

Ashish Kumar Singh

Caste – the Actual Cost of Empowerment?

Dalit Women & NREGA-

A Study of the Poverty, Social Exclusion & Shame Nexus

172897_MIS300

Oslo and Akershus University College of Applied Sciences,

Faculty of Social Sciences

Abstract

This thesis seeks to examine the lives of rural Dalit women in private as well as public spheres. A theoretical framework of poverty, shame and social exclusion has been used to explore the objectives. The study goes further and analyses one of India's biggest social security programs, the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme, and to what extent it has provided Dalit women with a shield that can protect them from who they are, what they are and where they are. The study uses Dalit feminism as a stand point, and utilizes the available data and literature to analyze the aforementioned objectives.

Key words

Dalit, shame, social exclusion, poverty, caste system, gender, equality, NREGA

Abbreviations

SC	Scheduled Caste
ST	Scheduled Tribe
MGNREGA	Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act
NCDHR	National Campaign on Dalit Human Rights
NREGA	National Rural Employment Guarantee Act
NREGS	National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme

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1. Introduction

Dalit women within the caste hierarchy

The caste system in India is structured as a four-tiered socio-economic-political system determined by familial line. The system is classified in four varnas prescribing occupation along with the social status; in sinking order Brahmins (priests), Kshatriya (warriors), Vaishya (merchants) and Sudra (servants). Untouchables, or Dalits, were the people so low in social status that they were not included in the caste system; outcastes. The term 'Untouchables' refers to their traditional degrading and 'impure' occupations that often involved handling dead matter of faeces, resulting in them being considered polluting in themselves – they were not to be touched (Pareek 2010, 2).

The Dalit is 'unclean' from birth; is considered perpetually filthy and can never escape his status. According to Hindu scriptures, what is pure must be separated from what is unpure (Ghose 2003 cited in Pareek 2010, 3). Following that logic, the impure and Untouchable Dalits are forced to live in segregated areas of villages and refrain from touching (and therefore 'defiling') common resources as power supplies and water sources (Dalton 2008, cited Pareek 2010, 4). Rajawat (2004, Pareek 2010, 4) states that it is undeniably shameful to be considered 'Untouchable', and that the practice of Untouchability which leads to higher caste people avoiding Dalits presence, can itself be regarded as an act of shaming.

The practice of Untouchability is forbidden by law in the Indian constitution, but the social stigma, discrimination and social exclusion of Dalits remains both on an institutional and personal level even today. Akhter et al. (2007, Pareek 2010, 5-6) asserted that the systematic exclusion has subjected the majority of Dalits to persistent poverty. Therefore, Dalits are suffering from the double burden of being poor and being Dalits. For Dalit women, the situation is even worse, as they suffer from the triple oppressions of being poor, being female and being female Dalits. Dalit women numbers 80.517 million, or approximately 48 per cent of the total Dalit population, 16 per cent of the total female population and 8 per cent of the total Indian population. (Government of India, National Census of India 2001, Final Population Totals 2004, cited in NCDHR 2006, 31)

All available data on the status of Dalit women's rights to education, health and work participation, indicates that they are subjected to lower levels of enjoyment of these rights as

compared both to non-Dalit women and men, and Dalit men. There exist, however, very little current data regarding women's experiences of descent-based violence and discrimination – the available data is classified either by gender or caste, but does not include both factors and the relations between them. Caste based Untouchability, discrimination and violence is extensively researched and documented, but mostly with referring to Dalits as one single group, not illuminating the specific intersection between descent, occupation-based identity and gender identity in the experiences of Dalit women (NCDHR 2006, 33).

NREGA

Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA) in India is a form of social security program that addresses the social risk of unemployment in the country. It is based on the fact that the unemployment rate in the country has been soaring over the years and lack of sustainable source of income is responsible for high levels of income poverty especially among the youth and women in the country. The program is thus aimed at providing short time employment opportunities to ensure regular source of income (Kaustav 2010). Under this scheme rural unemployed adults are given a guarantee of 100 days of employment wages at a minimum fix rate by asking them to perform manual work within the community area (Ministry of Rural Development, 2005). In the beginning, in 2005, the act covered only the 200 poorest district of India, but after a long advocacy from civil society organizations and activists, the United Progressive Alliance government extended its scope to covering 625 districts in the year 2008 (*ibid*).

NREGA provides employment for adult members of a rural household willing to do unskilled manual work. The beneficiaries are required to register in writing or orally to the local Gram Panchayat (village council). The Gram Panchayat will, after due verification, issue a Job Card. The Job Card will bear the photograph of all adult members of the household willing to work under NREGA and is free of cost. It should be issued within 15 days from the application date. A Job Card holder may further submit a written application for employment to the Gram Panchayat (village council), stating the time and duration for which work is sought. Then the Gram Panchayat issues a dated receipt of the written application for employment against which the guarantee of providing employment within 15 days. In case, the employment is not given within the given 15 days-time period, a fixed daily unemployment allowance as per the Act, has to be paid. Kaustav (2010) also mentions that in

order to make sure that the beneficiaries do not have to travel long distances to get work, it is made as a provision in the act the work should be provided within the 5 km radius of the village. If the work is provided outside the 5 km radius, an additional 10 per cent wages will be paid to meet additional transportation and living expenses. The Act also insures that the wages should be paid according to the national minimum wages Act of 1948 (*ibid* 2010). Payment of wages shall be done on a weekly basis, and in any case not exceed a fortnight.

NREGA is an Employment Intensive Program (EIP). Ginneken (2003, 50) argues that EIPs are popular with developing countries because they enhance economic development by linking social protection to development of infrastructure in a country. The EIPs also have the benefit of being self-selecting and as such are an effective way of targeting. Only those who are desperately poor will participate in the projects (*ibid*). Thus, the issues of patronage and corruption in the selection of beneficiaries are minimized. Soares (2011, 20) observes that there is a self-selectivity in India's NREGA program as landless laborers, small and marginal farmers, scheduled caste and schedule tribe population and women are over-represented among the beneficiaries. According to Soares (*ibid*), NREGA has had a positive impact in improving household food expenditure although he argues that the program has a weakness in that it does not cater to the goals of promoting skills and development of workers.

NREGA's own act states that "Priority" should be given to women in the allocation of work in such a way that at least one-third of the beneficiaries shall be women" (Schedule II, Para 6, NREGA cited in Jandu 2008, 1). MGNREGA is designed to transform rural livelihoods through implementing a rights-based approach to employment, and mention empowering rural women as an expected impact of the program (Holmes et al. 2008, 20). Vasathakumari (2011, 4) states that a reading of the statistics shows that more than 70 per cent of the beneficiaries constitute of women.

Structure of the thesis

This study tries to look into the intersections of caste-poverty-shame and social exclusion from the perspective of Dalit women. This study will follow theoretical framework, after this brief introduction about NREGA and the situation of Dalit women in India. The theoretical part has been written in a way so that it can be directly correlated with the broader objective of this study. Thus, it follows a process of selection inclusion. The next section of this study explains the research design and data collection methods. Following that section is an analysis

of secondary literature available on market based discrimination for rural poor Dalits and Dalit women specifically. The section after covers reviews of articles and studies done on the impact of NREGA in relation to the research objectives. Then, the conclusion and recommendations follow.

In this study, NREGA, MGNREGA, and ‘the Act’ has been used interchangeably for the Mahatama Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme. Terms SC and ST are given to Dalits and tribal people of India by the Indian Constitution. SC/Untouchables/Dalits have also been used interchangeably for the lower caste and still socially “Untouchable” people of India.

2. Theoretical framework

Poverty

According to Fitzpatrick et al. (2006, 1037) people are said to be in poverty when their living-standard is below what the society recognizes as a reasonable minimum. The meaning of the word itself is not contested, even though the usage is contextualized. The word ‘poverty’ is pervasively used for describing both how to measure and to categorize the findings of the experience of the people suffering it (‘the poor’). As a term, poverty is often used to identify harmful conditions and the relations between them, including lack of resources, being deprived of opportunities for participation, as well as suffering from damaged dignity and social exclusion. Research suggests that there is a link between poverty and social inequality, and traditionally, signs of poverty being present include both a deprived lifestyle and a feeling of degradation and exclusion (*ibid.* 1038).

Most definitions of poverty have been written by those who observe it from the outside; necessarily lacking the perspective of those who experience it. The absence of agreement on the descriptions of poverty is contextualized in the sense that it is the political agenda for social and economic management that determines which aspects of poverty is important for the societal development and hence prioritized, often contrary to which aspects are perceived as the most salient by those living in poverty. Precisely the lack of power and opportunity to influence the public perceptions of poverty is one of the meanings of the term (*ibid.* 1039).

Poverty, in the public image, is often conceived as deprivation caused by lack of material

resources. Amartya Sen (2000) on the other hand conceptualize poverty by using the term ‘capability’ to shed light on the need for activities, not only passive resources, to accomplish participation and social inclusion. Effective social policy responses to poverty reduction demand perceiving poverty not as a personal, but a social problem – thus proposing solutions that include fundamentally changing not only the behavior of those suffering from poverty, but also of those who wield power over the resources necessary to change the structure, be it economically, politically or socially (*ibid.* 1040).

Sen (1980, 2000, 2004) argues that it is important to consider what people are actually able to be and do. The commodities and material things people have or their mental reactions are less important (or inappropriate, The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, 2011). The Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy explains that the capability approach focuses on the quality of life that individuals are actually able to achieve. There are two main concepts in Sen’s capability approach- *functionings*, are the state of being and doing; and *capabilities* are person’s freedom to choose between different *functionings*. (or set of valuable *functionings* that a person has effective access to)

Alkrie (2007, 5) write that functionings are ‘beings and doings’, that is, various states of human beings and activities that a person can undertake. Examples of *functionings* (the ‘beings’) are being well-nourished, being undernourished, being educated, being illiterate, being part of a supportive social network, and being depressed; and examples of *functionings* (the ‘doings’) include travelling, caring for a child, voting in an election, taking part in a debate and eating animals; whereas, capabilities are a person's real freedoms or opportunities to achieve functioning. Therefore, while travelling is a functioning, the real opportunity to travel is the corresponding capability. The distinction between *functionings* and capabilities is between the realized and the effectively possible, in other words, between achievements, and freedoms or valuable opportunities from which one can choose (*ibid.*, 6).

The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (2011) adds that the relevant *functionings* can vary from such elementary things as being adequately nourished, being in good health, avoiding escapable morbidity and premature mortality, to more complex achievements such as having a decent and valuable job, not suffering from lack of self-respect, taking active part in the life of the community, and so on (Sen 1992: 39).

One of the important reasons for using the theoretical framework of the capability approach is that because it is better to focus on the ends rather than the means. People differ in their ability to convert means into valuable opportunities (*capabilities*) or outcomes (*functionings*) (Sen 1992: 26–28, 36–38 in Alkire 2007). In case of lower caste women, this fits with not having opportunities to choose from in their day to day lives, resulting in multiple deprivations for them. Alkire (2007) states further that these inter-individual differences are far-reaching and significant.

Social exclusion

The term ‘social exclusion’ was first used in France in the 1970s to distinguish the groups of people excluded from the society. Since that time, it has been used in social science literature to denote which rules and practices are used to keep certain groups on the outside. Social exclusion as a concept does not perceive the individuals per se, but as an entity integrated in society through groups (Silver 2004 cited in The World Bank 2011).

Social exclusion has been defined by the Department of International Development (DFID) as a process of disadvantaging certain groups, both in public and social institutions, because they are discriminated on the basis of, among other things, their ethnicity, caste and gender. The Governance and Social Development Resource Centre further states that social exclusion is seen to apply to groups, involving the exclusion of individuals due to their membership of particular groups that suffer discrimination, i.e. according to racial, ethnic, gender, geographic or age characteristics. It complements the concept of inequality, which focuses more on disparities between different categories of people (GSDRC 2009).

