

EMPOWERMENT OF RURAL WORKFORCE: STUDY OF MGNREGA IN NORTH-EASTERN STATES OF INDIA

Sarah Tahmeen Choudhury

Research Scholar

Department of Political Science

Aligarh Muslim University, Aligarh

Abstract

Every individual, communities, nation, civilisation face the process of growth and evolution. Development in common parlance indicates a stage of advancement. Rural development indicates the advancement in rural areas' social, economic and physical advancement and its population. India is a rural area dominated nation, where about two-thirds of the population resides in the village. Despite being the second-largest populated and third-largest economy, India's rural population is still dependent on agriculture and allied activities. They have been struggling for basic needs for ages, and thus, poverty, hunger, illiteracy, poor health and sanitary condition, unemployment have become their way of life. For the upliftment of rural lives, prosperity, and development, the Government of India has promulgated numerous policies and schemes. After being grilled for a long time for rural India's development and facing the failure of previous programmes, the Government of India launched Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA). The programme has become a 'silver bullet' for alleviating poverty and unemployment. It has developed a source of income for rural people, eradicating poverty, reducing migration, and making the village sustain by creating a durable asset. It has a positive impact on the income of the rural household, women empowerment, empowerment of socially disadvantaged groups. The chapter will describe the basic features of MGNREGA, its goals, implementing structure. The chapter will also highlight the role of the scheme in the empowerment of the rural workforce of North-East India.

Keywords: Empowerment, Rural areas, Rural workforce, MGNREGA, North-East.

Introduction

With the dawn of Indus Valley Civilisation, history in India begins. During the ancient period, the economy of India flourished as it was mainly dependent on agriculture, trade and other economic activities. The Mughal period also witnessed unexampled economic prosperity. After 1757, the British East India Company gradually started expanding its political power in India, which ruthlessly exploited Indian resources and devastated the Indian economy. After getting freedom from colonial rule, the architect of modern India focused on restructuring and developing a nation's economy. They envisioned a socialist pattern of society and opted for centralised planning. Socialist pattern means a system where economic activities are regulated and controlled by the state for the wellbeing and development in every aspect of life.

All nations, communities, individuals attain development regardless of their religion, demography and culture. In everyday terminology, development refers to the process and stage of advancement, evolution and growth. Rural development refers to the growth in rural

areas to make the physical, social, and economic conditions better to provide the rural population with a better, advanced and well-equipped life.

The Father of the Nation, Mahatma Gandhi, emphasised the development of rural areas. He states – “India lives in its villages.” India is primarily a village dominating nation since ancient time. According to the 2011 census, 68.84% of the Indian population resides in rural areas where agriculture is the critical source of income, and the village economy revolves around it. Rural development has been an essential objective for the Government of India since independence. The rural population are on the threshold level of their subsistence. The rural population has been facing unemployment, poverty, illiteracy, poor health and sanitary condition. For eradicating the problems faced by rural people, to enable them to live with dignity and fulfil their needs, the Government of India proclaims various programmes every year. Since independence, the Government implement various policies like-Community Development Programme (1952), National Extension Service (1953), Rural Manpower Programme (1960-61), National Rural Employment Programme (1960-61), National Rural Employment Programme, Jawahar Rozgar Yojana and many more. Nevertheless, these programmes did not perform well because of corruption, improper implementation, the dominance of bureaucracy, and a lack of knowledge about policy. To bridge the gap of earlier policies and uplift rural mass life, the Government of India in 2005 launched the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act, which later became Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA).

MGNREGA at a glance :

The programme was launched with a mandate to provide 100 days of guaranteed income-generating employment in a financial year to the rural household where adult members volunteer to do untrained manual work. In the first phase, the Act was launched in 200 districts with effect from February 2, 2006, and then stretched to an additional 130 districts in 2007-08. The residual districts have been notified under MGNREGA with effect from April 1, 2008. It covers all the rural areas of the entire country. The World Development Report 2014 described MGNREGA as a ‘Stellar example of rural development, and The World Bank report states India’s Mahatma Gandhi Rural Employment Guarantee Act illustrates how good governance & social mobilisation go hand in hand. The primary objective of MGNREGA is to enhance the livelihood security of rural mass by providing 100 days of guaranteed income-generating employment in a financial year to a rural household whose members volunteer to do unskilled manual work. Under the scheme, rural areas are given the opportunity to livelihood and access durable assets.

