



## Working of MGNREGS: An overview

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### Abstract

Indians became the masters of their own destiny after 200 years of British colonial rule when India woke up to a new dawn of freedom on August 15, 1947. Even after nearly 70 years of independence, India's journey of economic transformation apparently is unfinished, with major challenges like malnutrition, poverty, rising unemployment and rural distress remain to be solved substantially and need to be addressed with all commitment and sincerity. To address these issues and to find solutions to them, the governments of the day, since independence have been introducing several welfare programs to bring the nation out of the quagmire of these problems.

The unrelenting march of globalization coupled with the economic reforms that were heralded in 1991 has proved to be a bane to the rural India. Probably, after receiving and realizing the increasing deprivation of the common man in the post liberalization period, the UPA Government under Prime Minister Manmohan Singh has introduced some significant economic rights that constituted social welfare programs earlier as envisaged in the Directive Principles of the State Policy. A spate of rights such as right to information, right to education, right to work and right to food were introduced. It is imperative to understand the whole lot of issues centered around them such as in what ways these rights are realized, why they were introduced and how they will be achieved. The main focus of this research study is to study one such right namely, right to employment under the MGNREGA Act 2005.

**Keywords:** poverty, rural distress, directive principles of the state policy, malnutrition, etc.

### Introduction

Indians became the masters of their own destiny after 200 years of British colonial rule when India woke up to a new dawn of freedom on August 15, 1947. Even after nearly 70 years of independence, India's journey of economic transformation apparently is unfinished, with major challenges like malnutrition, poverty, rising unemployment and rural distress remain to be solved substantially and need to be addressed with all commitment and sincerity. To address these issues and to find solutions to them, the governments of the day, since independence have been introducing several welfare programs to bring the nation out of the quagmire of these problems.

The unrelenting march of globalization coupled with the economic reforms that were heralded in 1991 has proved to be a bane to the rural India. Probably, after receiving and realizing the increasing deprivation of the common man in the post liberalization period, the UPA Government under Prime Minister Manmohan Singh has introduced some significant economic rights that constituted social welfare programs earlier as envisaged in the Director Principles of the State Policy. A spate of rights such as right to information, right to education, right to work and right to food were introduced. It is imperative to understand the whole lot of issues centered around them such as in what ways these rights are realized, why they were introduced and how they will be achieved. The main focus of this research study is to study one such right namely, right to employment under the MGNREGA Act 2005. It has been explicitly recognized that the 'trickle-down' effect

of economic growth process is too slow and uneven to have any substantial impact on unemployment and poverty since last couple of decades. Since the Fifth Five Year Plan, it was conceived by the Indian Government that to banish poverty the only way is to have a direct and a frontal attack on it. In support of this perception, several welfare programs were introduced by the Government of India like Food for Work.

Program (FWP), Drought Prone Area Program (DPAP), Integrated Rural Development Program (IRDP), Rural Landless Employment Guarantee Program (RLEGP), Jawahar Rozgar Yojana (JRY), Employment Assurance Scheme (EAS), Swarna Jayanti Sahari Yojana (SJSRY), Sampoorna Grameen Rozgar Yojana (SGRY) and National Food for Work Program (NFFWP). All these programs though were conceived to eliminate poverty; there wasn't much progress in achieving the goal. As a result, there was a paradigm shift in attempts to eliminate poverty and the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act 2005 was conceived differently from the previous programs to tackle poverty.

The defining feature of most of the earlier programs is that all of them were essentially supply-side programs, providing assets or employment to certain targeted sections of people. The National Rural Employment Generation Act 2005 (NREGA) makes a clear departure from the previous employment generation programs. It is unique in the sense that MGNREGA apart from being an Act is also a right. It has a 'rights-based' framework which gives a legal guarantee for work, as opposed to a typical government program which could be withdrawn at will by a government. It is a time

bound action programme which fulfils the guarantee for work within 15 days from the day the demand has been made for work. Secondly, it is a demand driven program. The program has to be implemented as long as when and where people demand it; the flow of the resources has to be ensured, into the demand for work. Thirdly, there is a mechanism to address the vexatious issues such as building people assets, providing amenities at the worksite, minimum wages, and gender differences in wages which could drastically alter the economic conditions of the poor. MGNREGA is perhaps one of the biggest promises ever made not only in India but in the entire world to the poor of a country in history. Many people had cast apprehension that this program would lead to a large-scale corruption and there is a need to look deeply at the accountability mechanism built into the program. When an ambitious programme of tectonic proportions is undertaken on such a large scale throughout the country, it is the intellectual responsibility of the intellectuals of the country to make a comprehensive study of it, to discuss the lacunae and contribute in a positive way to help the better and effective execution of the Scheme. The present research study is a modest attempt in this direction.

