

## IMPACT OF RURAL EMPLOYMENT GUARANTEE PROGRAMME: AN ANALYSIS OF SELECTED STUDIES IN INDIA

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### ABSTRACT

*Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme is a rights-based workfare public policy with the provisions of guaranteed employment. The scheme was launched in the year 2005 to provide the right to work to rural masses. The present paper discusses the impact of the scheme on income, employment, empowerment, nature conservation, asset creation, promoting gender equality, reducing distress migration, poverty, etc. by reviewing the studies undertaken in this area. The study suggests that good governance at the grassroots level is the key solution for the realization of the targeted benefits of the scheme. The study recommends that the right to work, ecology, infrastructure, health, sanitation, education, skill development, environmental sustainability, and enhancing institutional capacities are essential to achieve larger development goals through this programme. Implementation at the local level needs more attention for achieving the desired targets.*

**KEYWORDS:** *Right to Work, Employment, Labour, Agriculture, Ecology, Infrastructure.*

### Introduction

Poverty and unemployment have been major issues before the Indian economy since independence. The central government has initiated various self-employment and wage-employment programmes after the 1960s for employment generation and poverty eradication in rural areas. Integrated Rural Development Programme (1978-79) and Swarnajayanti Gram Swarozgar Yojana (1999) were popular self-employment programmes and National Rural Livelihoods Mission (2011) is the latest self-employment programme and also known as 'Aajeevika'. The government of India also initiated the wage-employment programme named as Rural Manpower Programme in 1960-61, Crash Scheme for Rural Employment (CSRE) in 1971-72, Food for Work Programme (FWP) in 1977-78, National Rural Employment Programme (NREP) in 1980-81, Rural Landless Employment Guarantee Programme (RLEGP) in 1983, Jawahar Rozgar Yojana (JRY) in 1988-89, Million Wells Scheme (MWS) in 1989, Employment Assurance Scheme (EAS) in 1993, Jawahar Gram Samridhi Yojana (JGSY) in 1999, Sampoorna Grameen Rozgar Yojana in 2001 and National Food for Work Programme in 2004.

Since 2006, Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme is on the roll and is the flagship scheme of the central government for rural employment generation. This scheme is extraordinary in the world due to the number of beneficiaries under this scheme (6.8 crore beneficiary households in 2021-22 and 15.23 crore active workers) and due to various provisions in the scheme which were not covered in earlier schemes viz; right based framework to wage employment, demand-driven programme, time-bound provision of employment, provision of unemployment allowance, inbuilt transparency safeguards, basic facilities at work-sites, thirty three per cent reservation in employment

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days generation, equal pay for equal work, that is no discrimination on the basis of gender, making implementing agencies accountable for asset creation and quality control, wage determination on the basis of consumer price index for agriculture labour in each state, 60:40 ratio between wages and material so that more labour intensive work projects would be selected, more flexible list of permissible works, seeding of Aadhaar Number in workers record to prevent leakages, all-time availability of information of work projects and workers on the website that is meant exclusively for MGNREGS (nrega.nic.in) and work opportunity to all interest. Project Livelihoods in full Employment under MGNREGS (Project LIFE-MGNREGA) is an addition to the features of the scheme. This is an initiative to converge skilling programmes such as; DeenDayalUpadhayaGrameenKaushalyaYojana (DDU-GKY), DeenDayalUpadhayaAntyodaya- National Rural Livelihood Mission (DAY-NRLM), Rural Self-Employment Training Institutes (RSETI) etc. with MGNREGS to promote self-reliance among proactive youth beneficiaries and improvement in their skill-base, so that they may be fully employed and self-sufficient persons. After the inception of the scheme, it has drawn significant attention from academicians, journalists, researchers, policymakers, scholars, development experts and practitioners etc. Literature is available that describes the impacts of the scheme on rural employment and livelihood and also its limitations.