Goals of MGNREGA-

The Act has some specific goals to achieve. The goals are¹–

- The Act aims to provide an alternative source of employment to the vulnerable groups of society to make them strong and secure them socially and economically.
- To strengthen the livelihood of rural people and create a durable asset.
- Flood management and drought-proofing and in rural India.
- To act as a mean or gateway for sustainable development of an agricultural economy.
- The Act aims to empower socially disadvantaged groups, especially women, Scheduled Tribes (ST), Scheduled Castes (SCs) through right-based legislation.

- To strengthen grass-root democracy by strengthening Panchayati Raj Institutions.
- Effecting greater accountability and transparency in governance.

Salient Features of the Act:

Some of the features of the programme are² -

- **Registration for Work:** All adult household members of rural areas willing to do unskilled manual work must apply for registration to the local Gram Panchayat. Household is the unit for registration, and Under the Act, each household is will be given wage employment for 100 days during a financial year.
- **Right based programme:** Those willing to work will apply for the job orally by writing a letter to Gram Panchayat. The Gram Panchayat will give a receipt of the written application, and against the receipt, the guarantee of employing within 15 days of application will operate.
After verifying the applicants' age, residence (only adult eligible members for employment), the job card is issued for a registered household. A job Card is the basis of identification for demanding employment. A JC is issued within 15 days of registration. The Job Card is marked with a unique identification number through which the demand for employment has to be made.
- **Time-bound guaranteed of employment:** Employment will be provided within 15 days of application. If the beneficiary will not get employment or the employment is not provided within 15 days, then as per the Act, the state will pay an unemployment allowance to the beneficiary. Each household will get 100 days of guaranteed employment.
- **Provisions of Work:** Below mentioned conditions are to be followed while allocating work to beneficiaries:
 - (a) Work is to be provided within 5 kilometres radius of the village. If work is provided beyond 5 km, extra wages of 10 per cent are payable to meet additional transportation and living expenses.
 - (b) Women are prioritised while giving work. The beneficiaries under the scheme are reserved one-third for women.
 - (c) In terms of cost, at least 50 per cent of works are to be executed by the GPs.
- **Wages of the beneficiaries:** Wages to the workers are to be paid as per the State-wise Government of India (GoI) notified wages of MGNREGA. Payment of wages is mandatorily made through the individual/joint bank/post office beneficiary accounts.
- **Cost Sharing:** The Government of India bears the 100 per cent cost of the wage for unskilled manual labour along with 75 per cent of the material cost, including the wages of skilled and semi-skilled workers.
- **Worksite Management:** The Act prohibits contractors or machinery from executing the works to ensure direct benefits of the worker under the scheme. To ensure that the spirit of the Act is not diluted and wage employment is the main focus, MGNREGA mandates that in the total cost of works undertaken in a GP, the expenditure of wage to material ratio should be 60:40. Worksite facilities such as crèche, drinking water and shade have to be provided at all worksites.

- **Transparency and accountability:** To ensure transparency and accountability, the following steps are followed:
 - (a) Social audit, to scrutinise all the records and works under the scheme, are to be conducted regularly by the GS.
 - (b) Grievance redressal mechanisms have to be set up to ensure a responsive implementation. All accounts and records of the scheme should be accessible to public scrutiny.
- **Decentralisation:** The scheme has made provision for decentralisation. Panchayat Raj Institutions will play a significant role in monitoring and implementation of the scheme. Gram Panchayat has made responsible for executing at least 50% of the works, and Gram Sabha has made responsible for recommending what works will be taken up.
- **Women Empowerment:** The scheme states that at least one-third of the workers should be women, and there should be equal pay for men and women.

