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NOTES FROM THE FIELD

MGNREGA Farm Pond Works – Perspectives of People and Policy

Dimple Tresa Abraham * and Neetha N **

1. INTRODUCTION

India is ranked thirteenth among the list of water stressed countries in the world (Bansal, 2019). In recent years India has witnessed acute water scarcity across states, resulting in a growing recognition that lives and livelihoods of all are intrinsically linked to water, and measures on a war footing are required to ensure that our basic needs of water is met. The Jal Shakti Abhiyan (JSA), set up in 2019, has reported that over the past few years 3.5 lakh water conservation measures were implemented, of which 1.54 lakh were direct water conservation and rain water harvesting measures. The criticality of monsoons and rainwater harvesting has been championed by the Prime Minister, who in June 2019 had sent personalised letters to all village chiefs and had made a national call to take measures to conserve rainwater (IANS, 2019).

Excavation of farm ponds, trenches and other earthen works are popular measures for water harvesting and conservation, and many of these receive monetary support from the government departments and ministries concerned. Under the JSA and the flagship public works programme of the country, the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act

* Centre for Women's Development Studies, 25- Bhai Vir Singh Marg, New Delhi – 110001, India; dimple@cwds.ac.in ✉

** Centre for Women's Development Studies, 25- Bhai Vir Singh Marg, New Delhi – 110001, India; neetha@cwds.ac.in

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Published by Indian Society for Ecological Economics (INSEE), c/o Institute of Economic Growth, University Enclave, North Campus, Delhi 110007.

ISSN: 2581-6152 (print); 2581-6101 (web).

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.37773/ees.v3i1.96>

(MGNREGA), emphasis is given to farm pond works.¹ If we look at MGNREGA, since its inception, over 50% of its works are related to natural resource management, with a focus on rejuvenation of traditional water bodies and building new ponds and tanks on common lands. In addition to works on common/public property, the MGNREGA also have a provision to develop irrigation facility on private lands of eligible households, particularly those from the weaker socioeconomic groups (SC/ST and BPL), and marginal and small farmers (those owning less than 2 hectare of land respectively). This provision aimed at creating sustainable livelihoods for individual households. The data indicate that the share of water harvesting and irrigation structures on private lands to total works have risen in recent years.²

The notes from the field discussed here are based on insights from an extensive study³ undertaken by CWDS in 2018 on MGNREGA private land works across the states of Karnataka, Madhya Pradesh (MP) and West Bengal. In addition, the notes also draw comparison to similar works in the state of Uttarakhand studied in 2019. All observations are limited to farm pond works alone.

2. POLICY PUSH ON FARM PONDS

Since the inception of MGNREGA, farm ponds are an integral part of its water conservation related works. But a big push came into the programme ecosystem when a commitment was made by the Prime Minister in 2016 towards creating 500,000 farm ponds (Varma, 2016).

Excavation and re-excavation of these water harvesting and storage structures were common works on private/individual lands in the initial

¹ It is referred commonly as the MANREGA or the NAREGA. But in published documents, including that by the Ministry of Rural Development, Government of India, it is written as the MGNREGA

² The share of these individual land works out of total works has increased over time from 18.6% (out of the total 104.6 lakh works) in 2012-13 to 31.7% (out of the total 122.1 lakh works) in 2016-17.

³ CWDS (2018) study had covered over 3000 MGNREGA private land works, broadly categorized as category B works. These works were completed using MGNREGA funds but their maintenance is the responsibility of the individual beneficiary household. Beneficiaries who received completed income generating category B works from 2013-14 to 2015-16 FY as per the MGNREGA MIS (management information system) were selected in the sample.

years. But later re-excavation works were removed from the list of ‘eligible works on private lands’ (owing to increasing number of ghost works and inability to identify re-excavations from new pond works) as is clear from directives issued by the Ministry of Rural Development (GOI, 2016). Our research observed that policy on farm pond works and specifications related to size and other parameters varied across study states with MP and Karnataka pushing for these works with a vision for water harvesting for agriculture and ground water recharge, while in West Bengal its focus was to facilitate fish farming for home consumption and livelihoods.

Officials in-charge of MGNREGA implementation across states championed for farm ponds works on private lands as these were labour intensive (over 90% of work expenditure was spent on labour/wage payments); hence helped to maintain the mandatory 60:40 labour to material ratio.⁴ For instance, in Karnataka cattle/goat sheds were popular works among the beneficiaries. A ‘package of works’ offer, to be completed within a 36 month time period (depending on number of applications received and budget for the year), was made to beneficiaries. There were three different packages, and in a popular option beneficiaries were provided with land development works (Rs.10,000/acre), a cattle/goat shed (Rs.35,000/unit) and farm pond works (Rs.19,500/unit). This ‘package’ was policy strategy to ensure targets⁵ for farm ponds and other ground water recharging works would also be achieved without much difficulty.

However, policy changes were common and took place at frequent intervals. For instance, in the block of Rajgarh in MP, farm pond construction (of a certain minimum dimension) was made as a supplementary work with dug wells for all new sanctions from 2017-18. This meant that a potential beneficiary had to possess sizable land area to ensure a farm pond was also constructed along with a dug well (with funding support from MGNREGA), which in effect meant the beneficiary had to earmark about one-fifth of a hectare for the ‘well-farm pond combination’ work. Officials stated that this condition was added to ensure that at least some, if not all, of the ground water drawn from the well would be replenished through the farm pond (through rainwater harvesting and further ground water recharging). In addition, combination works also helped to ensure farm ponds were built and targets were achieved (GOI, 2016), though this was never made in public statements. Rather officials

⁴ Inclusion of these works off-set material intensive works such as animal shelters and thus helped to maintain labour to material ratio at block level.