Wage employment programmes in India have always been important public policy interventions to provide the unskilled workers who are short of employment by giving them employment through public works. After considering the fact that anti-poverty programs like IRDP have been ineffective in reducing poverty, the employment programmes have come into existence. It was perceived that there was a dire need for programs that generated employment directly and wage income to the poor. Especially, during the absence of opportunities of employment in the rural areas, these employment generating programs provided income transfers to the poor in India. Many schemes have been conceived of and implemented for the welfare of the weaker sections of the society since independence. Hence, we can say that India has a protracted history and experience in implementing wage employment programmes. Earlier experiences have revealed that there existed many weaknesses and lapses in the implementation of these employment generating programs. These weaknesses include: lack of proper and adequate planning, lack of awareness on the part of the beneficiaries regarding the program, maintenance of false muster rolls, poor quality of assets created under these programs, payment of wages that were less than the prescribed amounts, non-maintenance of database, disparity of wages between men and women, lack of accountability and frailties and incapacities of implementing agencies. Different reasons have been ascribed by several researchers for the state of affairs in the employment generation programs. They are: selection of schemes with improper examination, priority to non-productive works, lack of manpower planning, undertaking the works on political and on ad hoc basis, supply of poor quality of grains, lack of provision for the maintenance of assets, lack of serious efforts to provide continuous employment to the beneficiaries, delay in undertaking the schemes and consequent non-completion of works, employing the labourers from outside the village concerned, payment of low wages to the workers, lack of commitment on the part of the officials who executed these works, wastage of public

resources and corruption in the implementation of these works, lack of political will to implement the employment policies etc.

### **Employment Situation**

As labour is the main asset for the vast majority of the poor in India, expanding employment opportunities should be the focus for not only sustained poverty reduction but also for improvement in human development. The absolute number of unemployed and underemployed has consistently increased in spite of the fact that there was improvement in the gross domestic product of the economy. The employment situation in India has also undergone vast changes in response to the accelerated growth of the economy. But since the high growth of non-agricultural sector has lower employment intensity than agriculture, employment diversification lagged behind the diversification of economy in India. Apart from the slow-paced growth of employment, many other problems like underemployment, unemployment, low educational levels, illiteracy rate, low wage rate and unskilled labour plague the Indian economy. The recent NSS round of survey on employment and unemployment estimated that workforce participation rate was high in rural areas of 43.9% than in urban areas which is only 36.5%.

The decline in employment adds to declining incomes of the small and marginal farm households, who derive their incomes from farming as well as labour. This partly explains the spate of suicides of farmers in several states like Andhra Pradesh, Maharashtra, Karnataka, Punjab etc. Taking this humanitarian crisis into consideration seriously, the Government under the United Progressive Alliance at the Centre made a commitment in its Common minimum programme, that it would immediately enact the Employment Guarantee Act during the 2004 general elections. The draft proposed by the National Advisory Council envisages a legal guarantee to every household in rural areas a hundred days of casual manual work and has passed it as NREGA in Parliament on September 7, 2005.

### **Need for Employment Guarantee**

The rural economy supports nearly 70% of the total population of the country. Agriculture and allied activities happen to be the mainstay and the primary source of income for the populace of the rural sector and contributes almost 25% of India's GDP. The advantages of globalisation as has been envisioned by the government have not been proved in effect. The economic fruits have not trickle-down to the rural poor and there has been no tangible evidence of positive growth in the unorganised sector of the economy. In fact, the globalisation is said to be affecting the rural India very adversely. The opening up of the economy resulted in cheaper exports in a country where agricultural prices are constantly fluctuating. This hampers the producers and leads to further losses of the rural India.

