

**EXAMINING THE ROLE OF MGNREGA IN CREATION OF JOB AND BETTER LIVING CONDITION:  
A STUDY ON THE NORTH EAST INDIA****Dr. Santosh Kumar Mahapatra**

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**Abstract:** India, a country with diverse religion, caste, creed, tradition and customs is gaining its stand in the world both economically and politically. More than 70 percent of the population resides in the villages and majority of them are poor. The problem of poverty is in a sorry state of affair and poses a serious hurdle to economic growth the country. The Government of India had launched various developmental programmes and anti-poverty schemes to reduce the disparity between the rich and poor. But the efficacy of these schemes is under cloud. The present work focuses on this issue by making a critical study of a popular scheme of the Government under the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA). The study examines the role of MGNREGA in creation of jobs and the performance of scheme in reducing the poverty level, improving consumption level and social security. This has been done through a critical examination of literature available and analyzing the official data available. The study finds that the scheme has succeeded in providing employment to the rural people and raises their purchasing power and economic condition to some extent at national level but the performance in the North East India is not remarkable as compared to the national averages.

**Key words:** MGNREGA, Job Creation, Living Condition.

**Introduction**

The National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA) enacted in 2005- renamed as Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act on October 2, 2009 is one of the largest rights based social protection initiatives in the world. It is a landmark legislation which empowers rural population with the legal right to demand work. The Parliament passed the Act in the monsoon session on August 23, 2005 which subsequently received the assent of President on September 5, 2005 and was notified on September 7, 2005. The Act notified aims at enhancing livelihood securities of the households in rural areas of the country by providing 100 days of assured employment in a financial year to every household whose adult members volunteer to do unskilled manual labour. The Act is the first tangible commitment to the poor and aims at providing employment as a source of income by

ensuring their dignity. The scheme was supposed to be the most unique scheme after independence as it provides them statutory right to employment. Infact, the government has a statutory obligation to provide employment to every rural household in a financial year. NREGA gives legal guarantee of employment to anyone who is willing to do casual manual labour at the statutory minimum wage. Thus, the Act provides a universal and enforceable legal right to employment. The objective of the programme is to enhance livelihood security in rural areas by providing at least 100 days of guaranteed wage employment. It is the fact that in agricultural sector that there is seasonal unemployment which does not allow the people to come up above the poverty line. The MGNREGA provides opportunity to build the foundations of social security system in rural India, revive village economies, promote social equity and empower rural labourers. It is a

demand-driven programme where provision of work is triggered by the demand for work by wage-seekers, The MGNREGA in principle, provides legal guarantee of work and hence it is a milestone in the way of Right to Work. But in practice it is a manifestation of the Right to Life. The main aim of the Act is to provide livelihood security in rural areas by providing work to them. If we look in a different way, the basic idea of the NREGA is making an attempt to provide decent work to the people. According to the International Labour Organization (ILO), decent work involves opportunities for work that is productive and delivers a fair income, security in the workplace and social protection for families, better prospects for personal development and social integration, freedom for people to express their concerns, organize and participate in the decisions that affect their lives and equality of opportunity and treatment for all women and men.

The Indian labour market is characterised by predominance of informal employment with more than 90 per cent of India's informal workforce working as self-employed and casual worker (Srija and Shirke, 2014). The informal sector is characterized by excessive seasonality of employment especially in non-farm sector, preponderance of casual and contractual employment, absence of social security measures and welfare legislations, negation of social standards and worker rights, denial of minimum wages, etc. The informal sector workers in India are living in poor socio-economic conditions leading to a sub-standard life and poor social security. Thus, there is a great need of effective social security programmes to reduce income insecurity and develop their skills and efficiencies for enhancing productivity. In this context, MGNREGA is a noble scheme of the Government of India as it attempts to create a back up employment provision for these seasonal unemployed in the rural areas.