The present study has tried to analyse the impact of the scheme in the country as a whole and different states as well. The study used secondary data and findings from various research articles and represent various perspectives about the impact of the scheme on income, employment, empowerment, nature conservation, asset creation, promoting gender equality, reducing distress migration, poverty and other socio-economic indicators.

#### **Different Perspectives on the Impact of Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme**

- **Targeting Intended Beneficiaries**

MGNREGA envisages providing positive inroads to the life of rural masses with a special focus on poorer socio-economic segments. Jha et al. (2010) compared Andhra Pradesh and Rajasthan in terms of targeting vulnerable sections of the society by the National Rural Employment Guarantee Programme. The study found that Andhra Pradesh performed better than Rajasthan in terms of successful targeting of vulnerable castes; SCs, STs, income groups and landless households. Ahmad and Sarkar (2014) highlighted that in Tripura, Mizoram and Manipur participation of SCs and STs and their person-days were higher than in other states. Swain and Sharma (2015) in their study in Rajasthan realized that the scheme was successful in targeting the poor and has given protection against extreme poverty. Alhaalso (2017) put forward the argument that the scheme was successful in creating a new segment of workers comprising females of various caste groups and aged male workers in Rajasthan, which now exclusively focus on MGNREGA labour. Baruah and Radkar (2017) also confirmed that the scheme was successful in targeting intended beneficiaries in Assam.

Whereas critics believe that the scheme has serious inclusion and exclusion errors. Sharma (2015) study found that needy sections in some districts of Punjab were not covered under the scheme and those who were registered were provided less than one-third of compulsory workdays in the scheme. Narang (2014) identified that in Mewat which is the most backward district of Haryana state an increasing trend in employment generation under the scheme was observed but still implementing agencies were not able to employ a requisite scale. Swain and Sharma (2015) found that declining participation of SCs and STs was a matter of concern in Rajasthan. Similarly, Sinha (2016) reported that there was a need to identify real target groups in Uttar Pradesh and suggested taking certain initiatives to enhance women's participation in the scheme. In Telangana state Dhaktode (2021) found multiple types of exclusions for SC workers in the form of fewer employment days, lower wages, long-distance worksites and no commercially-oriented projects given to SC landowners. In conclusion, it can be conveyed that the scheme has ushered in a new horizon of hope for the downtrodden but implementation differentials work as hindrances in the objective in some states.

- **Employment Creation through MGNREGA**

MGNREGA is primarily known as the employment Guarantee Programme and provision of one hundred employment days under the scheme to all rural workers who are willing to do manual work. Several studies had intervened in the scheme on this dimension. Sarkar and Islarly (2017) found an increase in total employment days per household and in the number of households who have completed hundred days in Jharkhand. Instead of 'Government Providing Approach' the scheme is an 'Entitlement Based Approach'. However, many of the studies found a dismal picture of the scheme. Bhattarai, M et al.

(2018) found that only in three northeast states (Tripura, Mizoram and Manipur) around one-third of the households could get employment for hundred days. The economy of these states was small in comparison to large states. Among five other states which have achieved more than 10 per cent of households provided full employment, only two states; Andhra Pradesh and Maharashtra were large. At the macro level around 45 employment days were provided to a household. This level of achievement was very far from the target.

In addition to this Kumar and Dipanwita (2016) found that average person-days per household were less than 50 days except in 2009-10 when it was 54 days. The study added that states like Tripura, Himachal Pradesh, Andhra Pradesh, Telangana, Rajasthan, Tamilnadu, Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh etc. have provided employment higher than the national average in several years. The study further found that only one-tenth of beneficiary households have completed 100 employment days. In contrast with the provision of the scheme Jatav and Chakraborty (2019) identified that in Telangana lack of availability of sufficient work in comparison to demand was observed.