Silver (1994, 531) argue that Social exclusion is a socially constructed concept, and can depend on an idea of what is considered ‘normal’. In many developing countries, where most people do not enjoy an acceptable standard of living, defining what is ‘normal’ is not a simple task, especially given the lack of the welfare state and a formalized labor market. Indeed, as social exclusion can be structured around hierarchy, the exclusion of people on the basis of their race, caste or gender, may be viewed by the society excluding them as ‘normal’. Individuals, like Untouchables in India, who fit outside the category of being normal, have the chances of being left out from being able to enjoy the equal rights.

Social exclusion can also be seen as a part of Amartya Sen’s (2000) capability approach,

which is based on the ideas of ‘functionings’ and ‘capabilities’. ‘Functionings’ are those things that an individual is able to do or be in leading a life, such as having a healthy body, being educated, having self-respect, participating in community life, etc. ‘Capabilities’ are combinations of various functionings which allow an individual to lead the kind of life he or she values. Social exclusion can thus be seen as a process leading to a state in which it is more difficult for certain individuals and groups to achieve certain ‘functionings’. Saith (2007) explains that the impossibility of reaching a functioning leads to a state of deprivation, and the ‘state’ of social exclusion can therefore be defined as a combination of deprivation.

Sen’s (2000) capability approach thus gives basis to an argument that being in any of the disadvantaged groups, as stated in the definition by GSDRC (2012), is not necessarily a pre-requisite to be called as socially excluded, but that lack of access to opportunities may also be considered as social exclusion. The focus is thus not on the outcomes of social exclusion alone, but on the relations and process that leads to these outcomes (Haan 1997 cited in The World Bank 2011). This argument is supported by the European Commissions’ Observatory on National Policies to Combat Social Exclusion (2003), which, when the concept of social exclusion was taken into use, clearly pointed out that social exclusion is not just a matter of having inadequate resources, as much as their disadvantaged position constraining them from the chance of gaining access to the social distributors of said resources.

Amartya Sen (2000 cited in The World Bank 2011) differentiates between ‘unfavourable exclusion’, which describes situations where people are left or kept out and ‘unfavourable inclusion’, where people are included forcefully on terms that are not favouring them, hence the unequal treatment may lead to ‘unfavourable inclusion’ carrying the same adverse effects as ‘unfavourable exclusion’.

Social exclusion and Poverty

De Haan and Dubey (2003 cited in de Haan and Dubey 2004: 14) used 1993-1994 NSS data for India to analyze the likeliness of a household to be poor, and concluded that as a national average, household belonging to deprived groups (low-caste) are 30 per cent more likely to be poor. Also in 2004-5, De Haan (2011: 8), used NSS data to analyze the measure of consumption, and it showed that the average consumption of Dalits (SC) was less than 80 per cent of the national average.

Social exclusion characterizes the processes that keep certain people out of the mainstream

society and could be seen as a substitute for, or complementary to poverty. Bhalla and Lapeyre (1997, 413-433) argues that social exclusion does overlap with poverty, but also goes beyond it by explicitly embracing the relational as well as the distributional aspects. While poverty is understood as a condition, social exclusion is understood as a process. Poverty refers to a vertical social stratification where the poor are at the bottom, while social exclusion refers more to horizontal stratification which means that the socially excluded are the outsiders and the mainstream are the insiders. The critical variable when it comes to poverty is resources, while the critical variable for social exclusion is discrimination (Fitzpatrick et al, 2006).

Social exclusion and limited participation in community life amongst the poor is manifested in different ways. Tilly (2007, in GSRDC) argues that since exclusion itself promotes poverty, exits from poverty would therefore depend on eliminating or bypassing the usual effects of social exclusion. To conceptualize this, social exclusion, in one of its forms, is about denied access to developmental and social welfare programs (institutionalized social exclusion), while in another form, inability to join community self-help projects (informal social security / insurance against social risks) such as informal and formal savings and credit associations, farmers' cooperative organizations, burial groups, among others (self-created social exclusion). This is due to not only lack of information but also lack of necessary minimum requirements for membership usually in form of membership and subscription fees. It can also be understood as the unique interplay of a number of factors, whose consequence is the denial of access, to an individual or group, to the opportunity to participate in the social and political life of the community, resulting not only in diminished material and non-material quality of life, but also in tempered life chances, choices and reduced citizenship (Kenyon, S. et al. in Ramaiah 2007).

Professor A. Ramaiah quotes Duffy in his lecture on Social Exclusion given at Tata Institute of Social Sciences, Mumbai, "Social exclusion is a broader concept than poverty, encompassing not only low material means but the inability to participate effectively in economic, social, political and cultural life and in some characterizations, alienation and distance from mainstream society". People who are excluded are not 'just like' the rest of the poor. They are also disadvantaged by who they are or where they live and as a result are locked out of the benefits of development (Ramaiah, 2007).

De Haan (2011 cited in The World Bank 2011:3) states that income poverty is only one element of social exclusion, due to focusing only on an absolute measure of individual well-being, while social exclusion on the other hand focuses on the process that exclude certain groups from accessing the goods and services, which, ultimately determines their well-being. De Haan and Dubey (2004: 17) argues how the World Banks influence on the poverty debate has led to a residual approach to poverty reduction, which focuses on safety-nets for people who falls outside the system, thus identifying poverty as external to the social-economic system and something that can be addressed by gentle measures. De Haan (2011: 15) uses NREGA as an example of how the targeted poverty programs have focusing on addressing specific needs at the expense of the causes and patterns of social and economic exclusion. NREGA has, according to him, relieved poor workers of insecurity, but has not emphasized on contributing to rural infrastructure and agricultural development; thus neglecting factors which would be elementary for sustained development and transformation of socio-economic relations.

De Haan (2011: 16) further argues that even though Indian poverty debates do highlight the inequalities between social groups, they fail to pay sufficient attention to the nature of exclusion and thus there is evidence that support that has been given to deprived groups have resulted in the opposite effect of what was intended, and eventually reinforced how the social identities are entrenched into the political frameworks. To paraphrase De Haan (2011: 17); the affirmative policies, while having helped in articulating a Dalit identity, has led to polarization and may eventually become part of maintaining discriminatory attitudes, and needs therefore to be made more sensitive to the nature of exclusion to ensure that protection against informal mechanisms of discrimination are integrated in the policy implementation.

Shame and humiliation

Scheff (1990, 2006) cites Lewis (1971, 33) formulated a widely acclaimed and operational definition of shame. According to her, shame differs from other emotions by depending on social relations. Lynd (1961 cited in Scheff 2006, 35) presents a detailed demarcation between shame and guilt, saying that guilt is about things being done by the individual, while shame is about the self- what one is. Guilt is an individualist emotion while shame is a social emotion, reaffirming the emotional interdependency on persons. Shame is an emotion which feels like weakness and dissolution of the self (*even for the wish that the self would disappear*).

Adam Smith, in his book *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1759/2000), analyzed the concept of shame. Seen from the perspective of the lower social classes, the upper middle class has such a position that it can determine the criteria for assessing dignity and respect that create the norm against which the lower social classes are evaluated and to which they are forced to adapt. In the case of caste system in India this description holds truth. The result of this assessment is that people from the lower social classes are not treated as equals. It is claimed (Elias, 1939; Scheff, 1990; Sennett, 1980 cited in Scheff 1990, 35) that making other people feel inadequate and experience a sense of shame, has become an increasingly important element in the exercise of power in modern society. Hochschild (1983) claims that harmful shaming has worse effect for lower class individuals in the society as the individuals belonging to upper class/middle class of society possess necessary resources to shield themselves from the negative effects of shaming.

Lazarus (1999, cited in Scheff 1990, 36) talks about the causes of shame by saying that shame arises from conditions that are considered threatening, harmful and challenging. Many scholars, including Lewis (1971), Elias (1939), Scheff (1990) and Starrin (2002) have focused on shame as a key factor in social interactions, and are arguing that the adverse effects of harmful shame may lead to social exclusion (*ibid*). Starrin (2002 cited in in Scheff 1990. 36) says that vulnerability, insecurity and shame work together against low-status individuals.

Sennett and Cobb (1974 in in Scheff 1990, 40) find that members of working and lower classes are ashamed by their statuses. Scheff (2006, 40) explains this further by saying that there are certain things which are considered shameful in the society. These are the things which maintain the societal relationships, as there would be very few individuals willing to get involved with shameful things knowingly. Whereas, when individuals break with the social norm, the harmony of social relationships is disturbed. Using the caste system in India as a case, this phenomena could be played out for instance if a rural Dalit man marrying a Brahmin girl. This act would be breaking the social rules surrounding the caste system, and therefore be considered sinful and create a huge hue and cry in the society.

Retzinger (1991 cited in in Scheff 1990: 41) points out the importance of other people's values and attitudes as important sociological factors for individuals. As these are the factors making people feel ashamed. Scheff (1990: 41) clarifies that shame and shame related

feelings lie in the relations between how heavy the actor weighs other people's point of view against his own point of view.

Palshikar (1996) and Retzinger (1991) provide a co-relation between the concepts of shame and humiliation. According to Palshikar (1996 in Guru 2009: 7) shame is a passive concept and it does not have a moral power. When thoughts like 'I am humiliated' comes individuals' minds, they are only half claims and they need a societal interaction to feel ashamed. Retzinger (1991 in Guru 2009: 7) writes that shame is broadly a class name for a large family of emotions - ranging from social discomfort and embarrassment to humiliation.

Klein (2005) defines humiliation as experiencing ridicule, scorn, contempt or degrading treatment inflicted by others. Linder (2002) elaborate by saying that humiliation is an enforced lowering; stripping away someone's dignity; placing someone in an inferior situation against their will; forcing the victim into passivity and helplessness. Guru (2009, 7-9) presents an interesting evaluation of humiliation and self-respect in his study about Untouchables and humiliation. He says that many would claim that by providing equality, justice and freedom, Untouchables will be freed from humiliation. But *do these terms accommodate the essence of self-respect?*

Untouchables have been put in a position where they are lacking self-respect and may also refrain from asking for it. Guru (2009, 8) says that it is easy for these people to be humiliated, as they are taught to accept it. Servility necessarily postpones the possibility of an insight into humiliation; it exists because the Untouchable or the servile person lacks the capacity to aspire for self-respect. To put it differently, a person who lacks self-respect, and does not aspire to attain it, cannot be humiliated (*ibid.* 7). Humiliation is a struggle with the self and the other. Many (Sharma 2000: 98-102, Nandy 1983; Gender 1999 cited in Guru 7-9) states that, if the person and/or the group holds awareness of the self, they cannot be humiliated. "...a thick-skinned person cannot be humiliated" (Gender 1999: 94 cited Guru 9)

Social construction of gender

Gender as a construction has been questioned most hazardously by women due to the fact that the naturalization of sex differences has been far more detrimental for women than men. The feminist movement was the direct reason behind gender becoming a key concept within social sciences. Agrawal (2004, 1) writes that the differences, inequalities and divisions in labor

between men and women often are treated simply as consequences of natural differences between humans categorized as either male or female, and a common notion was that the difference in roles and division of labor for women and men were regarded as a complementary relation and the 'glue' for a stable society. This is contrary to the variability we can observe in how the roles and relations between men and women differ in various societies – *if the division was due only to 'natural' differences, why is there no correlation and consistency in how women are supposed to be women and men are supposed to be men across societies?(ibid.)*

The distinction between the terms 'sex' and 'gender' is based upon the presumption that 'sex' is universal and 'gender' a societal variable. This notion was introduced by Anne Oakley in 1972, and dominated theorization in the sociology of gender for several years. However, this notion has been questioned by many researchers who disagree that 'sex' is a binary category given in nature. On the contrary they argue that 'sex' also is a social performance, as it is the society who decides which biological criteria classifies a person as either male or female (West and Zimmerman 1987, Foucault 1989, Butler 1990, Jackson and Scott 2002 cited in Agrawal 2004: 4). These criticism suggests that it is not only 'gender' that is a social construct while 'sex' is nature given, but rather that 'sex' is a social construction in itself (*ibid.*).