India is a labour surplus country coupled with the acute problem of burgeoning population year after year. The major segment of India's population consists of the rural masses. Increased investment and growth in capital or adopting technology that is capital intensive will only lead to further unemployment in a country which is already burdened with a

lot of unemployment. The government schemes and measures to target poverty and unemployment must be in such a way that they are labour-intensive. Due to the failure of trickle-down effect, inequalities in rural India are exceedingly difficult to tackle. Without adequate improvement in the government's delivery mechanism, the despair of the average rural India will be prolonged.

### **Weakness of the rural Employment Generation Programmes**

The rural employment generations programs are replete with many weaknesses. These programs are self targeting, and the objective is to provide enhanced livelihood security, especially to those depending on casual manual labor. These employment guarantee programmes targeted the poor and generally aimed at poverty alleviation. Though these employment programmes have helped in many ways in stabilizing wages in rural areas, the coverage of the schemes remained poor and more than 50% of the beneficiaries were non-poor. There are other issues like corruption in the form of underpayment of wages, differential wage payments to male and female workers, and proliferation of contractors in implementation of the schemes etc. The Tenth Five-Year Plan observed that the growth rate of employment slowed down in the 1990s. Though the average annual rate of growth of GDP was higher in the 1990s (6.7%) than in the 1980s (5.2%), the rate of growth of employment has been much lower (1.07%) in the 1990s than in the 1980s (2.7%) if such trends in employment coefficients continued, as Indira Hirway argued that it will not be possible to generate enough employment during the Tenth Plan even to absorb the additions made to the labour force during the plan period. Considering that the 8% rate of growth per year may not be feasible and therefore the employment coefficients also may not move as desired, there will be a huge burden of unemployed people at the end of the plan. Also, the working poor, employed at a low level of productivity and wages, will need the attention of policymakers to provide work with greater productivity and wages. In short, it was believed that there will be a significant number of poor who will not be absorbed in the mainstream economy even at the end of the 10<sup>th</sup> plan (and also the 11<sup>th</sup> plan). She has clearly highlighted in her paper that there is an urgent need to support these people to enable them to come out of poverty. She explains four major approaches that are adopted by national governments for providing minimum incomes to these people.

In the opinion of economists, the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act is absolutely essential for India for poverty reduction, prevention of starvation, reducing distressed migration of the poor and empowerment of the Poor. This Act also has the potential to direct strategic use of surplus labour for promoting sustainable development and for mainstreaming the poor in the economy. The employment Guarantee plan announced in the Common minimum programme has been designed to protect the interests of the poor by detailing the rules of the guarantee and imposing penalties for non-compliance. It has also drawn heavily on the Maharashtra Employment Guarantee Act, which has been in operation for 30 years. However, two major drawbacks of the proposed program are its unrealistic underlying assumptions and short-

term vision. The provisions of the employment guarantee programme should be strengthened to achieve the objectives of poverty reduction, construction of productive assets and promoting mainstream employment.

According to the 12<sup>th</sup> Five Year Plan (2012-2017) "Wage Employment programmes, an important component of the anti-poverty strategy, have sought to achieve multiple objectives. They not only provide employment opportunities during lean agricultural seasons but also in times of floods, droughts and other natural calamities. They create rural infrastructure, with support for the economic activity. These programs also turn upward pressure on market wage rates by attracting people to public works programs, thereby reducing labour supply and pushing the demand for labour. Such an assurance would ensure a minimum level of employment and stability to the incomes of the poor and give them an opportunity to develop their collective strength. It would improve their economic position, reduce vulnerability and discourage migration to facilitate their continued access to health, education and welfare activities available in the village."

### **The Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Generation Act (MGNREGA)**

The aforementioned scheme which saw the light of the day in February, 2006 emerged from the thinking that 'a society which has failed to reduce the unemployment problem in six decades of development cannot ask its unemployed to wait indefinitely for the utterly uncertain prospect of employment growth catching up with population growth or income growth'. Macroeconomic development has not delivered the desired results to India's rural labour, despite the fact that Indian economy experienced a marked acceleration in GDP from the 1980s onwards. The Indian economy at present is growing at the fastest rate in the world. However, agriculture which happens to be the primary occupation of the people is presenting a dismal picture. Agriculture as livelihood, especially in drought and flood occurring backward rural areas, is facing an upwardly spiraling crises and an imminent structural collapse. This is resulting in hunger, starvation deaths, rising migration, extremist violence and farmers suicides. The need for ameliorating the suffering of the rural community and to address the distressed and development of the rural areas necessitated a state employment guarantee programme.

The Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) is a program that was unanimously approved by the Indian Parliament and political parties of all hues supported the efforts of the government to reduce the rural distress through this program. The program emerged to address the issue of providing additional wage employment income, malnutrition, hunger, abject poverty and distress migration but this approach to social protection has gained momentum and global attention in the context of the global economic crisis. The MGNREGA program is one of the largest public programs for the benefit of the rural poor in order to confer the right to guaranteed employment of 100 days initially in a year to every needy and the poor in rural areas in the whole country. Efficient, effective and successful implementation of this program is going to result in providing

significant empowerment to the large numbers of the poor people and the people who are living below the poverty line in the country.

This scheme can also serve other objectives such as protecting the environment, generating productive assets, reducing rural-urban migration, empowering rural women, fostering social equity in the rural society etc. The uniqueness of this Act is that it placed special emphasis on the equality of wages between men and women and encourages no disparity between the sexes, payment of wages only through post offices and bank accounts to prevent corruption, elimination of intermediaries in the works of the program, creating transparency in workers muster rolls etc. Any individual, either in writing or verbally, in respect of his socio-economic status can ask for employment with the Gram Panchayat. The Act guarantees that if the workers are not provided work within 15 day period (including the eligibility, verification, and issuing of the job cards) the applicant then is eligible for unemployment allowance. The decision regarding the work that is to be done is the prerogative of the Gram Panchayat. It takes appropriate decision regarding the nature of the work that is to be implemented. The emphasis is given to the unskilled manual labor with thrust on building roads and other public infrastructural facilities in the villages, afforestation, water conservation, land development and drought proofing. All adults belonging to a household are eligible to work under this program. If the worksite is beyond 5 kms from the applicant's residence, then the applicant is eligible for an additional 10% of the wage for commutation to the worksite. This Act has immense potential to benefit nomadic tribal communities since locally domiciled but migrant populations are also eligible for employment. Initially it was conceived that the program must provide at least 100 days of guaranteed wage employment in every fiscal year for at least one adult member of every household who is prepared to do unskilled manual labour at the wage rate specified by the government. The payment of the wages is directly credited into the accounts of the workers, thereby restricting any possible pilferage.

When the program was first made in the Parliament it was stated that it would cover 200 districts within six months of its enactment and then it would be extended to cover all of the rural India. The Act is applicable to areas notified by the Central Government. The first phase aimed to cover 200 districts across the country. In the second phase, an additional 130 districts were covered bringing the total number of districts covered to 330 districts. In these districts, pre-existing wage employment programmes like the National Food for Work Program (NFFPW), and the Sampoorna Grameena Rozgar Yojana (SGRY) were merged with the National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme. The remaining districts were notified under the Act from 1<sup>st</sup> April 2008.

The government also put its entire weight behind this Employment Guarantee Scheme so that it is going to yield rich dividends to the rural poor. In the initial stage of the program, that is the first year of its implementation, Rs 11,300 crores were allocated in the budget of 2006-07 for the scheme. In the financial year 2007-08, Rs 12000 crores was allocated for the Scheme. In the year 2008-09, it was 16,000 crores. In the 2009-10 budget allocations of MGNREGS was

raised to 13,000 crores. In the year 2011-12 the budget allocations for the scheme was 40,000 crores and allocations for the scheme in 2012-13 was 33,000 crores. For the year 2013-14, the budget allocation for the scheme was 34,000 crores and for the financial year 2014-15, the budget allocation was 34,699 crores. In the financial year 2016-17 the budget allocations to the scheme is 38,500 crores.