⁵ GOI (2016) gives state-wise targets.

maintained these works were critical to ecology. A personal communication from an official with regard to why farm ponds were made an accompaniment work with dug wells is given below:

Wells are like bank ATMs while ponds are equivalent to saving bank (SB) accounts. If you have no money in the SB account, then the ATM will not dispense any cash. Similarly, you should not be allowed to dig wells and draw upon ground water if you do not make farm ponds alongside. As only then you are contributing to recharging the ground water which you are drawing up from the well.

3. PERCEPTION OF PEOPLE AND FARM PONDS

Across the states, the initial years saw resistance towards farm pond works with only a few households applying for it. The general perception was that ‘precious land would be lost’, and the loss was not commensurate with the gains from improved crop yields as people felt there would hardly be any increase in cash incomes. The only exception was the case of those who were keen to venture into commercial fish farming, as was the case of some beneficiaries in blocks of West Bengal and Uttarakhand. While it was possible to undertake commercial fish farming even if the farm ponds retained water only for 8-9 months a year, beneficiaries hoped to farm fish round the year.

Many of the beneficiaries in 24 Parganas South and Purba Medinipur district of West Bengal had farmed fish previously for home consumption, but with the new ponds they were able to grow fish for longer periods or about 9 months and earned higher incomes through fish sales. Most of the beneficiaries here abided with natural availability of water and stopped fish farming from March/April until monsoons. But beneficiaries of farm ponds in Dehradun and Haridwar districts of Uttarakhand, who incidentally were venturing into pisciculture for the first time, were keen to ensure availability of water round the year, for which they dug borewells alongside ponds. Installing bore wells and pumping up water to fill farm ponds was ecologically adverse for overall water economy of the area but no one — villagers, officials or elected representatives — took note of this paradox.

In West Bengal, many households with farm ponds were raising fish for household consumption, while some were also earning regular income from sale of fish. Farm pond works were at times jointly executed for 3-4

beneficiaries in cases where individual land holdings were tiny⁶ in size and hence land pooling by beneficiaries who owned adjacent plots helped to excavate larger ponds. This improved the scope for commercial fish farming.

Beneficiaries in Laksmijanardhanpur (Pathar Pratima block of 24 Parganas South), T Majee and M Samal, who received farm ponds in 2015-16 were farming fish and earning Rs.500-1000/month. But J Bunia, a beneficiary who had ventured into betel leaf farming after completion of farm pond in 2013-14 had experienced manifold increase in income with the household earning close to Rs.1,00,000 from sale of betel leaves (0.08 ha) in 2017. In all cases, beneficiaries also reported that the ponds ensured plenty of fish for their home consumption, a staple in Bengali diet.

In Karnataka, across study districts of Ramanagara and Tumkur farm ponds were individually provided, as unlike West Bengal, here average household land ownership was sizable. One aspect that was clear from discussions with officials and people was that the resistance towards excavation of farm ponds during initial years, had significantly reduced and many households were applying for these works as they were able to 'witness' its benefit. In some of the villages in Ramanagara, particularly, there were many 'new' applications as villagers saw how sericulture incomes of their neighbours had risen owing to these works.

In Choodahalli GP, Balaramu who had received a farm pond in 2015-16 was able to harvest 425 kg of cocoon compared to about 375-390 kg previously. In I Gollahalli, another beneficiary, Kulliah who had received a farm pond in 2015-16, had benefitted from higher mulberry leaf production from his 1 acre plantation, which in turn led to increased cocoon production of 290kg (earlier the average was not above 250kg).

Dairy farmer Sannegowda, also from Choodahalli, had always bought water spending close to Rs.10, 000 during the summer season for raising napier grass for his cows. But construction of a farm pond on his land in 2015 had helped to harvest rainwater and store it to tide over the summer months. After the farm pond was built on his land, he had stopped purchasing water.

4. CONCLUSION

The positive impact of farm ponds is substantial and for many there was decipherable improvement in crop yields improving cash incomes or

⁶the modal land class category was 0-0.1 Ha with 46.6 per cent of beneficiary households having on an average 0.02 Ha or 5 decimals of land

household food consumption or both. In case of beneficiaries who were only practicing subsistence agriculture, households were able to grow crops over longer duration, and reduce market dependence for grains and vegetables. But it was also observed that in many GPs across the study states, there were beneficiaries whose farm ponds had shrunk in size and depth, owing to carelessness with regard to regular maintenance (periodic cleaning activities, including removal of accumulated silt). These beneficiaries hoped that some support would be extended towards maintaining the ponds to ensure sustainability over time.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The Notes from the field are mostly based on insights drawn from a multistate study titled “MGNREGA, Asset Creation and Rural Development: An Evaluation of Category B Assets in Selected States” conducted by Centre for Women’s Development Studies, New Delhi in 2017. Observations are also drawn from another study on water conservation works completed in the state of Uttarakhand in 2019. The authors acknowledge the funding support from National Institute of Rural Development & Panchayati Raj (NIRD&PR) Hyderabad.

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