Nonetheless, there have been difficulties connected to explaining why the subordination of women is a near social universal, without resorting to biological arguments. Marxist thinkers, such as Engels (1948 cited in Agrawal 2004: 5) claims that women's subordination is due to them being left out of attaining private property during the course of history, and even being regarded as property themselves – leading to the conclusion that gender inequality has arisen due to socio-cultural history. Theoretical attempts to conceptualize gender differences have hardly led to any consensus of what is the source of division, but they argue for understanding gender in social rather than biological terms (*ibid.* 6). In the context of the Indian society, the gender differentiation starts already from birth, with always defining women by their relation to the male members of the household; as daughter, sister, wife, mother and grandmother – this categorization spans both the personal and public spheres (Rodrigues in Guru 2009).

Agrawal (2004, 8) writes that religious and kinship organization in the society largely deducts the manner in which gender is socially constructed. In most religions, there is an ambiguity

towards for women; as for instance within Hinduism, where women on one hand are equated with animals, but on the other hand worshipped as goddesses. One other characteristic within religions attitudes against women are treating the female body and its functions as impure and polluting – not only outwards and justifying exclusion from several spheres of social life, but also inwards; a women can be polluted by her own bodily functions, thus being a women can be impure in itself (Rawat 2006, 1, Agrawal 2004:8).

In a discussion about the social construct of gender, it is also necessary to look into how gender articulates with dimensions such as class, ethnicity and caste. These structures determine any social organization and shape the society, thus making it inextricable from gender even to the degree that it obliterates the possibility of separating gender consciousness from class/caste consciousness (*ibid.* 7). This is contextualized by looking at the dynamics of sexual harassment in the Indian society, where rape of Dalit women often is used as a mean of oppressing the entire caste group; by violating the women's dignity and the men's 'property' (Shah et al. 2006, 120, Agrawal 2004: 8).

Dalit feminism

Dalit women feminism is one strand of feminism that has emerged in India in the last two decades. It has its roots in the formation of two Dalit women social movements in India in the 1990s, namely the National Federation of Dalit Women, and the All India Dalit Women's Forum. These movements raised an essay "Dalit Women Talk Differently" which aroused debates among a spectrum of intellectuals in India (Guru 1995 cited in Rege, 2004, 220). Just like Third World women feminism which emerged as a critic of the 'Western' hegemonic feminist movements, Dalit women feminism emerged as an antithesis of other feminist movements in India such as the Left-party based upper caste women feminism, Dalit men movement, among others. Its stand point counteracts pluralism and relativity claimed by other feminist movements as most valid and valued. It instead places much emphasis on individual experiences within socially constructed groups and focuses on the 'hierarchical, multiple, changing structural power relations of caste, class, ethnicity which construct such groups' (Rege 2004, 222).

Dalit women feminism seeks for Dalit women's self-definition, self-identity, self-consciousness and autonomy hence the assertion "Dalit women talk differently" (Rege 2004, 211-223). This difference is located in the historical struggles of the marginalization of Dalit

women. In other words, to understand and address this peculiar history of the plight of Dalit women, it necessitates Dalit women to ‘talk differently’ with a view to uphold the interests and raising the voice of the ‘socially denigrated, suppressed and silenced’ Dalit women (Swarthy 2008, 1). Dalit women feminists argue that the peculiar historicity of the oppression, marginalization, and subjugation of Dalit women necessitates a separate framework of ‘difference’ to address peculiar concerns of the Dalit women which have not been adequately addressed by the other existing feminist movements (Rege 2004, 211, Swarthy 2008, 2). The need for a separate identity of Dalit women and their ‘talking differently’ is defended by Guru (1995) who points out that “...social location determines the perception of reality and therefore representation of Dalit women’s issues by non- Dalit women was less valid and less authentic’ (cited in Rege, 2004, 220).

Dalit women feminism is generally against injustices in the system of caste hierarchies and patriarchal arrangements which are responsible for producing divisions in the society characterized by shaming labels and social identities such as ‘scheduled’ castes and tribes, Dalits being regarded as the outcastes, the Untouchables, have resulted in systematic classical exclusion of this social group, and especially the women, from society’s political, economic and socio-cultural arena (Guru 1995 cited in Rege 2004, 215-220; Swarthy 2008, 1-2). It is this discrimination and social exclusion from decision making-processes and denial of an opportunity for realizing potential and self-fulfilment that has left many Dalit women uneducated, economically unproductive and consequently poor.

3. Research questions and objectives

3.1. Research objective

To analyze the relationship between castes, poverty, shame, social exclusion, and gender in India in relation to MGNREGA.

3.2. Research questions

3.2.1. How is shame, poverty, social exclusion nexus manifested in the rural labor market of Dalits and Dalit women specifically?

Within the given hierarchal structure of the Indian society, it is evident to see what kinds of challenges and discrimination are imposed by the market – a public sphere – on Dalit women.

The pretext is, in this study, the shame-poverty-social exclusion nexus from a gender perspective.

3.2.2. How is NREGA addressing these issues?

NREGA, as a social security program, has to take into account the many issues related to gender equality. It is important, thus, to see how effective NREGA's measures has been so far in addressing the shame-poverty-social exclusion nexus for rural poor Dalits and Dalit women specifically.

4. Data and methods

Research design

This study uses an exploratory research design. Chambliss and Schutt (2010, 10) write that exploratory research design tries to find out the way people get along in the socio-cultural setting, the meanings they give to their actions, and the issues that concern them. This study is qualitative in nature. It employs the inductive method of data collection based on the broader objectives of the study- to find the poverty-shame-social exclusion nexus from a gender perspective for rural Dalit women.

For the purpose of this study, the paper will focus on the discriminations faced by lower caste women within the prevailing social structures. As a part of the research objectives for this thesis is to analyze the relationship between caste poverty and gender in India, I will look into connections between discrimination based on caste/social status and discrimination based on gender in economic spheres in India. This study will look at the findings of various existing studies about women's part in NREGA and try and find connections between caste-based discrimination and possible gender biased outcomes of NREGA programs, to see how they correlate.

Being of the qualitative nature, this study tries to look into the social world for rural poor Dalits and Dalit women from their viewpoint (Bryman 2012, 399). This study explores into beliefs, value-system, social structures, cultural norms and opinions (thick description, Geertz 1973a cited in Bryman 2012, 401) from the perspectives of people who have been directly or indirectly involved with such social setting, either by the means of living in it or by closely studying it.

Exploratory research is a preliminary research and prepares the ground for further specific study. By exploring the connectivity between poverty-shame-social exclusion nexus from a gender lens, this study will try to come up with findings which could be used further, within the specific time-period settings (since 2007-2012) covered under this study, for a more extensive research into this subject. There are two reasons for selecting this time frame (2007-2012) a) one of the largest studies on Untouchability practices in rural India covering more than 500 villages was done in 2007; b) The scope of NREGA was extended to the whole country in 2008. Thus, even though the program came in force in 2005, its scope was limited.

However, selection of a wider coverage gives scope to understand a relatively new phenomenon. Qualitative research provides in-depth understanding of a social phenomenon from the actor's point of view (Chambliss and Schutt 2010, 12; Silverman 2005, 6-10), and for this particular study where very little is known about the shame-poverty-social exclusion nexus for Dalit women, application of exploratory research is in itself justifiable.

Shah et al. (2006, 29) after their extensive study on Untouchability in Rural India establish that:

There does not appear to be any qualitative studies on labor experiences of groups within the caste-class-gender nexus – thus the intersections between the social construct of gender, economic class and caste still needs to be explored.

The current study, thus, tries to seek a possible connection within the framework of one of India's most intensive social security programs; NREGA.

Sources of data

This study is based on secondary data sources. The data was collected from different English newspaper websites (regional and national) to collect viewpoints and opinions of policy makers, NGO activists, Government Officials and also to collect contemporary and relevant information to the topic of study. Mainly The Hindu group and The Times of India groups' websites has been used to search articles and opinionated pieces. Since the study is about NREGA which is being implemented all over India; and different states have developed innovative mechanisms at the ground level, it is important for the study to go through regional newspapers as well.

To collect specific data, it is important to go through social sciences online databases. I have used Google Scholar, Jstor, Informaworld and Ebsco. NREGA has been a social security scheme drawing attention from scholars of various subjects under social sciences, and thus some specific data-bases have been made for the policy documents, research reports and journal articles. I have used two of them- <http://www.righttofoodindia.org/> and <http://knowledge.nrega.net/>. The website of NREGA program <http://nrega.nic.in/> has also been used to have an overview of the Act and the scheme (NREGS).

5. Analysis

Poverty in India

A large proportion of the poor in India, 75 per cent, live in rural areas, where they mostly have to rely on daily wage labor – often working for others with assets that are not their own, as many of them are landless. More than half of the Indian population depends on agriculture for earning their livelihoods, making the overall decline in agricultural production a matter of great concern. Even though India has experienced major economic growth in the last decades, the inequalities and differences between rich and poor has been increasing simultaneously (Holmes et al 2010, 9, Pranati 2009).

Poverty reduction in India is not only a challenge limited to the economic sector, but are also spanning the impacts of social structures, as the inequalities embedded in the society are influenced by e.g. ethnicity, caste and gender. The numbers speak for themselves; in rural areas in 2000, the poverty headcount was at 45 per cent for lower caste-individuals (SCs), compared to 21 per cent among non-SCs. The poverty vulnerabilities are also gendered; women receive almost 30 per cent lower wages than men in casual labor, and 20 per cent lower for executing the same tasks (World Bank 2009, cited in Holmes et al. 2010, 9); women make up two-thirds of the agricultural labor force, but still own less than one-10th of available agricultural lands; women work 457 minutes every day, while men comparatively work 391 (NAWO 2008, cited in Holmes et al. 2010, 9).

The plight of Dalit women

The plight of Dalit woman is clearly expressed in the phrase of ‘Triple Dalit’ or ‘Thrice Dalit’ – being a woman, being a poor woman, and being a Dalit woman (Dalton 2008). Dalit women is, like their male counterparts, subordinated by poverty and caste, but at the same time they

are also subjected to the patriarchal power that makes them vulnerable to exploitation and domination not only by upper castes, but also by Dalit men (Shah et al. 2006, 117). A similar description is expressed by Rawat (2006, 1) who points out that Dalit women suffer from double disability in the Indian society. The first disability of being woman is doubled with the caste tag over their head (*ibid.*).

Shah et al. (2006, 117) point out that, in all states, an overwhelming majority of Dalit women work outside of their homes – mostly with labor connected to agriculture, which is known for exceptionally low wages (*ibid.*, Ruwanpura 2005, 23). In addition to working outside, Dalit women also have the sole responsibility of running the household; attending to domestic chores as cooking and cleaning, raising children, fetching water, collecting fuel and fodder and tending livestock or land (*ibid.* 121). In the lives of Dalit women, two aspects are of specific concern; sexualized form of oppression, and gendered labor that provides occupations in which Dalit women are even more vulnerable to Untouchability than Dalit men (Shah et al. 2006, 120). Women in Kerala reported that they feel forced to give in to sexual advancement by their male employers, thus having to silently accept being sexually harassed, in fear of losing their jobs. If the case becomes public, the blame will fall on the Dalit woman alone (*ibid.* 120). Sexual harassment does also take the form of molestation and rape, and as a mean of oppressing Dalit men – by violating their ‘property’ (*ibid.* 124). Dalit women are also exposed to discrimination and violence while executing the domestic chores, and especially while herding livestock alone or at public places as by the water source (*ibid.* 121).