### **An overview of the performance of the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act**

In the financial year 2006-07, 200 districts were covered under the scheme. During the year, 3.78 crore job cards were issued and the employment was provided to 2.1 crore households. The total number of person days that were generated in this financial year was 90.5 crore days. The share of participation of the Scheduled Caste people was 25% and the participation of the people belonging to the Scheduled Tribe was 36% and the participation of the women in this Scheme was 40%. The participation of the others constituted 38%. The number of person days that was created per House Hold was 43 days. The budget outlay for the Scheme in this financial year was Rs. 11300 crores. The amount of money that was released by the Central government was Rs. 8640.85 crores. The total available fund was Rs. 12073.55 crores. The expenditure that was made for the scheme in the financial year was Rs. 8823.35 and it constituted 73% of the available funds. The expenditure that was made on wages in the year was Rs.5842.37 crores which constituted 66% of the funds allocated. The total number of works that are taken up were 8.35 lakhs. The works that were completed were 3.87 lakhs. Among the works that were taken up under the Scheme in the financial year, water conservation works constituted 54%, provision of irrigation facility to land owned by Scheduled Castes/ Scheduled Tribes/ people living below the poverty line constituted 10% of the works, the works pertaining to rural connectivity constituted 21%, and the works pertaining to the land development were 11% and the works pertaining to other activities were 4%.

In the financial year, 2007-08, 330 districts were covered under the scheme. The total job cards that were issued during that year were 6.48 crores. Among them 3.39 crore households were provided employment. The total number of person days that were created during this period was 143.59 crore person days. The participation of the Scheduled Caste persons was 27%, the participation of the Scheduled Tribes was 29%, the participation of the women was 43% and the participation of others was also 43%. The number of person days that was created for each household was 42 days. The total budget outlay for the scheme in the financial year was Rs. 12,000 crores. The Central government released funds to a tune of 11610.39 crores and the total available funds was 19305.81 crores. In the expenditure of Rs. 15856.89 crores which constituted 82% of the total outlay was made. The expenditure on the wages constituted Rs. 10738.47 which was 68% of the total amount spent. The total number of works that are taken up in the financial year under the Scheme were 17.88 lakhs and the number of works that were completed were 8.2 to lakhs. The water conservation works constituted 49% of the works undertaken under the scheme and the works for provision of irrigation facilities to the lands owned by the

Scheduled Castes/Scheduled Tribes/people living below the poverty line constituted 15%. The road connectivity works constituted 17% of the total works, the land development works constituted 16% and the works pertaining to other activity were 3%.

In the financial year 2008-09, 615 districts were covered under the scheme and the total job cards that were issued were 10.01 crores and 4.51 crore households were provided employment under the Scheme. The total number of person days that were created under the scheme was 216.32 crore person days. The participation of the people belonging to Scheduled Castes in the scheme constituted 29%, the Scheduled Tribes 25%, women 48% and the others constituted 45%. The number of person days that each household got was 48 days. The total budget outlay for the scheme during the financial year was Rs. 30000 crore rupees. The Central government released an amount of Rs. 29939.60 crores. The total available fund including the OB was Rs. 37397.06 crores. Out of it an amount of Rs. 27250.10 crore rupees which constituted 73% of the total available fund was spent on the works under the program. The expenditure on wages was 18200.03 crore rupees which constituted 67% of the expenditure. The total works that were taken up under the Scheme was 27.75 lakhs and the works that were completed were 12.14 lakhs. The water conservation works constituted 46%, the works pertaining to provision of irrigation facilities to lands owned by the Scheduled castes/Scheduled tribes and the people below the poverty line constituted 20% and the works pertaining to the rural connectivity constituted 18% and the works related to the land allotment to 15% and the verse pertaining to other activity were 1%.

In the financial year 2009-10, 619 districts were covered under the scheme. The total number of job cards that were issued during this period was 11.25 crores. The number of households that are provided employment during this period were 5.26 crores. The number of person days that was generated under the scheme in this financial year was 283.59 crore person days. The percentage of Scheduled Caste people who got employment under the scheme was 30%, the number of Scheduled Tribes people who got employment under the scheme was 21%, the number of women who got employment under the scheme was 40% and the number of others who got employment under the scheme was 49%. The number of person days that were generated per household was 54 days. The total budget outlay for the scheme in the financial year was Rs. 39100 crore rupees and the amount released by the Central government was Rs. 33506.61 crore rupees. The total expenditure for the scheme was 37905.23. The expenditure on the wages was 25579.32 crore rupees which constituted 70% of the total amount of the scheme. The total number of works that were taken up under the scheme in this financial year was 46.17 lakhs. The number of works that were completed was 22.59 lakhs. Out of the total works that are undertaken under the scheme in the year 2009-10, the water conservation works constituted 51%, the works pertaining to the provision of irrigation facility belonging to the scheduled caste / scheduled tribe/people belonging to the below poverty line group constituted 17%. The works pertaining to rural connectivity, land development and other activities constituted 17%, 14% and 2% respectively.