MGNREGA in the North-Eastern States :

The North-Eastern region of India consists of eight states – Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Sikkim and Tripura. The region is rich in minerals and adorned by flora and fauna, constitute 7.9% of the country’s geographical area and covers 2,62,179 km, having 4% of India’s total population (census 2011) and surrounded by countries like – Bangladesh, Bhutan, China, Myanmar and Nepal.

For the region’s socio-economic development, the Ministry of Development of the North-Eastern Region is the deciding body under the Government of India. The region has remained one of India’s economic background regions, constituting only 2.7% of India’s Gross Domestic Product (GDP) in 2018-19. Primary and tertiary sectors dominate the economy of the North-East states, and the secondary sector remains subdued. The economy is dependent on agriculture, and some aboriginal groups of the tribe of the region follow Jhum cultivation. Along with poverty, unemployment, underdevelopment, the region is also suffering from inter-state disparities, socio-economic gap, and various development indicators and insurgency.

MGNREGA was implemented in India in three stages, and North-Eastern states were no exception. It is a flagship programme for providing employment and creating an asset. The focus of the scheme is to reduce poverty. MGNREGA is the best welfare scheme promulgated by India’s Government that creates job opportunities and provides employment to rural mass, unskilled manual labourers in rural areas.

Table 1: Highlights the status of MGNREGA in the North-East region-

Name of the States	Total no. of Active workers (in Lakh)
1. Arunachal Pradesh	2.45
2. Assam	45.77
3. Manipur	6.88
4. Meghalaya	8.41
5. Mizoram	1.98
6. Nagaland	5.13

7. Sikkim	0.94
8. Tripura	9.36

Source: MGNREGA programme website (www.nrega.nic.in)

The scheme’s implementation varies from state to state because of various factors like- population, administrative structure, implementation mechanism, geographical location. MGNREGA has played a vital role in removing anguish and has a crucial part in improving the human resources of rural areas³ . Every state has been employing different strategies to execute the programme. The programme has a vital role in generating employment, creating an asset, developing rural India.

Table -2: Person days generated so far (in Lakh) under the scheme in NE from the Financial year 2016-17 to the financial Year 2019-20

Name of the states	FY2016-17	FY2017-18	FY2018-19	FY2019-20
1.Arunachal Pradesh	85.38	42.8	68.7	86.07
2. Assam	463.98	480.86	532.84	624.13
3. Manipur	119.03	61.25	117.39	234.67
4. Meghalaya	282.51	291.88	342.15	370.22
5. Mizoram	168.23	144.38	181.22	192.96
6.Nagaland	290.71	200.03	132.85	138.48
7.Sikkim	46.12	34.61	33.55	29.47
8.Tripura	460.61	176.04	253.09	344.02

Source: MGNREGA programme website (www.nrega.nic.in)

Table 3: Total household worked in Lakh from the Financial year 2016-17 to 2019-20

Name of the states	FY2016-17	FY2017-18	FY2018-19	FY2019-2020
1.Arunachal Pradesh	2.03	1.42	1.6	1.77
2. Assam	15.68	16.85	17.42	19.31
3.Manipur	5.16	4.91	5.13	5.42
4. Meghalaya	4.15	4.27	4.75	5.06
5. Mizoram	1.89	1.91	1.96	2.04
6 .Nagaland	4.18	4.1	3.86	3.9
7. Sikkim	0.68	0.64	0.62	0.58
8.Tripura	5.77	5.32	5.49	5.66

Source: MGNREGA programme website (www.nrega.nic.in)

Table 4: Total number of household completed 100 Days of Wage Employment from Financial Year 2016-17 to Financial Year 2019-20

Name of the States	FY2016-17	FY2017-18	FY2018-19	FY2019-20
1.Arunachal Pradesh	46	2	292	412
2. Assam	11,297	10,928	18,360	30,069
3. Manipur	3	1	16	857
4. Meghalaya	86,473	1,14,987	1,60,908	1,80,536
5. Mizoram	56,528	0	81,736	1,57,672
6.Nagaland	182	138	0	1
7. Sikkim	8,401	3,495	4,668	3,550
8.Tripura	1,16,090	4,438	14,982	55,381

Source: MGNREGA programme website (www.nrega.nic.in)

The programme aims to employ rural households and has been creating a benchmark in employing in rural areas. Table 2 shows the total number of person-days generated in the scheme in a financial year. From the Financial year 2016-17 to FY 2019-20, there has been a gradual increase in the workforce. Not only providing employment but also the programme has reduced migration to some extent.