Dalit women do not own and control property such as cultivable land, and have no inheritance rights. Their only alternative source of livelihood at their disposal is all day long engagement in less paid casual labor, but also from which earnings, the husbands tend to forcefully want to control (Swarthy 2008, 3; Santosh 2005, 189). In extreme cases, this results into wife battering due to women’s refusal to accept men’s demand to share the former’s earnings, coupled with abuses, accusations and counter abuses /accusations leading to domestic violence, which is both a cause and a consequence of poverty (Swarthy 2008, 3).

Dalit women face the paradox of being socially regarded as Untouchable and polluted, but still being exploited in the most intimate spheres of their existence (Shah et al.2006, 124). Every day, Dalit women confront a wide spectre of challenges – having to manage the social stigma of being Untouchable as well as being dependent on their oppressors – upper castes

and in some cases even Dalit men – both in economical and gendered relations (*ibid.* 131). Despite the odds, many Dalit women continue to fight vigorously – to survive, to succeed and to be dignified (*ibid.*)

Unclean occupations

Shah et al (2006, 106) describes how the caste system traditionally is characterized by socially prescribed occupations with little mobility. The groups belonging to the bottom of the hierarchy are assigned to jobs that are regarded as degrading and ‘impure/polluting’. All across rural India, Dalits are the ones trapped in the most humiliating and disregarded occupations. These occupations are often associated with bodily waste or death – tasks that are historically considered as polluting – hence being regarded as ‘unclean’. Even though these occupations are unhygienic in executing, even to the extent of being dangerous to the safety of the performers, they are still considered ‘unclean’ mostly based on the ritual connotations involved. Untouchability constitutes thus of a circular logic; certain tasks are ‘impure’ because they are being executed by Dalits, and Dalits are ‘impure’ because they execute these tasks (*ibid.* 108).

Many Dalits find that the stigma of pollution makes it impossible for them to escape from their ascribed occupation due to lack of safe and cash rewarding alternatives (*ibid.* 109). There is also a distinct possibility of them suffering under the weight of oppression, thus continuing in their occupations either because they feel powerless to resist, or because they are accepting their ascribed caste roles (*ibid.* 110).

Galanter (1984: 84-118) describes how the reservation policies, which was implemented after independence to remove the practice of Untouchability, is based upon giving Untouchables preferential treatment to promote equal rights and liberties. These policies may have been resisted in themselves, but there has nevertheless not been any opposition against employment prospects for members of Dalit castes directly related to providing them employment within traditional occupations, like sanitation. This is a reaffirmation of how segmenting groups into designated occupations according to caste are maintaining the caste-based power-structure within the society of India. Baxi and Parekh (1995 cited in Guru 2009, 9) points out that the reservation policies, by reinforcing existing occupational structures, may even be in danger of strengthening the humiliation already inflicted upon the beneficiaries.

Discrimination against Dalits

In this section, the study looks into various forms of discrimination faced by rural lower caste Dalits. There has been very little research done using the field data in past decade. Two of the studies are the main source of this section of my study- Shah et al. 2007 and Thorat et al. 2010. I also have tried to show the implications of such discriminatory practices, with the assumption that such practices are found in most of the rural India - of course with varied intensity.

The Indian society is heterogeneous in many ways - it is enormously diverse and varied. This in turn, having its good sides, has various negative aspects for some groups. The World Bank's report on social exclusion in India (2011: 3) lists caste, tribe and gender as the three axis of exclusion in India, whereas particularly caste and gender are responsible for a high number of unequal outcomes and processes.

Kanchana Ruwanpura (2005, 21) have done a review on the multiple discrimination in India within the labor market. She defines discrimination as individuals being treated differently due to assumed characteristics of their group rather than based on their individual capabilities (*ibid* 2), but further argues that discrimination also spans situations where individuals are excluded from or deprived of opportunities - thereby being denied full enjoyment of basic human rights (*ibid* 4).

Discrimination against Dalits and Dalit women in the labor market

Discrimination against Dalits

The World Bank (2011: 20) states that “*the wage differentials between Dalits and others are a testimony to the continued disadvantage of Dalits in the labor market.*” In the labor market, the difference does not lie in how many Dalits have salaried work compared to non-Dalits, even though the per centage is slightly larger, but in which kinds of jobs Dalits land; menial, low-paying and often socially stigmatized occupations. Differences in access to occupations – that castes are clustered around certain occupations – are important determinants of the wage gap (*ibid.* 94). Poverty compels the labor force participation among Dalits, due to the lack of opportunity to choose to obtain from the labor force (*ibid.* 90).

Ruwanpura (2005, 22) argues that people are likely to occupy many social positions - marked

by class, caste, gender, ethnicity, religion, migrant status and so on - showing that the prevailing social structures in India which may have an impact on how discrimination is shaped in labor market relations. She draws from a study conducted by Rodgers (1994 cited in *ibid.* 22), which shows that there is a close link between labor status and poverty, arguing that these findings underline the importance of looking into how the labor market distributes existing employment opportunities, not only creating new jobs. Caste discrimination manifests in the labor market through wage and occupational discrimination. It can be argued that unequal earnings have their origins in historical discrimination, indirectly leading to low investments in education and further lower earnings (*ibid.* 26, World Bank 2011, 101). The effect of prejudice and discrimination against caste is an emphasizing of occupational segmenting – in turn reinforcing each other and preserving the caste system itself (*ibid.* 27).

Ruwanpura (2005, 28) paraphrases Dhesi (1998, 1041 cited in *ibid.* 28) and argue that there is high concentration of lower caste individuals in unskilled and manual labor due to lack of opportunities to acquire a solid primary education. She writes that *“income inequalities that result from caste discrimination in the labor market also appear to have a direct relationship with social exclusion, income distribution, and educational achievement of scheduled castes”* (*ibid.* 26). The World Bank’s report (2011: 103) argue the point that groups that are discriminated against, may adopt self-discriminatory behavior over time – expecting poor outcomes and reflecting these outwards, thus receiving the endowments they believe they deserve.

Shah et al (2006, 103) links poverty among Dalits directly to the inequality and exploitation they experience in their lives every day. Upper-caste techniques for profiting on Dalit vulnerability includes practices as denying Dalits employment, excluding them from common property resources paying them lower wages and overall refusing to sell their products – with the result that Dalits having nothing to invest in improving their own situation. Thorat, Sadana and Mahamallik (2010, 148) have done an extensive study on discrimination against Dalits in rural markets – underlining these arguments. They write that economic and social rights of each individual caste are predetermined or ascribed by birth and made hereditary. We have to keep it in mind that assignment of economic rights across various castes is unequal and hierarchical. The caste system provides social and economic penalties to ensure its maintenance. This is justified with the fundamentals of philosophical explanations given within Hinduism.

The day to day practices of discrimination against Dalits in various spheres of life make them even weaker. That in result shows its manifestations in what Sen (2000) put as capabilities. Johns (2012, National Campaign on Dalit Human Rights) in her study Stigmatization of Dalits in Access to Water and Sanitation in India, found that In India, more than 20per cent of Dalits do not have access to safe drinking water. 48.4per cent of Dalit villages are denied access to water source. Only 10per cent of Dalit households have access to sanitation (as compared to 27per cent for non-Dalit households), and the vast majority of Dalits depend on the goodwill of upper-caste community members for access to water from public wells. Dalit women stand in separate queues near the bore well to fetch water till the non-Dalits finish fetching water. Dalits are disentitled and not allowed to use taps and wells located in non-Dalit area. Dalit villages risk being denied access to water for several days in case the Dalits tries to resist the existing practices of discrimination.

The discriminatory practices do not stop here. Only 27per cent of Dalit households have water sources within premises as compared to 45.2per cent for the general populations. Only 9.5per cent of Dalit households have access to drinking water sources away from their premises whereas it stands at 14.45 for the general population, and no more than 32.2per cent of Dalit households have access to drinking water from tap as compared to 40.1per cent for the general population (*ibid*).

Regarding sanitation, 23.7per cent of Dalit households have access to latrine facility as compared to 42.3 per cent for general households. Only 17per cent of the tribal households have access to latrines which is well below the figure for general households (43.2per cent). Poor quality of drinking water and lack of awareness about hygiene and improved sanitation are major sources of water borne diseases amongst tribal areas. The situations with regard to household's connectivity for waste water outlet, the figures are 50.6per cent for general households, 42.9per cent for SC households (MDGs and Dalits: A Status Report, NACDOR in John 2012, 8).

Findings from other studies further show how discriminatory practices enter all spheres of life for Dalits. Thorat, Mahamalik and Sadana (2010, 149) argue that the fundamental of the caste system is based on restrictions on change and mobility in occupation, thus 'forcing exclusion' from certain economic rights on the lower castes. This way, exclusion and discrimination in

economic spheres becomes a necessary outcome and integral part of the system. The restrictions on economic rights and occupational mobility inflicted upon lower castes, operates in different markets, such as capital, credit, land and labor.

Thorat, Mahamallik and Sadana (2010, 150) define caste-based discrimination in rural markets as 1) the complete exclusion of lower caste persons from employment by the higher castes, 2) selective inclusion in hiring, but with unequal treatment, which may be reflected in denial of jobs to low castes in certain economic activities (as they are considered to be polluting and impure and, therefore, Untouchable) and in lower wages (lower than market wages or lower than offered to upper castes); 3) selection inclusion with different terms with respect to number of hours of work and other working conditions; and 4) inclusion with differential behavior towards lower caste individuals at the workplace. Discrimination may also involve forced labor practices- including overwork and loss of freedom. Discrimination in these markets may also mean denial of opportunities to engage in the sale and purchase of products and consumer goods. Higher caste individuals may deny sale inputs and products to low caste individuals, as well as refuse to purchase the same from lower caste sellers. Low-caste Untouchables may also experience price discrimination. They may have to buy inputs and products at high prices, whereas sell their products and goods at lower prices than the market prices. This may include price of land or rent on land, interest on capital, access to capital, rent on residential houses, and charges or fees on privately supplied services such as irrigation. Discrimination may also be faced by the lower caste individuals in the use of common village properties such as water bodies and grazing land.

The study done by Thorat et al (2010, 157) shows that inter-caste differences are fairly clear in access to employment. Lower caste individuals were given less days of employment compared to their counterparts from higher castes (154 days of work for Higher caste individuals in comparison to 100 days for Low caste Untouchables every year. It was manual wage labor engaged in agriculture. The study assumed that the skills required for such work would be available in both low caste Untouchable as well as high caste laborers).

The discrimination is also visible when it comes about wage payments both in farm and non-farm activities. Thorat et al (2010, 158) present their findings that while the overall farm wage rate is about Rs. 33 per day. the wage received by the SC (Schedule Caste) farm wage laborer is on about Rs 30, which is lower than the wage (Rs 34 per day) received by the higher caste

farm wage laborer. In case of non-farm wage labor, the average wage is about Rs 48 per day. The wage received by SC non-farm wage laborer is Rs 58, and by the higher caste non-farm wage laborer it is Rs 77 per day.

Discrimination can also be found in the time intervals of wage payments. Nearly 90 per cent of the respondents from low caste background were paid their wages after a week or more, only about 9 per cent reported getting the wages on the same or the next day. On the other hand, 94 per cent of higher caste individuals received the payments the wages the same day or the next day (*ibid.* 159).

Delays in wage payments are less favourable to for the lower caste Untouchables as compared to their counterparts from the higher castes. This impacts their capacity to meet daily livelihood requirements. Provided the already lower wage rates for SCs, when there is delay in wage payments, meeting the daily livelihood requirements on savings is near impossible, which compels them to borrow money on very high interests from money-lenders and others. (*ibid* 160-161)

Thorat et al (2010, 161) also explore the preferential treatment given to higher caste laborers. About 47 per cent of the respondents mentioned that caste affinity is a factor for selecting the laborers; 45 per cent reported loyalty of own-caste person (comprising approximately 92 per cent of the respondents). The discrimination in hiring has many aspects, including selective inclusion to total exclusion from certain type of works. 62 per cent respondents of the study said that they were denied in employment by higher caste employers with regards to some areas (mainly processing and cutting some crops), about 7 per cent respondents answered in denial about being hired by higher caste employers in any work, 3 per cent in some season and about 90 per cent in some specific work (*ibid* 162). In case of non-farm work, the discriminatory practices were reported in specific labor. About 64 per cent of the respondents reported exclusion in work related to social ceremony, 7 per cent in house construction, 7 per cent in work in restaurants and about 21 per cent in any household work. Work inside higher caste houses seems to be confined to higher castes only (*ibid* 163).