In the financial year 2010-11, 626 districts were covered under this Scheme. The number of job cards that are issued during this year was 11.98 crores. The number of households that are provided employment was 5.59 crores. The total number of person days that were created in this financial year was 257.15 person days. The number of Scheduled Caste people who participated in the scheme constituted 31%, the number of Scheduled Tribe people who participated in the scheme constituted 21% and the number of women who participated in the scheme constituted 48%. The number of person days per household that were created under the scheme in this year was 47 days. The total outlay for this scheme was Rs. 40100 crores rupees. The Central government released an amount of Rs. 35768.95 crore rupees. The total available fund was Rs. 54 172.14 crore rupees. The amount that was expended under this scheme was Rs. 39377.27 crore rupees which constituted 73% of the total outlay of the scheme. The expenditure on the wages was Rs. 25686.53 which constituted 68% of the total expenditure. The total number of works that were taken up under the scheme was 50.99 lakhs and the number of works that were completed was 25.90 lakhs. Out of the total number of works undertaken under this Scheme the water conservation works constituted 48%, the works pertaining to provision of irrigation facility to the Scheduled Caste/Scheduled Tribe/people living below poverty line constituted 18% and the activities pertaining to rural connectivity, land development and other activities constituted 18%, 14%, 2% respectively.

In the financial year 2011-12, 626 districts were covered under the Scheme. The total number of job cards that were issued was 12.39 crores. The total number of households that are provided employment under the scheme was 5.04 crores. The total number of person days that were created under the scheme in this financial year was 216.34 crore person days. The percentage of scheduled caste people who participated in the scheme in this financial year was 22%, the Scheduled Tribes was 18%, the women was 48% and the others was 60%. The total number of person days generated per household was 43 days. The total budget outlay for the Scheme was Rs. 40000 crore rupees. The Central government released an amount of Rs. 29189.77 crore rupees. The total available fund including the OB was Rs. 48832.49 crore rupees. The total amount of money that was spent under the scheme was Rs. 24860.91 crore rupees. The total number of works that are undertaken under this scheme was 82.51 lakhs. The total number of works that were completed was 18.56 lakhs. Out of all the works under the scheme, the water conservation works constituted 53%, the works pertaining to provision of irrigation facilities to the lands owned by the scheduled caste/scheduled Tribes constituted 12%, the road connectivity works constituted 22%, the land development works constituted 9% and the other activities constituted 4%.

During the financial year 2012-13, 632 districts were covered under the scheme. The total number of job cards that was issued during this financial year was 12.59 crores. The number of households that are provided employment under the scheme was 4.48 crores. The total number of person days that are generated under the scheme in this financial year was 163.38 crore person days. The number of scheduled caste people who participated in the scheme in this financial year was 22% for

the scheduled Tribes it was 16%, for women it was 53% and for other six was 62%. The number of person days that are generated per household was 36% days. The budget outlay for the scheme was Rs. 33000 crore rupees. The Central government released an amount of Rs. 26533.06 crore rupees. The total available fund for this scheme was Rs. 42464.26 crore rupees. The expenditure that was made in the scheme was Rs. 21127.10 crore rupees which constituted 75% of the total outlay of the Scheme. The total number of works taken up under the scheme was 64.54 lakhs. The total number of works completed under the scheme was 11.83 lakhs. Out of all the works that are undertaken under this Scheme, the water conservation constituted 58%, the works pertaining to the provision of irrigation facilities to the lands belonging to the scheduled caste/scheduled tribe constituted 12%, the rural connectivity works constituted 18%, the land development works constituted 8% and the other activities constituted 3%. This shows that a good portion of the rural labour was covered under the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme. Thus this scheme has proved to be a boon for the rural populace of the country in providing livelihood.

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