#### **Features Of MGNREGA**

The idea of Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) is not

new in its kind. Prior to this there were Maharashtra Employment Guarantee Scheme (MEGS), and many other wage employment schemes, but MGNREGA ranks among the most powerful initiatives ever undertaken for rural transformation of rural livelihoods in India. Preexisting wage employment programmes, the National Food for Work Programme (NFFWP) and Sampoorna Grameen Rozgar Yojana (SGRY) were merged with MGNREGA to serve the mass in a broader perspective. The Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) is a holistic measure aimed at fulfilling one of the most important human rights that is Right to Employment, at least to one member of the family. Some of the unique features of MGNREGA are as follows:

**1. Guaranteed Employment:** MGNREGA ensures job for all with a provision of guaranteed employment for one hundred days in every financial year to rural households with unemployed adult members prepared to do unskilled manual work at a statutory minimum wage rate. As per the provision of this act, a person who needs employment has to get his/her family registered with Gram Panchayat. The scheme has been universalized for all persons living in rural areas whether they are below or above poverty line. The benefits are reflected in greater economic security, higher farm wages, lower migration and building of infrastructure.

**2. Better Supervision and Management:** The scheme lines out certain guidelines for better management and supervision of the programme through introduction of job cards and muster roll system. Job Card is a legal document of right to work where the information about the applicants, like name, age, sex, the head of the family, number of adult members in the family willing to work etc. is given. This job card is valid for a period of 5 years. Muster roll is a kind of attendance register with a list of the names of the workers working under MGNREGA. At every worksite a muster roll containing the names of workers

must be kept for the better administration of the work.

**3. Participation of People:** The Act says that at least 50 percent of the works in terms of costs will be allotted to the gram panchayats for execution. The act defines panchayats as the prime authorities in management of the MGNREGA. Panchayats are to finalize, approve, implement and monitor the projects. The scheme will not permit engaging any contractor for implementation of the projects.

**4. Wage Rates:** Under MGNREGA Wages will be paid at the rate of agricultural minimum wages as notified by the state government from time to time. Section 6(1) of MGNREGA, states that notwithstanding anything contained in the Minimum Wages Act 1948, the Central Government may by notification specify the wage rate for the purposes of the Act. In fixing the wage rates two basic principles have to be kept in mind. First, it should be high enough to meet the daily subsistence needs of the worker households and second, it should be significantly higher than the prevailing market wages.

In principle, the minimum wages fixed under the Minimum Wage Act, 1948 should fulfill these requirements and should therefore be the wages to be paid under the Employment Guarantee Programme and there can be no compromise with the payment of statutory minimum wages as per the Minimum Wage Act, 1948. The present wages for the MGNREGA workers from 1st April 2014 is Rs. 236 per man days and it revises in every 6 months and this remuneration is equal for both, men & women. And the main purpose of Minimum Wage Act, 1948.

Besides, payment of wages to the workers is to be given every week or within 14 days in any circumstances. If a worker does not receive his/her wages on time, he/she is liable to get compensation under the Wage Payment Act, 1972.

Under MGNREGA the payments of wages through banks or post offices are benefited the MGNREGA workers. Many

observers have favoured the payment of wages through bank/ post office as a right step under MGNREGA to prevent the corruption. The main advantage of this approach is that it reduces the likelihood of any fudging of the muster rolls on the part of the implementing agency (i.e., gram panchayats). Since the actual wage payments were beyond their reach it is a safeguard against the embezzlement of MGNREGA wages. The fundamental attraction of the use of bank or post office accounts for MGNREGA wage payments is twofold; First: It separates the payment agency from the implementing agency to avoid any sort of corruption. Second: It ensures that money sanctioned for wage payments can be listed only by the labourers listed on the muster rolls. In addition it can be argued that the bank/ post office payments of MGNREGA wages encourage savings and help to initiate people to modern banking arrangements.

**5. Unemployment Allowance:** Under MGNREGA if an applicant is not provided employment within 15 days of receipt of his/her application, there is a provision of daily unemployment allowance. This unemployment allowance is one-fourth of the prescribed wages for first 30 days and after that it is half of the prescribed wages. And this Unemployment Allowance will be paid by the concerned state government implementing the scheme.

But a person will not get any unemployment allowance in the following conditions.

- a. If a person has completed 100 days employment in a financial year.
- b. If he/she refuses to do work.
- c. If he/she takes a continuous leave for 7 or more than 7 days from work without any prior information will not get any unemployment allowance for a period of three months. But he/she will be eligible to seek employment under the scheme at any time.