The caste based analogy provides hierarchical occupation status to different castes and it is clearly visible in the treatment of wage workers participating in the aforementioned study. The discrimination even continues in the ways the payments are given - employers would

sometimes give cash by dropping it from a distance or placing it on the grounds to avoid physical contact with the lower caste individual.

In the study, it was also found that Dalits face discrimination in purchase of lands from the higher castes- in both farm lands as well as lands for residential purposes. The purchases of farm lands were made between other backward castes (OBCs), Schedule Tribes (STs) and Schedule Castes (SCs). Thorat et al. (2010, 163-164) reported various kinds of difficulties faced by SCs when purchasing lands. For farm-lands, Dalits have to buy lands at long distance from their native village (about 24 per cent), or away from the catchment areas of irrigation canals (15 per cent), or away from high caste land, or even purchase land that was inferior in quality (6 per cent). About 56 per cent of the respondents reported that they were denied the purchase of land when the land shared borders with higher caste landowners. About 64 per cent of the SC respondents reported that the caste preference was the determining factor in the purchase of agricultural lands by higher caste owners, compared to only 20 per cent of the respondents who mentioned price as the only factor in the buying of agricultural land. A similar discrimination was found in the agricultural land rental market.

The Dalit respondents also faced various kinds of difficulties both in the purchase of land for construction of residential dwellings and in renting within a higher caste locality. Out of 67 respondents in the study, 60 reported that generally high castes did not buy lands for construction of houses in low caste locality. About 60 per cent of the SC respondents said that they were generally not allowed to buy lands in high caste locality. Out of these respondents, about 80 per cent said that the high caste did not like low castes to stay in the same locality; about 8 per cent said that they themselves were not comfortable about staying in a high caste locality. Of 53 respondents, 39 (73 per cent) reported that they would face discrimination in finding a house to rent (*ibid* 166).

The exclusion and discriminatory practices do not stop here. Of the respondents, 31 per cent carry out cultivation as their main occupation and participate in the market by purchasing inputs and services. Out of 15 respondents 2-2 respondents each reported discrimination in ability to access the input or higher payments than the prevailing market price; and in acquiring water for irrigation from private suppliers. (Thorat et al (2010, 167) however, do not wish to generalize these instances, provided the size of sample being too small).

Castes have been assigned certain occupations, which keeps the construct and status of the caste system stable. Out of the 94 households, 17 reported having caste-based occupations (mainly barbers, scavengers, tailors, washermen, and carpenters). 64 per cent of the respondents reported that there are separate barbers for lower caste and higher castes. 23 per cent of the respondents mentioned that higher caste do not avail the services of lower caste washermen; and higher caste washermen do not work for lower caste families (*ibid* 171).

About two-third of the SC respondents, while answering to the question about why higher castes do not buy goods from them, mentioned their “impure” status as a reason. Higher castes reported low quality of the products as a reason for not purchasing goods from lower castes (*ibid* 169). Thorat et al (2010) asked specifically about purchase of milk and vegetables as they are bought by almost all households on a daily basis in rural areas. On responding to the question of buying vegetables from the Untouchables, 16 per cent of the SC respondents said higher castes do not buy from them due to their impure status. Nearly 73 per cent of these respondents of the study mentioned that the notion of purity and pollution was the main reason.

Rodrigues and Geetha (1994 in Guru 2009, 13) seek to link the distinct character of pollution and Untouchability within the public domain. According to them, public domain in India is deeply Brahmanical in nature. It is distinct by its capacity to fragment the Untouchable’s body by deploying the ideology of purity-pollution (*ibid.* 14).

Discrimination against Dalit women

The World Bank (2011, 20) states that there have been positive changes in the access to rights for Dalits, but that the positive changes in education, political participation and labor market have been more significant among Dalit men than among Dalit women, and that the latter still has extremely poor outcomes from education and labor market.

Social exclusion of women also has instrumental consequences. Lewis and Lockheed (2007 cited in Lockheed 2010) argue that educating girls and young women promotes social and economic development, and even though there has been improvement, a lot of girls in developing countries still remain out of school. When combining the gender gaps within socially excluded groups with the gaps arising from social exclusion alone, there is a stark difference in school participation between socially excluded girls and majority children. In

India, tribal girls had a 9 per cent lower probability of attending school than non-tribal boys (Arunatilake 2006; Nguyen 2006; UNESCO Institute for Statistics 2005 cited in Lockheed 2010). Thorat (2008) describes the lack of educational development as an important problem among low-caste women, pointing out that the literacy rate among low-caste rural women in 2000 was 24 per cent, as compared with non-low-caste women in the same areas, who had a literacy rate at 41 per cent.

When it comes about Dalit women in the public domain, Rodrigues (1994 cited in Guru 2009, 15) provides this analogy, thus showing the double tag of impurity and shame connected both to being Dalit and being women (Rawat 2006, 1):

“While the bazaar, or the outside, could pollute the man, the woman could be polluted by her own body and insulated from social intercourse, during menstrual cycles, childbirth, and death of her husband.”

Social discrimination does play a part in influencing women’s under- and unemployment rates. A study conducted in three states in 2005, showed that higher caste-women had a larger probability of being employed than women from lower castes (Dalits) (Sukhadeo et al. 2005 cited in Holmes et al. 2010, 10). Further, the study showed that Dalit women had a maximum of 148 days of employment during a year, while women from higher castes had an average level of 290 days of employment per year. Dalit women are also predominantly working within the agricultural sector – approximately 57 per cent – as compared to 29 per cent of higher caste-women (NSSO 2000, cited in Holmes et al. 2010, 11).

The World Bank (2011: 27) states that the labor market is among the most important sites of gender inequality. This is reinforced by Costa et al (2009), who argues that gender equality is critical in any attempt to reduce poverty, and that women’s access to the labor market is equivalent with overall greater economic equality. Ruwanpura (2005, 23) cite Deshpande (1999 in *ibid* 23) and argue the point that caste and networks related to caste are important in searching for and finding employment, and that precisely the importance of these networks plays a critical role in restricting occupational mobility for women.

Vasathakumari (2011, 2) argue that gender inequalities is the reason behind women getting unequal pay for equal work. She also mentions that even within the poor, women contribute a

major part of the disposable income, as men spend more on personal comforts and women generally tend to prioritize ensuring welfare for the entire family. Therefore, women empowerment is acclaimed as a poverty reduction measure, and this is done by creating employment that is focused on women. It's worth noting that despite a period of dramatic economic growth, the female participation in the labor force has stagnated from 1983-2004-05, especially counting the rural areas (World Bank 2011, 167).

Ruwanpura (2005, 23) argues that employment in itself not necessarily lead to empowerment of women, because the market relations are so nuanced that a strive for gender equality must go beyond just creating employment - forms of employment that seeks to break down the occupational biases between the genders should also be given equal attention from policy makers. She further argues that education is an important factor in the rising of caste and gender inequality (*ibid.* 26, The World Bank 2011, 3). Kerala and West Bengal, which are renowned for social reforms and promoting education for all, can show for lower disparities than the national average, despite having slow growth in the economic sector (Deshpande 2001, 136-9 cited in Ruwanpura 2005, 27).

Women from scheduled casts have higher work participation rates than men (Ahmed 1999, 85 cited in Ruwanpura 2005, 26). The majority of women in India, 79 per cent, work in agriculture, which is known for exceptionally low wages (*ibid.* 23). She argues that this could be a reflection of economic deprivation and poverty, because scheduled caste women were forced to accept any kind of employment and labor wages, simply to survive. This can again show how individuals from vulnerable social groups are driven into forced labor, showing the connection with social exclusion and discrimination. Furthermore, it shows how caste, class and gender converge in the process of making the groups more exposed to facing multiple-discrimination (*ibid.* 26).

The study done by Shah et al (2006, 103) found how Dalits, and specifically Dalit women, face “multiple and mutually reinforcing forms of exclusion and subordination“, thus strengthening the argument that the systematic humiliation of which Dalits are subjected to, is a crucial dimension in the economic relations. In other words – they are denied the rights each citizen are entitled to, making the battle for fair working conditions not only about wages, but human dignity.

Violence against Dalit women

According to the World Bank (2011: 27), violence against women is a sign of extreme inequality in gender relations in a society. To put the situation for women in India in perspective, it is worth noting that the NFHS 2005 report shows that over one-third of Indian women reported that they had experienced spousal violence, and of those, over one-fourth had experienced violence in the previous year. According to the Government of India's National Family Health Survey (table 3.15, 2009, cited in NCDHR 2006, 34), 27,4 per cent of Dalit women have been repeatedly beaten or mistreated since the age of 15, most of them (25,2 per cent) by their husbands. 36,1 per cent of all crimes against women in India falls under the category of domestic violence, even after excluding dowry deaths, making it the single largest recorded crime against any group within the country (National Crimes Records Bureau 2004, cited in The World Bank 2011). NCDHR's report (2006, 34) argues that the violence against Dalit women necessarily results in harm and suffering – violating their personal integrity in such a way that it reinforces their subordination due to their lower caste-gender-identity and increases their degree of social exclusion and isolation.

A study titled 'A research study on sexual assault' conducted by one NGO in India establishes that *Dalit women who have suffered caste rapes were subjected to more humiliation than other women similarly assaulted*. In an interview Rajat Mitra (published in The Times of India, 15 December 2009), who led this study, said that the nature of rapes against Dalit women is more heinous. When Dalit women are assaulted, offenders use foul language vilifying the woman verbally, *invariably calling them prostitutes*. The study notes that in any other rape, the victim is not called a 'prostitute'.

This comparative study between Dalits and non-Dalits, was done in 12 states (Delhi, Meghalaya, Assam, Karnataka, Tripura, Maharashtra, UP, West Bengal, Andhra Pradesh, Jammu & Kashmir, Bihar and Gujarat), showed that *Dalits felt anguish to a greater degree of intensity*. They often see rape as "something ordained" by virtue of a double disadvantage: being Dalit and woman. *Whenever a Dalit woman is raped, it gets connected to all other sufferings and discriminations*. The study also noted that "Allusions to rape by upper castes begin to appear in subtle conversations and often inflate their anxiety and depressive symptoms that begin to mark (rape) as inevitable in the mind of young Dalit girls." The study also found out that the severity and frequency of flashbacks was measurably much greater for Dalit women. In fact, they notched higher trauma levels on every factor studied except for

'despair' and feeling betrayed. This, concludes Mitra, also demonstrates how rape for Dalits, is an intergenerational trauma and not restricted to a one-time event.

Violence against women is not only a human rights-problem, but affects the economic sector and thus the overall economic development of a country. UNIFEM's India study (2005, 13) shows how domestic violence against women can be the factor pushing an economically fragile household across the threshold and into an economic crisis. After an incident of violence, women lose an average of five working days, thus reducing the household income substantially (UNIFEM 2003, cited in The World Bank 2011, 13). It can be argued that employment with cash reimbursements potentially can increase women's decision making power, because they will have power over assets that are measurably important for the household. This will strengthen women's position and ability to protest and resist – thus possibly over time ultimately bring a reduction in the violence committed against them (Kelkar 2009, 18, Holmes et al. 2010, 13).

NREGA and its impact

An article published in The Frontline magazine (Jan 3-16, 2009) discusses features of National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA). This scheme gives an employment guarantee to poor in India. The extent of poverty for a large number of people is so severe that even meager wages for survival seems a distant dream to many. NREGA tries to support people in this situation. NREGA promises 100 days of labour to every household in India. Although 100 days of labour is still an unaccomplished dream but the programme has increased number of days of employment available for poor significantly. Also the performance of the scheme varies a lot in different states. In the multiplicity of views regarding success and failures of NREGA, authors examine the situation in the light of selected critical parameters.