MGNREGS is meant for augmenting employment opportunities and improving livelihoods security in rural India in lean agriculture seasons. Jatav and Chakraborty (2019) assessed the role of MGNREGS in the reduction of risk and vulnerability of livelihoods in the semi-arid tropics in Telangana. The study found that MGNREGS provided the most significant coping mechanism to the most vulnerable segment in drought years. In their study in Jharkhand state Sarkar and Islarly (2017) found the increase in total employment days per household in 2015-16 as MGNREGS provides additional employment days in lean agriculture season. Whereas Bauri (2010) in a study of West Bengal found that work under MGNREGA was only demanded in offseasons due to better employment opportunities in other seasons. It can be concluded that the scheme has reduced the employment vulnerability of the poorer segments.

- **Labour Markets**

Various studies attributed the shortage of labour in villages and this resulted in speedy farm mechanization. Alha (2017) attributed MGNREGS as one of the reasons for the rise in farm wages and labour market tightening in Rajasthan. In addition, Bhattarai, M et al. (2018) found that in the majority of villages in Telangana and Andhra Pradesh farmers felt peak season shortage of agricultural labour. The study further found that reduction in the agricultural labour market was primarily due to the state policy of encouraging farm mechanization. To deal with the labour shortage during peak farming seasons, farmers had demanded to suspend MGNREGS work during this period. To address this issue, governments in various states had allowed local governments to prepare a work calendar of MGNREGS in consultation with labour and farmers. Studies have appreciated this step on the logic that it will create a win-win situation for all, the labour class will get increased employment days and farmers will not face a labour shortage.

MGNREGA was devised as an instrument in the hands of the rural working class to enhance their bargaining powers. Kumar and Dipanwita (2016) found that the scheme was quite effective in enhancing the bargaining power of wage earners. Likewise, Bhattarai, M et al. (2018) reported that except in certain regions, this scheme encouraged an increase in the overall agriculture wages but also the reduction of the wage gap between males and females in agricultural labour operations. The impact of this scheme was found more impressive, especially where migration declined.

- **MGNREGS and Migration**

While reporting the findings in Andhra Pradesh and Telangana, Bhattarai, M et al. (2018) found that the scheme has provided job security to the beneficiaries. The study revealed that this has helped to reduce migration and in the case where migration occurred to receive higher wage work for a relatively longer period remained unaffected. Likewise, Kumar and Dipanwita (2016) realized that MGNREGS has helped in safeguarding households from distress migration and distress consumption loans. Esteves et al., (2013) quantified socio-economic and environmental benefits by the works implemented under the MGNREGS and their impact on reducing vulnerability to climate risks on agricultural production and livelihoods. The study found that these factors have contributed to reduced migration. In a study of West Bengal, Kundu (2015) identified that MGNREGS had a significant influence on employment generation and reducing the intensity of migration from rural areas. Swain and Sharma (2015) put forward the argument that MGNREGS helped reduce distress migration in Rajasthan. Korra (2015) in a study of Telangana state challenged this notion and found that due to fewer working days and insufficient wages MGNREGS was unable to check rural migration. To realize this objective, extracting the scheme to its full potential is a must.

- **Individual and Community-Level Upliftment**

A spate of comments by various researchers and scholars proved MGNREGA an effective policy intervention of the government to protect, prevent, promote and transform the socio-economic wellbeing of the Indian rural labour class. Natarajan and Jeyanthi (2013) found that the income effect of the scheme has a positive in Tamilnadu and the maximum of this increased income was spent on food items. The majority of tribals' households in Tamilnadu received average hundred additional days of employment after joining the scheme and their quality of life has increased significantly (Shanthi and Geetha, 2014). In Assam, Panda (2015) found that MGNREGA has increased the economic, social and environmental sustainability of the beneficiaries in comparison to the control group.