**6. Greater Social Welfare:** The scheme aims at the welfare of people from the poor section of the society. To ensure more jobs the scheme gives emphasis on manual labour and not

machines. It takes care of the working conditions like provision of rest shed, drinking water facility, on-site medical first aid, free charge medical treatment, crèche for children below six years of female workers. It gives more security by providing ex-gratia payment to those who die or get permanent disability in work. A minimum of 33% reservation is to be made for women, where the numbers of applicants are too large. The MGNREGA is expected to reduce migration through opportunity to earn and save, creation of employment security during lean seasons and raising the level of effects and social happiness.

**7. Transparency and Accountability:** Every scheme will have adequate provisions for ensuring transparency and accountability at all levels. Social audits are supposed to scrutinize all the records and work at regular interval. Social Audit is a process for evaluating, reporting and improving the performance and behaviour of local people and government officials. Social Audit is a participatory process in which both the local people and government officials verify the outcomes under MGNREGA so that they help at every stage to build up the transparency and responsibility. This is one of the unique features of MGNREGA through which people can make officials accountable for their performance in the delivery of legally enshrined rights which may be able to check the corruption or misuse of the scheme.

#### **Objectives Of The Study**

The basic objective of this paper is to examine the role of the MGNREGS in providing a decent job to the rural people. This is possible when the scheme can deliver people to get the opportunity to work with a reasonable income level that will help them to improve their living standard and bring a social status among

others. More elaborately, we can put the objectives of the present study in the following ways.

1. To examine the impact of the scheme under MGNREGA in raising the income of the rural people.
2. To examine the regular flow of income.
3. To examine the change in consumption pattern of the rural people/beneficiaries after the implementation of the scheme.
4. To examine the reduction in the incidence of migration.
5. To examine the impact of MGNREGA on social status and participation.

#### **Methodology**

The main objective of this work is to examine the role of MGNREGA in creation of decent jobs and how far the scheme has delivered its expectations in reducing the poverty level, improving consumption level and social security. For this purpose a critical examination of literature available in the concerned field and during the period of 2009-15 has been done. To assess the performance of the scheme in the North East India, data from secondary sources has been collected from the official web site and analysis of the same has been done on the basis of ratios.

#### **Performance Of MGNREGA**

**1. Overall Performance:** An overview of the performance of MGNREGA over the last nine financial years is provided in Table 1. The overall performance so far indicates that 4.13 crore of households have been provided employment as on 31<sup>st</sup> March 2015 where as it was only 2.1 crore in the financial year 2006-07. Total person days created in FY 2006-07 was 90.5 crore, which rose up to 165.9 crore in the FY 2014-15.

**Table 1: Performance of MGNREGA**

Indicators	2006-07	2007-08	2008-09	2009-10	2010-11	2011-12	2012-13	2013-14	2014-15
No of households provided employment (in crore)	2.1	3.4	4.5	5.3	5.5	5.06	4.99	4.79	4.13
Persondays(in crore):									
Total	90.5	143.6	216.3	283.6	257.2	218.8	230.5	220.3	165.9
SC	23 (25)	39.4 (27)	63.4 (29)	86.5 (30)	78.8 (31)	48.5 (22)	51.2 (22)	50.1 (23)	37.1 (22)
ST	33 (36)	42 (29)	55 (25)	58.7 (21)	53.6 (21)	40.9 (19)	41 (18)	38.4 (17)	28.2 (17)
Women	36 (40)	61 (43)	103.6 (48)	136.4 (48)	122.7 (48)	105.3 (48)	118.2 (51)	116.3 (52)	91 (55)
Average person days per employed household	43	42	48	54	47	43	46	46	40

Note: Figures in parentheses are percentages.