The *social background* of NREGA workers revealed that significant number of beneficiaries belonged to the lowest strata of society in economic as well as social terms. Therefore *self-targeting* (self-selection) element of the scheme worked on the right direction. Further, survey finding showed that there was a good demand of NREGA works and only a small per centage of that was met by the scheme. Average number of days of work in India was only 16 in 2007-08. Although because of the low scale of scheme, the *impacts* were also limited, yet there was a good *demand* for the scheme. The reasons for unsatisfactory results of the scheme

were further explored as low awareness about the scheme among levels among poor. Rajasthan, which was a comparatively better performing state for NREGA, had better awareness levels too (*ibid*).

Authors (*ibid*) argue that NREGA is designed on a right based approach, which would not be effective with poor awareness levels. Also it was observed that awareness tend to be higher where some sort of collectives for poor were operational. Survey results also showed that NREGA is perceived as a very important scheme, which has brought significant change in the lives of poor. Authors suggest that as awareness levels would increase with passage of time, so would the impacts of the scheme.

Case studies from different states – a comparison

Kerala

Kerala has one of the highest unemployment rates in India (national unemployment rate-) but compared to other states most of the unemployed are educated (Vijayanand and Jithendran, 2008. 1). However, the recent data presented by National Sample Survey Office shows the decline in unemployment rates in Kerala. The Hindu (Jun 2011) quotes Dr Isaac (Ex-Finance Minister of Govt of Kerala) that the rural unemployment has come down from 15.8 per cent in 2004-05 to 9 per cent in 2009-10 He said that in the rural areas, 8.3 per cent of the grownup male population was unemployed as per the 2004-05 sample survey. This proportion diminished to 3.8 per cent as per the 2009-10 sample survey. Among rural women, the unemployment rate decreased from 30.9 per cent to 21 per cent during the same period. This report cites him again while talking about the employment participation in rural areas (34.3per cent in 2004-05 to 35.3 per cent 2009-10). According to this report these trends were attributed to employment guarantee scheme [NREGA] among other government schemes.

Vijayanand and Jithendren (2008, 3) on the other hand writes about the implementation of NREGA in Kerala, arguing that that the innovative use of including the existing program Kudumbasree has had positive impact on women. As under Kudumbasree every family below poverty line is organized into a Neighbourhood Group (NHG) at the local level consisting of 15 to 40 families with each family being represented only by a woman. A group of NHGs are then further organized into Area Development Society (ADS) at the ward level – which comprises of around 1500-2000 individuals (*ibid*.3). ADSs are then federated to a registered

organization named Community Development Society (CDS). Each NHG, ADS and CDS has a few volunteers carrying out different roles. The implementation of NREGA has been given to ADS, which includes maintaining the records, providing implements to laborers, and the transparency and monitoring requirements are also carried out by them (*ibid 4*). ADS also looks after the welfare amenities for the workers. Vijayanand and Jithendren (2008, 4) put forth the argument that since ADS is an organization poor and basically a women's group, there has been greater *sensitivity* in the implementation process. Mahapatra (2010) adds further that since the management of work-sites and other logistics for implementation is in the hands of women self-help groups (under Kudumbasree), most of the members of the group join this program.

The study also mentions further that as the work is organized by women's group, the gender perspective gets built automatically (*ibid 6*). Due to the fact that women are comfortable working with their neighbours, around 80 per cent of the participants have been women. Equal wages have been paid ("for the first time" - *ibid. 6*). The study also argues as the bank deposits are increasing, the intra-household status of women has also been increasing, by giving the women control over cash resources and thus a certain decision making-power (*ibid 6*).

NREGA has suddenly increased the purchasing power of poor and there is visible economic development. It also mentions that working within in public sector gives substantial relief to landless laborers (extremely poor) as it takes away the burden of working within the farms of elite class farmers. The study cites the specific case of Wayanad district, where the farmers' suicide rate was quite high. Because of NREGA, the peasants can now get "on to the now-respectable public works." (*ibid 7*)

Tamil Nadu

In the case of Tamil Nadu, women constitute approximately 80 per cent of the workforce. It is the highest percentage in the country. Women are involved in different layers of NREGA implementation in Tamil Nadu (*sizeable numbers as NREGA staff at the GP and Block level as worksite supervisors (Makkal Nala Panniyalars, or MNPs), data entry operators and so on.*) Participation of women in Gram panchayats (GPs) is also high. In Tamil Nadu, GPs are well-equipped and that is an important factor for the effective implementation of public works

programs such as NREGA. A social audit in Tamil Nadu (Narayanan, 2008: 10-11) finds that the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act has brought about major changes in the lives of women. Women (in Tamil Nadu) reported that MGNREGA had been only source of income for them for last few months.

Narayan (2009, 158) gives example from Tamil Nadu, where some of the Dalit women with small children reported, that they are being deterred from bringing their children to the worksites. Some of the women even mentioned that they had been returned back, when they carried their children with them. (*ibid*) It has to be noted that under the provisions of the Act, childcare facilities will be provided if there are at least five children are present or at least five workers (male/female) demand childcare facilities (MoRD, Narayanan, 2009, 161). The audit found out that there was no child care health center. It has also been noted that young mothers are not allowed to feed their children by going home (*ibid* 11). They have to bring their children on site and there is provision of keeping child at site. Childcare facilities were absent, as there were no women to look after the children (*ibid* 12). Availability of drinking water and food were also not found (*ibid* 12). It has been seen that many women would not take their children with them, even though there are facilities and resources made available.

Khera and Muthiah (2010) analysed the implementation in three sites in Tamil Nadu from 2006-07 to 2009-10. Tamil Nadu have used some innovative steps to remove the corruption and middlemen. That, in return, has positive impact on women's participation during the time period 2006-07 (from 9 to 42 days per year). In Tamil Nadu the funds are spent by the Gram Panchayats, which are more accessible than the government departments. At the same time, Tamil Nadu has strict measures to stop corruption.

The study asserts that Tamil Nadu's emergence as an NREGA success story *fits into a more general pattern of a relatively well-governed state with a genuine commitment to social welfare*. Most social welfare schemes (ICDS, mid-day meals, public health and so on) perform better there than in other parts of the country. The attention to detail (even, say, column widths in the design of MRs) and the openness with which officials admit to faults in the system, crucial if one wants to make improvements, is refreshing and quite remarkable. Nevertheless, the study maintains that if the work has been selected by the workers themselves it could improve the labor productivity, as the needs of the community will be dealt directly by the members of the community. Authors of the study suggest that since the

number of Dalits is quite high in Tamil Nadu, some permissible works (e.g., land leveling, farm ponds on the lands of Dalit farmers could be added.

However, the study concludes that the sense of commitment and duty among government employees is evident in the state. For rest of the country, it is certain: *there is a lot to learn from Tamil Nadu.*

Madhya Pradesh

An article in Central Chronicle (April 30, 2010) wrote that in Madhya Pradesh there are more number of women workers involved in NREGA work than men. Quoting the Minister for Panchayats & Rural Development and Social Justice Gopal Bhargava the article write that the number of women labourers is more than men in six districts (Dhar, Balaghat, Mandla, Sidhi, Umaria and Anuppur districts in 2009-10) in the works under Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme.

Holmes et al (2011, 3); and Pankaj and Tankha (2010, 50) explain the community level impacts of NREGA by giving some examples from Madhya Pradesh that the most common types of works created through MGNREGA have been road construction, the digging of wells (and other water related activities) and tree planting. These assets have varying impact, including the facilitation of greater crop production and better marketing of products as a result of improved infrastructure.

Sachin Jain, state convenor of right to food Madhya Pradesh, said (India Info, 2008) that the participation of Dalit and tribal women in NREGA work had been increasing in the state (Madhya Pradesh), and the upper castes are not happy with that. Upper castes take revenge by committing gang-rape. It shows that even though Dalit women managed to attain some benefits from public work programs like NREGA, they are still among the poorest and most vulnerable to exploitation in India.

Uttar Pradesh

In Uttar Pradesh (Raja 2007 in Pankaj and Tankha 2010, 49), single women were completely denied to get work. Khera and Nayak (2009, 54-55) write that in northern states the notion among the upper caste communities that allowing *women to work outside their home would amount to a loss of honour and dignity of the family.*

Himachal Pradesh

Himachal Pradesh is situated in a valley. It has intensive agriculture and productivity is high (*ibid*). Women are basically working inside their homes. Seeking jobs under NREGS for women is a way to earn independently. Pankaj and Tankha (2010, 49) write that since NREGS is a government sponsored work, wages are paid timely and are provided at a minimum rate, and attitude of implementing agencies in issuance of job cards for women is supportive, the participation of women in the state has increased. Khera and Nayak (2009, 51) write that getting work at the *doorstep* is one of the key factors of NREGA in attracting women workers.

Rajasthan

Rajasthan has shown a different picture, due to several factors, as noted by Pankaj and Tankha (2010, 48). Agriculture in Rajasthan is mostly rain-fed and of low intensity, so the demand of wage employment is widespread in the society. Due to the several drought relief programs, both men and women, have been participating in public works programs. Also, the migration in search of work, from rural areas to cities has been high for both men and women. For them, locally available wage work is preferable as it reduces social and economic costs (*ibid*). Rajasthan has also a long history of civil society movements (Roy 2010; Pankaj and Tankha 2010, 48), which may have eased the path in Rajasthan for NREGA implementation.

Across states

Mahapatra (2010) writes the variations of impacts on women in different states. He writes that participation of women in MGNREGA (called earlier as NREGA) has varied and contradicting aspects. He writes further that states like Kerala which has a low rate of women's participation in the work force (15 per cent), has as high as 79 per cent of women taking the work under this program (*ibid*). It applies for the same in states like Tamil Nadu and Rajasthan, which, even though having low share of women in the overall workforce, have respectively 82 per cent and 69 per cent women workers under MGNREGA. On the contrary, poor states with greater casual labor potential, like Odisha, Uttar Pradesh and Bihar, report low women participation (22-33 per cent). That is contradicting to the common assumption that poverty forces women to take up casual jobs. (*ibid*) Several studies show that states which have a history of women's mobilization, such as Kerala, Tamil Nadu and Rajasthan, have a substantially higher rate of women's participation in the NREGA program (Khera and Nayak (2009, 82 in Khera 2011, Pankaj and Tankha 2010, 45-46, *ibid*).

In a study done covering four states (Bihar, Jharkhand, Rajasthan and HP) varied results have been found (Pankaj and Tankha 2010, 48). Socio-cultural factors and local institutions have been the main reasons for low levels of women's participation. In Bihar, for example, the local institutions have been controlled by upper castes and upper middle castes (Pankaj and Singh 2004; Pankaj 2008b in Pankaj and Tankha 2010, 48) – the effective delivery of NREGA is still in question. In Bihar and Jharkhand, NREGS work is limited to the SCs, STs and OBCs - due to the aforementioned fact that upper castes find it against their dignity and honor to send their women out to work (*ibid*) even though they are poor.

However, there are certain problems related to implementation of NREGA. Khera and Nayak (2009, 10) cite the examples of Uttar Pradesh and Bihar where women had been told that the program was “not for them”. Female participation is also low in these states because of the sceptical views of male relatives and the Gram Panchayat (village council) functionaries (*ibid* 10). Women in certain parts of India are considered ‘too weak’ so they ‘cannot’ work on the worksites (*ibid*).

Khera and Muthiah (The Hindu, Slow but steady success, 2010) write that NREGA has had varied performance in many states, after its implementation in 2005. Bihar and Gujarat the implementation had been slow, whereas Jharkhand and Uttar Pradesh have shown effects of corruption on NREGA implementation. Rajasthan and Andhra Pradesh have been, so far, the most successful states in terms of implementation of NREGA.