Social welfare is reflected in the upgraded standard of living of the community as a whole and the scheme intended to raise the quality of life through employment generation and income enhancement. Kumar and Dipanwita (2016) found that the scheme has helped vulnerable sections of the society in terms of employment, reduced distress migration, improved resource base and resulted in household and community level empowerment. Sunil and Anupriya (2015) in their study in Haryana reported a significant impact on the income and expenditure level of the beneficiaries. In Assam, Bhattacharyya (2015) found that the family expenditure of participants has increased on healthcare facilities in comparison to non-participants. In Andhra Pradesh, Deininger and Liu (2019) identified that there was an increase in protein and energy intake of the beneficiaries and their access to nonfinancial assets has increased. Singh and Kaushal (2018) submitted that the scheme was quite important for poor sections of society.

In contrast with the above-said notion, Malangmei et al., (2014) found in their study in West Bengal that there was a limited impact of the scheme on employment, income and expenditure pattern of beneficiaries and no impact on saving behaviour. In Haryana, Kumar et al., (2015) assessed the performance of the scheme and submitted that there was a very limited impact on the level of employment and income.

- **Assets Creation**

The scheme is aimed at resource development and rejuvenating the rural base through asset creation. In Maharashtra, Ranaware et al., (2015) recognized that assets generated were mainly land development on private lands and waterworks on common lands. The majority of the beneficiaries admitted that assets were of good quality. Bhattarai, M et al. (2018) confirmed the fact that MGNREGS in some states has helped to increase the water tables, reduction in fallow lands and enhance the productivity of the land. The wage rates of agriculture labour have increased and small and marginal farmers also gained through increased productivity through MGNREGS sponsored land development works and the value of their lands have increased apparently. These land improvements also provided benefits to large farmers. In a study in Himachal Pradesh, Thakur (2018) identified that assets created under the scheme were durable. In contrast to these findings, Swain and Sharma (2015) found that poor quality assets were created in Rajasthan and these were not maintained further. A study by Kumar and Dipanwita (2016) also reported that many assets generated nationwide through the scheme were found poor in terms of quality, utility and duration. Pankaj (2017) highlighted another dimension to the fact that a huge number of works initiated under the scheme were not completed. The study showed the concern for the wastage of fiscal resources.

### **MGNREGS and Agricultural Productivity**

Assets such as water harvesting and conservation, desilting of tanks, renovation of water bodies, drought proofing, flood control, land development, afforestation, rural connectivity etc. generated through works under the scheme proved beneficial for agricultural productivity, directly and indirectly. The creation of a huge number of individual and community assets has enhanced agricultural productivity (Kumar and Dipanwita 2016). Thakur (2018) attributed to the fact that assets created under MGNREGA have improved agricultural productivity and helped in changing crop patterns in Himachal Pradesh. In the same state Singh and Kaushal (2018) found that MGNREGA was proving as a growth engine for the agriculture sector and more than ninety per cent of beneficiaries accepted that after the scheme, irrigation and land development activities, land under cultivation and production of agriculture/horticulture had increased. Agriculture is considered the backbone of the rural economy and improved productivity in this sector is instrumental in transforming rural India.

### **Environmental Impact**

Economic Growth without environmental enhancement and ecological balance is a matter of great concern at the global as well as regional level. Tiwari et al. (2011) assessed the potential of MGNREGA in upgrading environmental services and poverty reduction in the Chitradurga district of Karnataka. The study found that there was a significant improvement in groundwater recharge, soil fertility and tree biomass growth (on average more than 10,000 trees were planted every year). Azeez and Akhtar (2013) acknowledged the effects of community assets developed through the scheme has improved productivity as well as the ecology of the country. Similarly, Esteves et al. (2013) found that all land and water-related works under the scheme had a direct impact on reduction in soil erosion, on increasing soil potential and reported an increase in crop production. In Himachal Pradesh, Thakur (2018) realized that MGNREGA works have enhanced soil and water conservation.

