alone after collecting a customary share of agricultural produce and rarely tried to extend their administrative institutions to the 'everyday' life of the Indian villages.

### **The British Tax Policies in Rural India.**

Some of the ancient and medieval rulers of India did not hesitate to spend enormous time, energy and money in establishing their sovereignty over vast tracts of land. But, none of these Kings and Emperors ever tried to encroach upon the traditional notions of *Panch Parmeshwar* i.e. five wise villagers speaking in the voice of God while sitting for judgment over intra-village disputes and enabling the village communities to survive even as imperial armies were marching across their boundaries in quest of political supremacy. Later, somewhat more detailed studies enabled the British to claim that the British taxation did not impose a heavy burden upon the Indian agriculturalists. Thus, W. H. Moreland (1868-1938) stressed that there was no discontinuity between the revenue system of ancient times and that being practiced in British India.

The ancient system had been adopted by the Mughal rulers and was continued even after the establishment of Pax Britannica for more than two centuries. During the British rule, the Indian economy remained a barter economy and its monetization and introduction of industrial capital remained a gradual process enabling Moreland to rebut the oft-repeated charge of British over-taxation. It was stated in 1911 that ‘... the revenue now assessed represents a proportion of substantially less than 10 per cent of the produce of the land, curiously just about what was thought reasonable at the time when Manu wrote and was actually about one-third of what was considered proper by Akbar’.

### **British Raj and Agricultural Development Research**

While Moreland’s tax calculations of land revenue have yet to be examined in details, one thing is certain: Except keeping the Indian villages peaceful by means of strenuous touring by revenue officials, including Night-halts by the very senior ICS officers, the British agenda for Indian villages hardly included any sizeable delivery of administrative services or development goods like irrigation, seeds and other yield-boosting inputs. It was symbolized by the fact that they established the relevant R & D establishment for this purpose viz Indian Imperial Agricultural Research Institute only in 1921, which was shifted to Delhi after the formation of the Dominion of India. What then was the overall economic impact of British paramountcy over Indian villages, which became gradually institutionalized in an efficient system of revenue administration and all-India integrated system of public administration by the dawn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century? Did it have some learning on corrective lessons from the civil and military revolts of 1857?

Given the status of rural studies in pre-1847 as well as post-1847 era, it is very difficult to give a definitive answer to these questions, except to state unequivocally that most of the new Zamindaar proprietors were wholly loyal to the British rule while the peasants in the Ryotwari areas of the Punjab and the Gangetic plains played a leading role in the civil rebellions and military revolts of 1857. But, the trajectory of their subsequent unrest and hostility to the British rule was yet in a state of indeterminacy except in the areas where the cash crops had introduced new economic consciousness amongst the peasants as well as the agricultural labourers. In some isolated pockets of Kerala and Maharashtra, rural protests even assumed violent proportions. But, on the whole, agrarian unrest never posed a serious threat to the British paramountcy. This was a reality which Marxist analysts tend to attribute to the lack of any coherent self-awareness on part of India’s agriculturists to construct an ideological rationale for their agrarian grievances as well as their powerlessness when pitted against a global Empire.<sup>ii</sup>

### **Peasant Distress and INC Campaigns for Independence**

While the British assessments of their impact on the agricultural economy of India tended to belittle the burdens of the British revenue, the bulk of the Indian villages were coming under greater economic distress. It was evident from the fact that the INC-led ‘Freedom Struggle’ did receive a massive injection of rural participation after Mahatma Gandhi ascended to its helmsman ship.

The second and third decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century witnessed the dhoti-clad villagers bearing the brunt of police repression as they actively took part in the Gandhian campaigns of non-violent civil disobedience across the country demanding self-governance and spurning all British blandishments of ‘Good Governance’. Gandhi’s 200-miles walk to break the legal prohibition on (private) manufacturing of salt on March 12, 1930 began with just 78 persons, but thousands flocked to it. Gandhi sparked sympathy demonstrations across the country. When Gandhi reached Dandi and actually broke the law thousands of villagers had joined him, while hundreds of demonstrations were organised across the country in which the participation of the rural masses was even more massive. Similar enthusiastic participation of Indian villages in INC agitations and demonstrations clearly show that the Indian agriculturists were feeling great distress and were ready to take part in anti-Raj political protests even they might not have understood the basic objectives of these movements and its possible benefits.