Women's participation

The NREGA Act gives an extra emphasis on women by mentioning that at least one-third of the beneficiaries shall be women. Richard Mahapatra, in his article “How women seized NREGA” (2010), writes that more women than men work under the national program that guarantees employment to rural people. This article mentions that in the fiscal till October (year 2010), women availed of more than 50 per cent of employment created under the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA). Their participation has been growing since the inception of the Act in 2006. This is remarkable given that only 28.7 per cent women form a part of the country's workforce, according to the National Sample Survey Organisation data of 2004-05, the latest such data available for the country (*ibid*).

The design of MGNREGA is aimed at transforming rural livelihoods through its rights-based approach to employment. An important indirect impact of the act is to “empower rural women” (Ministry of Rural Development, n.d.), (Holmes et al. 2010, 20). Vasathakumari (2011, 4) states that a reading of the statistics shows that more than 70 per cent of the beneficiaries constitute of women. In his study, 74,2 per cent the sample beneficiary families are women headed (*ibid*).

Hazarika (2009, 10) writes that NREGA is envisaged as a gender sensitive scheme, as it suggests that at least one third of beneficiaries must be women (NREGA, Schedule II, Section 6: 19). She explains further that NREGA has provisions for providing equal wages for both men and women (The Act says that the provisions of Equal Remuneration Act, 1976 shall be complied with, p.26), as per the Act, a local Vigilance and Monitoring Committee is to be appointed with members from the immediate locality or village where the work is undertaken, to monitor the progress and quality of work. *‘The gram sabha will elect the members of the committee and ensure that SC/STs and women are represented on it.’* (p.44), the guidelines mention of a social audit forum, convened by the ‘gram sabha’ (the village council) every six months as part of the continuous auditing process. There is stress on the quorum of these meetings maintaining female participants alongside those from other disadvantageous groups. *‘The timing of the forum must be such that it is convenient for people to attend – that it is convenient for REGS (Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme) workers, women and marginalised communities.’* (p.56 in Hazarika 2009, 10-11).

Khera and Nayak (2009, 3) state that NREGA has provided income earning opportunities to women. The unavailability of these opportunities varies from region to region. Women are primarily care-taker for sick and the elderly at home. Outside home there is limited options to earn wages for women, which are also non-consistent. The study also mentions that women (respondents) who did not participate in the wage labor market earlier were working on home instead of farms, or due to the low wages they did not seek wage labor in locally available agricultural work, or they were socially restricted from taking wage work. (*ibid* 3).

Khera and Nayak (2009, 3-5) add further that women who earn wages outside NREGA were primarily involved in agricultural labor work in their or neighboring village (s), working in the construction industry, stone breaking or collection forest produces (such as *Tendu* leaves,

Mahuwa flowers etc.). These women were primarily those with “primary wage earning responsibility”. However, there were lots of irregularities involved in the wages, agricultural and collection of forest produces is mostly seasonal; and construction and the stone quarries were hazardous to health (*ibid* 4) not to mention the fact that working in forest can also be dangerous. Migration in the construction industry also exposes women to various vulnerabilities such as exploitation, illness and gender bias to avail the work (Khera and Nayak, 2009, 5. Jhabvala and Sinha, 2002, 9, 11, 15).

Studies show (Jhabvala and Sinha, 2002, 9; Khera and Nayak, 2009, 5) that women get less money than their male counterparts in the rural as well as urban casual wage work. Khera and Nayak (2009, 6) add to it that some women respondents under the study have given the credit to NREGA – if they had not worked with NREGA, they would have either worked at home or remain unemployed. Certain societal factors also constrain them from working in the fields other than that of their community members or where the members of their community are working (*ibid* 4). Khera and Nayak (2009, 5) add further that that NREGA has expanded the wage opportunities for women. Local Governments being the implementing agency, availability of work at local level, regularity and predictability of working hours, less chance of work conditions being exploitative, better wages than other work (the differences varies from Rs. 30- 65 per day); and work being socially acceptable and ‘dignified’ are certain features of NREGA which provide women a better earning possibility (*ibid* 5).

Studies (Holmes et al. 2010; Khera and Nayak 2009; Narayan 2009) also show that MGNREGA has positive impact on finding a job, as women do not have to go *place to place* to find work (The Act mandates providing work within the 5 km radius of residence of the applicant/ job seeker). It is important to note that in case of women, getting work close to their homes can be a positive thing as they do not have to migrate from one place from another. This protection from migration implies a significant improvement in the quality of life because of the costs and risks associated with migration. In case of family member being ill, access to work near the house is very critical (*ibid* 6).

Holmes, Sadana and Rath (2010, viii) write that women face specific gendered risks and vulnerabilities: they receive up to 30per cent lower wages than men in casual labour – and 20 per cent lower for the same task (World Bank, 2009 in Holmes et al). Forming two-thirds of the agricultural workforce women they are highly discriminated as they own less than one-

10th of agricultural lands (NAWO, 2008 in Holmes et al), and they spend a disproportionate amount of time compared with men on domestic activities (women work 457 minutes per day compared with men who work 391; NAWO 2008 in Holmes et al viii). Studies (Raja 2007, Sainath, 2008; Bhatta 2008 in Pankaj and Tankha 2010, 49) have shown that women are discriminated at the level of household registration and issuing of job cards.

Studies (Khera and Nayak 2009, Holmes et al 2010) also show that women get fewer days of employment under the MGNREGA, as they are given some “soft” work compared to men. There are separate provisions in the Act about providing different kinds of work to pregnant women or women who have recently given birth (Holmes et al 2010, ix). In case of poor Dalit women, this situation becomes very harsh – due to the fact that it is a necessity for the majority of rural Dalit women to seek work throughout the year. Certain types of work also limit the participation of women. For instance, it is perceived that digging a well is difficult for women workers after a certain depth. Other than that delays in wage payments make things particularly difficult for single women, as being the only bread-earner of the family needs a continuous flow of income. Women, often in case of untimely payment of wages, have to go to their previous work, which may be less preferred (*ibid* 11).

Explaining the causes of women’s participation under NREGA, Pankaj and Tankha (2010, 48) write that work under NREGA does not require any special skill (Krishnaraj et al 2004 in Pankaj and Tankha 2010), migration of male members from the family (Bhatta 2006, Mehrotra 2008, Talukdar 2008 in Pankaj and Tankha 2010), employment opportunity being provided closer to the residence of the applicants (Bhatta 2006; Khera and Nayak 2009 in Pankaj and Tankha 2010), the provision of equal (to men) and non-discriminatory wages (Sudarshan 2008, Khera and Nayak 2009), innovative implementation strategies like -the female mate system in Rajasthan (Khera 2008 in Pankaj and Tankha 2010), utilising the existing network of other schemes like Kudumbashree in Kerala (Vijayakumar and Thomas 2008 in Pankaj and Tankha 2010, 49) and gender differential tasks for uniform wages in Bihar (Pankaj 2008a in Pankaj and Tankha 2010, 49).

Facilities for women at NREGA worksites

The Act have a provision on having crèche facilities at the worksites, so that women with small children can go with their children and leave them there while they are at work, aiming to make the work be convenient for families: *‘If some applicants have to be directed to report*

for work beyond 5 km of their residence, women (especially single women) and older persons should be given preference to work on the worksites nearer to their residence.’ (p.18 in Hazarika 2009 11). Also, *‘If several members of a household who share the same job card are employed simultaneously under the scheme, they should be allowed to work on the same work site.’* (p.18 in Hazarika 2009, 11) and by recognising a single person as a ‘household’, the Act makes it possible for widows and other single women to access this work for widows and other single women to access work (*ibid*).

Lack of childcare facilities at the worksites is a challenge for women. Especially women who have infants have to give attention to their children during/ in between the work hours. They cannot leave their children at home since, the child has to be breastfed, and in case of the mother going to work in the morning and coming back in the evening poses a concern for the child. Breastfeeding on the sites can also increase the cases of exploitation. (Khera and Nayak 2009, 11)

Several studies (Holmes et al 2010, Khera and Nayak 2009, Narayanan 2009) show that childcare facilities were either absent or not good enough for women to rely on them leaving their children there. Which, in result, causes either women with small children not going to work or leaving their kids to their relatives and breast-feeding them after they come back from work (Holmes et al 2010, x; Narayan 2009, 153; World Bank 2011, 159). It has been also found that the awareness among women about such facilities was substantially low (Narayan, 2009. 156).

Women’s empowerment and equality – outcomes of the program

NREGA is claimed to have several other impacts on lives of women beyond generating income (Khera and Nayak 2009, 7). Pankaj and Tankha (2010, 45) write that NREGA has been beneficial for women, even though the program itself was not specifically made for women empowerment, some of its provisions have been providing rural women with benefits which they usually do not find in casual wage work. Adding further they say that the picture is complex from the gender-perspective, as there are several socio-cultural constraints stopping women from attaining 100 days of guaranteed employment under the scheme. This is due to the fact that the guaranteed employment is provided at the household level and given the patriarchal structure of Indian society it is highly questionable that women from rural households would be the first ones going to seek work under NREGA (*ibid*). It has also been

reported (Sainath, 2008; Bhatta 2008 in Pankaj and Tankha 2010) that the situation is even worse for single, divorced and separated and old women in attaining work within NREGA.

Studies (Boserup 1980, Folbre 2009, Hirway and Saluja 2009 in Pankaj and Tankha 2010, 51) have mentioned that women's involvement in household and unpaid work have been the main obstacle towards their empowerment. Even though, women spent a lot of time working in average number of hours per week (Central Statistical Organisation 2007, in Pankaj and Tankha 2010, 51), their contribution to household's welfare is mostly unaccounted (and unappreciated). Studies suggests that banks or the Panchayat (local government) should consider both individual and joint accounts (where household members are co-signatories) to avoid crediting household earnings solely to the male household head (MoRD, Khera and Nayak 2010; Holmes et al. 2010). Within the Indian social structure, it is an obvious fact that it would leave women with no control over their earnings. It is acknowledged that rights assertions by Dalit women are seen as an affront to the dominant castes status and honor. Said differently, the empowerment of Dalit women is perceived as a direct challenge to the prevailing patriarchal structure based on caste, hence providing 'legitimate' grounds for the dominant castes to commit punitive violence (NCDHR 2006, 33).

A National Family Health Survey (NFHS III 2005-06 in Pankaj and Tankha 2010, 51) shows that only 29 per cent of married women in rural areas take decisions about the purchase of daily household needs, 26 per cent decide about their personal health care, 7.6 per cent decide about purchasing major household items and approximately 10 per cent decide on visits to relatives.

Jandu (2008, 7) argues that the outcomes of women working with NREGA can be measured in their increased contribution to the income of the household. Of the respondents, a majority of 72 per cent spent their NREGA earnings on food, thus ensuring at least two regular meals every day (Chaterjee 2011, *ibid.*). The respondents in the study further reported that the amounts they earned were too small to repay substantial debts but sufficient to keep them away from local moneylenders and to repay small debts, which 28 per cent reported having used their wages on. Other large expenditures the respondents have met through NREGA wages is paying for their children's education - reported by 34 per cent - and ensuring good health care, 40 per cent (Chaterjee 2011, *ibid.*).

Studies (Holmes et al. 2010, Khera and Nayak, 2009) provide mixed results on women's improved economic status. In some of the households, noted in both the studies, women's earnings have increased. Khera and Nayak (2009, 86) write that some of the women mention that if had not been work provided under NREGA, they might have stayed at home or have got less payment. NREGA provides work in the close vicinity of the applicants, and it is paid work, money is transferred to individual bank accounts, Pankaj and Tankha (2010, 51-52) conclude with these saying that it increases women's ability at the household level, since they can decide where to spend the money on.