MGNREGA aims to provide a steady income and livelihood security for the poor, vulnerable and marginalised. Overall, evidence suggests that MGNREGA does provide essential income assurance to a large number of beneficiaries. The above tables reflect the income and livelihood status of the people of northeast India under the scheme. The total number of the household worked under the programme from FY 2016-17 to 2019-2020 has increased. It has played a substantial role in alleviating poverty and bringing the desired change in rural areas. There are numerous ways through which MGNREGA impact poverty. The most obvious and direct one is to provide work and income to the poor and vulnerable people of rural areas. It also provides alternate income opportunities and options to the rural mass. A household of rural areas has used MGNREGA income to start new ventures.

Table 2 and Table 3 indicate the role played by MGNREGA in providing employment and ensuring income and livelihood security to the rural workforce of North-Eastern India. The impact of the programme on food security, health, nutrition of rural households, and the per-capita income of rural people is also notable. The Act has made legal provision for 100 days guaranteed wage employment for each household in a financial year. Table 4 demonstrates that many states have provided 100 days wage employment, whereas the performance of a few state is not well in this regard.

Table 5: Percentage(%) of women participation in MGNREGA from Financial Year 2016-17 to 2019-20

Name of the States	FY 2016-17	FY2017-18	FY 2018-19	FY 2019-20
1.Arunachal Pradesh	34.1%	36.28%	38.69%	40.47%
2.Assam	36.49%	38.5%	41.08%	41.77%
3.Manipur	41.74%	44.82%	47.41%	48.98%
4.Meghalaya	44.28%	46.8%	50.15%	50.51%
5.Mizoram	35.76%	33.93%	37.95%	41.91%

6.Nagaland	29.68%	28.76%	31.56%	35.63%
7.Tripura	49.05%	47.05%	46.19%	47.03%
8.Sikkim	47.87%	48.05%	50.93%	51.07%

Source: MGNREGA programme website (www.nrega.nic.in)

Like men, women have always played a vital role in the development and growth of humankind and society. They have always been neglected by society and are treated unequally. MGNREGA has attempted the equality of men and women and thus provides special provisions for women. It states that at least one-third of the total beneficiary should be women. It is contingent on women who have limited work facilities. The above table (table 5) demonstrates the percentage of the participation of women in the scheme. The scheme has a positive impact on empowering women economically and financially. Through this programme, the status of women in rural areas has developed. They earn their livelihood now and thus live an independent, equal and dignified life. Women are much more actively involved in this programme than they have participated in all other forms of work recorded⁴.

Conclusion

The MGNREGA is a landmark legislation in history for providing livelihood and social security to the rural population. It has played a vibrant role in generating employment, creating durable asset and sustainable development, reducing migration, eradicating poverty and income in rural areas and its household. It has a positive impact on the empowerment of the rural workforce. It empowered socially disadvantaged groups, especially women, Scheduled Class and Scheduled Tribe. It benefits household as well as the community and thus contributed to national development. In North-Eastern states also it has played a vital role in rural development. Self-help Groups also have a crucial role in the scheme and the development of rural India.

Nevertheless, there are variations in field reports and pen and paper. A few states in the northeast are doing well in MGNREGA, while others have lacunas in their implementations. The programme faced many challenges like- fake entries in muster roll, delay in wage payment, lack of worksite facilities, lack of people’s participation, lack of awareness about the scheme and many other issues. The Government has been trying hard to eradicate the lacunas. There are serious needs to check these issues. The Government should create awareness of the programme through street plays, banners. It can involve youth in this process by training them and then send them to villages. There should be strict vigilant mechanism about people should be made aware of social audit and its benefits. NGO’s can also help Government in the efficient implementation of the scheme. The administration should also show professionalism and seriousness towards the efficient implementation of the programme. There is a severe and robust need to join hands for the development of rural poor and only after the development of rural India.