Thus, during the period 1885-1919, the social base of India’s ‘freedom struggle’ slowly expanded from urban educated elite towards the inclusion of lower middle classes, some industrial workers in the big cities and medium-size towns and some plantation labourers. But, the ascendancy of Mahatma Gandhi to the INC apex really revolutionized the organization and its rural membership gradually outnumbered its urban membership by 1923. The rapid inclusion of the India’s rural masses in its non-violent, but militant, anti-British struggles paid rich dividends in 1942. At that time, although a variety of Kisan Sabhas led by the Communists and Socialist leaders had also emerged to mobilize the Indian villagers, the rural masses all over British India responded spontaneously to the INC’s ‘Quit India’

resolution. They even went to the extent of organising guerilla movements and forming alternative governments (e.g. the *pathri Sarkar* in Maharashtra). However, these people received the police and military repression on a scale not seen in India after 1857.

This made it clear that the end of the British *Raj* was only a matter of time, especially, since peasants and ordinary peoples in several Princely States had also risen in revolt. Meanwhile, the back of the British naval supremacy in Asia was broken by the Japanese armed forces which had succeeded in dropping bombs at Calcutta and Madras cities.

### **Ruralisation of India's 'Freedom Struggle'**

The Indian peasants had to, literally, break their backs to make out a subsistence-level crop production. Yet, the fact remains that they rose in lakhs and lakhs to join the Satyagrahas against the British Raj. With this, they endangered not only their health on account of the Police repression, but also their economic health as they spent months on off-field activities in demonstrations and agitations which landed them in prisons. The militancy of the rural protests against British Raj clearly showed their economic agonies to relieve which they not only followed the great 'Mahatma', but also a westernised set of leadership including Jawaharlal Nehru, Subhash Chandra Bose and Sardar Vallabh Bhai Patel and many other INC leaders educated abroad or in the big and distant cities of Bombay, Calcutta and Madras. This massive 'ruralisation' of INC-led 'Freedom Struggle' must have a long way in steeling the accelerated British desire to quit India after winning the 1939-1945 war and led to several rounds of Indo-British confabulations, which resulted in the 'Transfer of Power' to the Dominion of India on August 15, 1947.

### **The Administrative and Political Priorities of the Dominion of India**

The Dominion of India was, thus, born as a culmination of long 'Freedom Struggle', which had received a massive infusion of rural protests and agrarian unrest all over British India. But, the administrative and political stars of Indian villages and agriculturists were not very propitious at its birth as far as the state-building in rural India was concerned. As a result of Partition, millions of the displaced persons were travelling helter-skelter across its borders in the west as well as the east amidst coercion and violence on a scale not seen for several centuries in South Asia. Its new statesmen were also grappling with the complex issue of merger of over 500 Princely states, accession of which to India added nearly one fourth of its territory and nearly one third of its population. These political developments distracted attention from 'nation-building' priorities and policies. Somehow or the other, the Indian statesmen lost their sight to the plight of Indian villages as these got grappled with a series of political and administrative hotspots.

### **The Status of the Age-old Indian Villages in the New Constitution**

While the administrative baptism of the Dominion of India was fraught with troubles and tensions, the task of the Constituent

Assembly of India was made easier by the fact that its membership was ideologically homogeneous (notwithstanding the fact the INC stalwarts consciously brought-in political activists, who had never been on the same wavelength with the INC). By and large, it was congruent with the constitutional developments during 1909-1935, so much so that, for most parts, the text of the Constitution produced by the Constituent Assembly looked like reproduction of the Government of India Act, 1935.

However, these similarities of the new Constitution of the Republic of India with the Act of 1935 were only partial and mostly superficial and incidental. It was because the Constitution of India, which came into full force on January 26, 1950 did contain many original and novel provisions which did not (indeed, could not have) find any mention during the voluminous debates and discussions during 1909-1935. In fact, these provisions had not been foreseen even in 1945-1946, when the process of making of the Constitution took off with a ringing declaration of the 'Objective Statement'. It then, proceeded to spell many original features in its Preamble, which won instant acclamation all over the democratic world.

With all its noble provisions modeled upon a number of countries in the West as well as the USSR, the most glaring omission of the Constitution of the Republic of India was the Constituent Assembly's disdain with which it brushed aside Gandhian plea for empowerment of Indian villages. The most severe indictment of the Indian villages came from a political activist, Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, who had not only been long associated with the British governance institutions, but had crossed ideological swords with Mahatma Gandhi himself many times during 20s and 30s of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Also, during the last years of the British Raj, he had contested elections against the INC candidates.