### **Issues of Implementation at the Grassroots Level**

The apathy of state governments and local implementation agencies has been proved quite harmful for the effectiveness and efficiency of the scheme. Sinha (2016) reported about poor worksite facilities and improper work selection by local authorities in Uttar Pradesh. Jatav and Chakraborty (2019) found that calculation of wages based on the volume of work ignoring the hardships in breaking the ground in dry rocky areas in semi-arid tropics in Telangana was not justified. Sarkar and Islarly (2017) reported that delays in wage payment were an issue with the scheme in Jharkhand. Manjula (2017) found wage delays in Karnataka. Similarly, Jatav and Chakraborty (2019) reported that delays in wage payments have increased vulnerability in drought-affected areas. Swain and Sharma (2015) identified that inadequate staff strength and frequent staff changes were hurdles in the smooth implementation of the scheme in Rajasthan. Swain and Sharma (2015) found non-payment of unemployment allowance made the scheme less attractive for beneficiaries in Rajasthan. Kumar and Dipanwita (2016) reported the problem of unemployment allowance and improper planning by implementing agencies. Manjula (2017) realised biases in favour of Other Backward Class over SCs and STs in Karnataka.

Sunil and Anupriya (2015) suggested that there was a need for people to participate in planning and to increase the efficiency of the scheme in Haryana. Singh (2016) showed the need for regular social audits to enhance the accountability of the implementing agencies. Dhaktode (2021) explores that without impartial presiding officers and effective vigilance wing social audit units are unable to protect beneficiaries' rights and gain their trust and cooperation in social audits. Singh (2016) reported that integration of ICT with MGNREGA and GPS based monitoring of physical assets can enhance transparency and efficiency of the scheme. As suggested by different studies 'Participation', 'Transparency' and 'Accountability' are the three key elements that need to be adhered to with immediate effect to revive the scheme.

### **Conclusions and Policy Alternatives**

Based on different studies in various parts of the country about the relevance and impact of the scheme, it can be argued that this rural employment programme has greater significance for inclusive growth. The scheme is unique, extraordinary in terms of its features, coverage and potential. On the other hand, it is also a bitter truth that the scheme has not realized its potential after one and half decades of its implementation. Various studies registered a lot of shortcomings viz. non-provision of job cards, bias, misappropriation of funds, engagement of contractors, forgery of muster roll, manipulation in job-cards, underpayment of wages, fewer employment days, non-payment of wages and unemployment allowance, delays in payment, use of machinery, corruption, no grievance redressal, measurement of work issues, irregular work provision, worksites at distant places, absence of basic facilities, asymmetric information and many more. To achieve better results, the scheme needs to be implemented with some improvements in structural and functional aspects of the scheme, limitations in the administrative system need to be addressed with immediate effect. Bose and Bhowmik (2019) found that the efficiency of the scheme was increased by literacy. The study also concluded that political will and MGNREGS efficiency influence each other positively. The study suggests that only institutionalized and trained social audit units, effective vigilance wing for follow up actions, visionary bureaucratic and political will along with people's participation can make the implementing system accountable and transparent. The reinvention of the scheme, better targeting, reducing exclusion and inclusion errors, strengthening of institutions, skill development and building capabilities in worker class, sustainable and quality asset creation, improving rural infrastructure, environmental and ecological improvements, democratic decentralization, objectives of equity among genders, castes and religions, empowering the female workforce, enhancing outreach to

the poor and last-mile connectivity, convergence with other schemes to increase fiscal space, micro and macro-level interactions for proper planning, enlarged stakes of states, regular social audits and effective monitoring, transparency and accountability, empowered ombudsmen, compliance to the provisions etc. are paramount. E-governance and good governance are the key solutions for the realization of the targeted benefits of the scheme. Presently a serious challenge in the form of COVID-19 and its mutations has been catastrophic for the vulnerable working class. People are grappling with viruses and employment shortages. There is an urgent requirement to remove structural deficiencies and procedural lapses in the implementation so that the actual objectives can be achieved.

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- 248 Inspira- Journal of Modern Management & Entrepreneurship (JMME), Volume 12, No. 01, Jan.-March. 2022
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