Notes

¹ MGNREGA Sameeksha - An Anthropology of Research Studies on Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act, 2005, 2006-2012,p. 1.

² MGNREGA Sameeksha - An Anthropology of Research Studies on Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act, 2005 , 2006-2012, pp 2-3

³ Padma, K. (2015). MGNREGA and rural distress in India. *International Journal of Humanities and Social Science Invention*, 4(8), 67-76.

⁴ J. Ghosh, 'Equity and Inclusion through Public Expenditure: The Potential of the NREGS', New Delhi: Paper for International Conference on NREGA, 21–22 January 2009.

References :

1. Adhikari Anindita and Bhatia. Kartika (2010). NREGA Wage Payments: Can We Bank on the Banks?, *Economic and Political Weekly*, 45(1), 30-37.
2. Ambasta Pramathesh et al. (2008). Two Years of NREGA: The Road Ahead, *Economic and Political Weekly*, 41-50.
3. Economic Survey of Assam, 2012-13, 2013-14, 2014-15, 2015-16, 2016-17.
4. Hazarika. P.G. (2009), Promoting Women Empowerment and Gender Equality through the Right to Decent Work: Implementation of National Rural Employment Guarantee Programme (NREGP) in Assam State (India)
5. Institute of Applied Manpower Research (2008). All-India Report on Evaluation of NREGA (A Survey of Twenty Districts).
6. Indian Institute of Technology (IIT) - Kharagpur (2010). Appraisal of Processes and Procedures of NREGS in Orissa: A Study of Mayurbhanj and Balasore Districts, Report submitted to Ministry of Rural Development, Government of India, New Delhi.
7. Institute of Rural Management Anand (2010). An Impact Assessment Study of the Usefulness and Sustainability of the Assets Created Under Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) In Sikkim, Institute of Rural Management Anand.
8. Ghosh, J. (2009, January 21-22). Equity and Inclusion through Public Expenditure: The Potential of the NREGS. International Conference On NREGA, New Delhi.
9. Ministry of Rural Development (2005). The National Rural Employment Guarantee Act 2005 (NREGA)-Operational Guidelines, Ministry of Rural Development, Department of Rural Development, Government of India.
10. Ministry of Rural Development (2006). The National Rural Employment Guarantee Act 2005 (NREGA), Operational Guidelines, 2nd edition, Ministry of Rural Development, Department of Rural Development, Government of India, New Delhi.
11. Ministry of Rural Development (2007). National Rural Employment Guarantee Act 2005 (NREGA), Report of the Second Year, April 2006-March 2007, Ministry of Rural Development, Department of Rural Development, Government of India, New Delhi.
12. Ministry of Rural Development (2013). Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act, 2005, Report to the People, Ministry of Rural Development, Department of Rural Development, Government of India, New Delhi.
13. Narayanan. S. and U. Das. (2014). Woman Participation and Rationing in Employment Guarantee Scheme. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 49 (46). 46-53.
14. National Sample Survey Organisation. 2011. Survey on MGNREGA (July-December 2009)'. Report No. 1, Preliminary Report Based on Visit-1. New Delhi: Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation, Government of India.
15. Government of India (2012). MGNREGA Sameeksha An Anthology of Research Studies on the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act, 2005, 2006-2012.

16. Government of India. Ministry of Rural Development. 2016. Annual Report 2015-2016(New Delhi).
17. Padma, K. (2015). MGNREGA and rural distress in India. *International Journal of Humanities and Social Science Invention*, 4(8), 67-76.
18. Panda. B. &Umdor. S (2011), *Appraisal and Impact Assessment of MGNREGA in Assam*. North-Eastern Hill University.
19. www.nrega.nic.in
20. www.rural.nic.in