As far as can be ascertained, Mahatma Gandhi took very little interest in the Constituent Assembly proceedings. But, there can be no doubt that all his life he had been a vocal champion of the quality of life in Indian villages and, contrarily, he had heaped nothing but scorn upon the British-style Parliament. Yet, right from the start, the Constituent Assembly was committed to install a parliamentary system of governance in post-1947 India, which was to be energized by the universal adult voter franchisee. In this system, the ancient traditions of self-government by village-level communitarian institutions had no place at all. This omission was, rightly regarded as a glaring departure from the Gandhian vision of *Swarajya* by some of Gandhi's followers. But, when they brought it to Gandhi's notice, he did not seem to be unduly agitated. This made some of them raise the issue on the floor of the Constituent Assembly, where their pleas were rejected by Dr. B.R. Ambedkar with a great oratorical flourish. He denounced the existing state of the Indian villages in very strong terms and the Constituent Assembly got satisfied by inserting token provision for strengthening the village Panchayats in a chapter of the Constitution of India, which was explicitly declared to be unenforceable by the Judiciary.

### **MGNREGA: An Employment Charter for Unskilled Manpower of Rural India**

The enactment of MGNREGA by the Parliament of the Republic of India can, therefore, be considered a milestone for the economic advancement of rural households through statutory provision of employment guarantee for the worse sufferers of the woes of the rural economy viz. the un-skilled members of agriculturists' households. These members could find no other remunerative outlet for earning even very low wages, except by uprooting themselves from their centuries-old villages and rolling in poverty in distant, and culturally very different, towns and cities. Threshold of wage-employment is very high in urban areas because most of urban wages are earmarked for semi-skilled and high-skilled workers.

The Republic of India, undoubtedly, drew (and continues to draw) a massive amount of political energy from its highly democratic Constitution. The Preamble as well as the Articles on Fundamental Rights of the citizens provided in this Constitution attracted world-wide approval. Broadly speaking, it was glossed over the ancient and medieval rural-urban divide endowing an impressive bundle of rights to all its citizens equally when an overwhelmingly large section of the village population had been denied the means to access decent food, shelter, health and education for several centuries. The rural-urban gap had been monstrously wide since long, even though some benefits of British-led modernization had trickled down to the upper crust of the landed gentry. While most of the people engaged in food grain production were either landless labourers or owned only miniscule amounts of lands distributed into non-connected parcels, the process of sub-division of such small and marginal holdings had also gained momentum on account of whatever health, medicine and nutrition services that reached the Indian villages. Prevalence of ancient land laws of partition and sub-division of land patrimony amongst the heirs of the deceased owner-cultivator continues to generate massive un-employment in Indian villages even for farming households. These households had to bear the burden of sustaining family members as their labour productivity was low, if not negative, as conceptualised by theories of 'Disguised Unemployment' in Indian agricultural economy which was not amenable by most other developmental projects and policies launched after 1950.

MGNREGA, in other words, is a massive attempt to correct a historic deficit in Indian Development Administration and must become an object of study and research by all students of Public Administration. Accordingly, we have, in this study, approached MGNREGA as a very innovative tool for direct attack of household-level poverty in rural India with several never-before legislative and administrative guarantees. These guarantees are likely to provide a new thrust to the existing programmes of 'Quit Poverty' because of their novelty as demand-driven project for remunerative employment to un-skilled labourers at very convenient work-sites for a shelf of projects approved by the Gram Sabhas and managed by an entirely new supervisory administrative apparatus in which the Gram Sabhas remain very important player. Such a role was never-before assigned to the Gram Sabhas although these were instituted in 1993 through a constitutional amendment.

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<sup>i</sup> Alan Heston 'National Income' in Dharma Kumar (Ed) The Cambridge Economic History of India Volume 2 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983). For a more detailed economic analysis of Indian history during 1857-1947 see, Tirthankar Roy, The Economic History of India 1857-1947 (New Delhi : Oxford University Press, 2000)

<sup>ii</sup> Bipan Chandra, Amles Tripathi, Barun De Freedom Struggle (New Delhi: National Book Trust, 2001, 11<sup>th</sup> Reprint): 48