Wages earned from NREGA work has been, to some extent, increasing the decision making power of women. This is for instance shown by their increased opportunity to make a decision of what to buy for food consumption and that having access and control to a bigger amount of money allows women to buy food in larger quantity, which is cheaper than buying in smaller quantities, thus increasing food security and decreasing hunger (Khera and Nayak 2009, 7, Holmes et al. 2010, ix). After working under NREGA the domain of women's decision making also widened – spending money to construct a toilet inside the house, saving for children's future and having frequent visits to their parents houses (earlier, going to parents' house needed the permission of in-laws) (*ibid*).

The patriarchal structure of Indian society and its rigidness have maintained women's farm and non-farm work majorly unpaid, NREGA has broken into this territory by providing cash directly into women's hands for working in the close vicinity of their homes. Jandu (2008, 7) draws the conclusion that the outcomes of NREGA's programs is taking shape as the beginning of a marked shift from women's previous roles. He argues that, while women's labor always has been essential for the functioning of rural households, it has not been made visible due to absence of monetary reimbursements. Thus, by giving cash earnings to women, NREGA has both increased and diversified the contributions women are making to household incomes (Jandu 2008, 7).

Khera and Nayak (2009, 7) also mention about the positive impact on the health of (both) men and women, as having a regular income increases the tendency to spend money on illness. The study suggests that approximately half of the women respondents said that the money has helped to cope with the illness of family. Studies (Lindstrand et al. 2006[1], 56, *ibid*.) suggest that poverty (and non-availability of economic resources) is the most important determinant

of health. Khara and Nayak (2009, 7) write that to that extent NREGA seem to be fulfilling its role of enhancing economic security. Pankaj and Tankha (2010, 51) present specific examples of reduction of women's dependency on the male members of the family after they started working under NREGS, which shows that paid employment under NREGS has increased both freedom and choice of the women. Aruna Roy (The Times of India, Mar 28, 2010) finds that women workers are more confident about their roles as contributors to family expenditure and their work decisions, and that they are also becoming more assertive about their space in the public sphere (Jan 3-16, 2009, *ibid.*).

Navjyoti Jandu (2008, 4), in her study, further describes how the NREGA Act mandates that men and women should be paid equal wages at NREGA worksites, and that this is a significant development as a wage gap between male and female casual workers has been the norm in India up to today. It is also worth mentioning that most female respondents to Jandu's study (2008, 6) said that they themselves had made the decision to work at NREGA's worksites - in other words, the prospects of NREGA employment has obviously encouraged women to make the decision to participate in the cash economy sphere. In some of the districts the number of confirmation from the respondents on this were very high, respectively 93 per cent in Rajnandgaon, 81 per cent in Mayurbhanj, 68 per cent in Cuddalore and 67 per cent in Jhabua.

R. Jagannathan in his article "How economics will drive women power" (Sunday, March 7, 2010. DNA) that in the globalized era economic forces are impacting the gender relations within Indian society equally much as social factors. He says that with the schemes like NREGA women are becoming wage earners, *even in rural sphere*. Extending such schemes will have a huge impact on image of women – from being merely a social burden to economic resources. The notion about women becoming the future wage earner will lead towards treating them equally within the family and in the society at large. It will have indirect impacts of social evils like dowry and child marriage too (*ibid.*).

NREGA and gender sensitivity in the future

Many have expressed the concern that the growth of the market economy in India unleashes inequality-increasing forces. Dev and Ravi (2007: 509) reach to the conclusion that inequality "*increased significantly in the post-reform period*", a conclusion shared by other researchers (Himanshu 2007; Datt and Ravallion 2010). But the exclusive use of consumption

expenditures or differences across castes in a few outcomes as measures of inequality cannot be adequate in the many parts of rural India where signs of social inequality, such as servility, humiliation, lack of self-respect, are important. Comparing consumption expenditure based inequality statistics across states immediately reveals the incompleteness of the picture they present.

Kelkar (2009, 1) argue that the main objective for government agencies aiming to reduce poverty has been on strengthening the production capacity of the rural economy – refraining from discussing the pervasive dynamics of inequalities related to social status and gender in the Indian society. This leaves us with the question; *how can a program designed for the creation of productive assets be directed at reducing both poverty and gender inequality?*

In a recent study conducted by ILO (2004, 86 cited in Kelkar 2009, 17), it is observed that generally, economic security is weakened by policies and institutions' failure to understand how promoting women's rights to earn and control incomes and resources would help improve overall economic growth and development. The inadequate number of women holding decision making positions in governance suggests that passive exclusion of women is widely practiced, and continues to result in capability deprivations and poverty (Sen 2000 in Kelkar 24).

Studies (Khera 2008, Khera and Nayak 2009, Chaterjee 2011) have found that there has been a low level of awareness about NREGA among the women workers. Khera and Nayak (2009, 56) and Chaterjee (2011) write that awareness regarding operational guidelines, household registration, the job card distribution process, work applications and entitlements such as worksite facilities and unemployment allowance *was inadequate*. The studies (Khera and Nayak 2009; Holmes et al 2011) further states that even though the awareness level goes high, due to the existing socio-cultural norms, the participation of women is not sufficient at different levels of NREGA implementation. Mahaptra et al. (2008) argue that there is a general concern that MGNREGA has been focusing on employment at the expense of development.

MGNREGA (MoRD) and many proponents of the act (Dreze, Roy, Dey 2005, 2007, 2008) suggest that adequate representation of women among worksite facilitators should be ensured; and recommends that women be represented in local-level committees and the social audit

process, as well state and central level councils. Chatterjee (2011) writes that, in rural areas *women still are under the shadow of second order citizenship*, especially when it comes about information sharing and decision making. That, in return, affects their capacity in many aspects of daily life. NREGA has tried to give some benefits to rural poor women, but to make the benefits more prudent – women’s participation in rural political organs can be important tools (*ibid*). Whether this has been implemented in NREGA or not differs from place to place.

Even though there has been policy efforts specifically directed at addressing key aspects of gender inequality in India – also establishing a link between reduction of gender-based violence and women’s increased involvement in the economic sphere – these policy measures have not proven sufficient for securing economic rights and inclusion in the management of assets for women so far (Kelkar 2009, 14). The general perception has been that providing a parity of wages between women and men under NREGA *is* sufficient measure for addressing the gender issues within poverty reduction. Questions directed at ensuring gender equality also in the management and controlling of the productive assets created by NREGA, has been seen as a distraction and diversion in the work towards poverty reduction through providing employment – reducing poverty and reducing inequality is still seen as conflictual terms (*ibid*. 16). The outcome of NREGA not challenging the inherent causes of gender-based discrimination is precisely upholding gender divisions in labor and reinforcing the subordination of rural women (*ibid*. 19). It remains a fact that the women workers in NREGA has minimal rights to and influence over productive assets, and that this is contributing to the persistence of a large-scale social exclusion of women in the Indian society (*ibid*. 24).

Kelkar (2009, 24), in his review of the NREGA programs related to gender during the last three years, finds that the challenge, if aiming to overcome the gender inequalities in both economic and social-cultural spheres, is not to reinstitute policies that safeguards women’s economic security, but to redistribute the machinery already there to work in a more gender responsive manner. There is evidence to support that reservations that lead to better representation of women in social audits eventually will increase women’s empowerment (Chattopadhyay and Duflo 2004, cited in Holmes et al. 2010, 30). This suggests that to ensure that the implementation of MGNREGA takes a more gender-sensitive approach, *capacity building on gender issues at the Panchayat level is necessary* (Holmes et al. 2010, 30, Kelkar 2009, 24).

Holmes et al. (2010, 6) finds that the exclusion of women from decision-making roles, may be further exacerbated by caste. One of the reasons behind excluded groups reluctance to access programs or claim what they are entitled to, may be due to fear of violence and abuse from more dominant groups in the community, such as members from a higher caste. Another critical variable is social capital, and how access to social networks can provide opportunities for employment and support for the included – therefore increasing the exclusion of and poverty within marginalized groups due to their lack of access to important networks. Holmes et al. (2010, 26) argues that MNREGA has not challenged existing social divisions based on caste, and even though certain aspects of social capital has increased due to the program, this is still along caste lines. Findings suggest that social discrimination still is prevalent after the implementation of MNGERA's programs (*ibid.*).

Kelkar (2009, 24) argues that the effectiveness of NREGA largely depends on what type of schemes priority is given to. Holmes et al (2011, 4) assert that in order to have better focus on women's empowerment and gender equality, there is a need to refocus on the types of works that are offered under MGNREGA. They suggest that health care, literacy and skills programs, nutrition and sanitation are alternative public works that would make a sustainable contribution to economic productivity and address pressing gender concerns.

The so-far lack of focus on social- and gender inequality in creation, control and maintenance of productive assets, is a major reason for the program's limited success (*ibid.* 23-4). In other words, providing women with rights to control productive assets as well as access to acquiring skills in management and technology are likely to help in providing them and their households with a livelihood built on equality and dignity. Thus showing that mediating women's rights is a strong measure in overcoming poverty and social exclusion (*ibid.* 22).

6. Conclusion

The empowerment of Dalit women continues to be seen as a threat to the comfortable seating of power, status and honor that is ascribed the upper castes. This threat penetrates several levels of the Indian society, by challenging the economic inequalities; challenging the social hierarchy in the caste system; and challenging the prevailing patriarchy by promoting gender

equality. This pervasive threat is often deemed as valid grounds for committing punitive violence against Dalit women.

We have found that National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA) of India is one of the most progressive legislations enacted since independence, guarantying rural employment and right to work as an enforceable legal entitlement in a rural milieu marked by stark inequalities between men and women. Previous governmental attempts to reduce poverty have mainly been attempted through strengthening the production capacity of the rural economy, often completely leaving out the dimension of inequalities related to social status and gender in the Indian society. Research suggests that MNREGA has not challenged existing social divisions based on caste, and even though certain aspects of social capital have increased due to the program, this is still along caste lines.

By general perception, providing a parity of wages between and men under NREGA has been regarded as sufficient measure for addressing the gender issues within poverty reduction, and questions directed at ensuring gender equality also in the management and controlling of the productive assets created by NREGA, has been seen as a distraction and diversion. Reducing poverty and reducing inequality is still seen as conflicting terms.

Here Sen's capability approach seems relevant to be written again, as it is founded upon one key analytical distinction within practical philosophy – namely the means-ends distinction. In other words, the capability approach stresses that when valuing something, we should always be clear on whether we value it as an end itself, or as a mean towards an end we deem as valuable. The capability approach regards people's capabilities as the ultimate ends of interpersonal comparisons – thus evaluating policies and societal changes not only according to their actual functioning, but also by measuring their impact on people's capabilities. The inadequate number of women holding decision making positions in governance suggests that passive exclusion of women is widely practiced, and continues to result in capability deprivations and poverty.

The outcome of NREGA not challenging the inherent causes of gender-based discrimination is precisely upholding gender divisions in labor and reinforcing the subordination of rural women. It remains a fact that the women workers in NREGA has minimal rights to and influence over productive assets, and that this is contributing to the persistence of a large-

scale social exclusion of women in the Indian society. It has to be understood clearly, that the gender inequalities in both economic and social-cultural spheres needs redistribution of the machinery already in place to work in a more gender responsive manner. This can only be attained by providing women with income earning opportunities with a skill-set on how to explore and take usage of the options they are given. Involvement in household and unpaid work has been the main obstacle towards their empowerment. NREGA provides cash earnings in women's hands and thus deconstructs their traditional roles of working inside their homes.

Even though the NREGA program has gone through some initial periods of organizational problems, the voiceless groups have now started to assert themselves by seeking their rights. Extending such schemes will have a huge impact on image of women – from being merely a social burden to economic resources. Findings show that women workers are more confident about their roles as contributors to family expenditure and their work decisions, and that they are also becoming more assertive about their space in the public sphere – such creating opportunities for gainful socio-economic inclusion of women.

However, human dignity still remains a far-fetched dream for Dalits and Dalit women in specific – being positioned at the lowest rungs of Indian society within the policy framework.

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