Source: <http://www.nrega.nic.in>

**2. Increase in Income:** Joshi, et al. (2014) in their work found that poor households with low asset bases and membership to vulnerable communities are more likely to participate in the MGNREGA. Datta, et.all. (2014) in the study conducted in the state of Bihar confirms that the scheme reached to the poor and estimated a poverty reduction of 14 percent or more. Using NSSO data, Liu and Barret (2013) found that in 27 states, the scheme had effective pro-poor targeting while the rest are struggling to reduce poverty. Rao and Madhusudhan (2013) tried to find the beneficiary community and found that about 79 percent beneficiaries belong to other category while SC and ST beneficiary constitutes only 16 and 5 percent respectively. Negi, Singh & Dhanai (2015) in their paper depicted that the introduction of MGNREGA had a clear positive impact on the rural economy i.e. in the Pauri Garhwal district of Uttarakhand during the financial year 2013-2014. It has generated income, raised the standard of living and the socio-economic performance of the rural community of the district. Parida (2015) in his paper has depicted that the work force participation rate in NREGS is very high among the households who possess NREGS job cards and the households belong to poor, landless and socially disadvantaged communities. They are benefitting immensely from the right based

employment programme. He has found that NREGS wage rate is often well above the existing agricultural and other non-agricultural wages in sample districts of Odisha. A relatively better wage in NREGS has a positive impact on the households' purchasing power. Ranaware et al. (2015) in their article had made a survey on 4,881 users of more than 4,100 works created under MGNREGA in Maharashtra. It provided evidence that MGNREGA works support agriculture and benefits a large number of small and marginal farmers. An overwhelming 90% of the respondents considered the works are very useful or somewhat useful. Ramanaidu (2015) in his paper had analyzed three main objectives. His study was based on secondary data. He studied the concept of rural development, analyzed the policy and administration of NREGP and described the organizational structure of NREGP in selected mandals of Anantapur district of Andhra Pradesh. He found that MNREGP has made tangible impact on socio-economic conditions, creating employment and had become a source of income for the sustainable development of people especially in backward and drought prone districts like Anantapur. Ramya (2014) views differently in his study examining the implementation process of MGNREGA and its impact on tribal livelihoods of poor tribal communities in a

Panchayat of Kurung Kumey district of Arunachal Pradesh. The study revealed that MGNREGA had little impact on tribal livelihoods. He found corruption in distribution of the job cards as one of the leading causes of failure of the scheme.

**3. Regular Flow of Income:** In a move to provide sufficient work to these labours in the dry periods and help them maintain consistent lifestyle, the government of India has started this famous reform law NREGA. It's started with paying 100 rupees a day for 100 days a year. These 100 days were supposed to be in the dry periods of the agriculture when the labour is not much sought for by the agriculturists. But later, the number of days is increased to 200 per year. This move guarantees 16-17 days of work per month. The minimum amount paid has also been increased from Rs.100 to Rs.135 since then. So, an average labour can earn up to Rs 2000 per month through this employment program. This seems to be a reasonable amount for people to make a decent living in villages. But the question is whether this income is regular or not. The average person day per employed household is in between 40 and 54 (as shown in Table 1). This means the annual income from MGNREGA source may be around Rs 6000 only and if the households do not have income from other sources, this income may not be treated as adequate for a better living. This aspect needs to be investigated further in more detail to see whether the real benefit reaches to the people at bottom.

**4. Change in Consumption Pattern:** The best part of this Act is it guarantees employment to millions of rural people across the nation. In rural areas, most of the people rely on agriculture and agriculture requires huge labour in the beginning and ending periods of the seasonal crops and labour is in demand during that period. The period in between requires minimum labour, hence no or less demand of the labour. This inconsistency in the work and wages for them denies them the same quality of life around the year. Emad (2013) in his study found significant impacts of MGNREGA on food patterns. Rural households

are shifting away from traditional staple diets of pulses and milk to more expensive vegetables, fruits and dry fruits and sugar and sugar products. There is also a decrease in the variation of expenditure on staple food products like cereals and pulses and an increase in variance of expenditure on luxurious food items like sugar and sugar products. We also observed a significant positive impact of MGNREGA on expenditure on durable goods and clothing and bedding, signaling the consumption smoothing effects of MGNREGA on very poor households. Liu and Deninger (2014) observed remarkable improvement in food security and nutrition by means of increase in calorie and protein intakes. Similar evidence is also given by Ravi and Engler (2015) who studied the impact of MGNREGA on food security, health outcomes and savings. The findings indicated that the scheme could able to raise the monthly per capita expenditure on food as well as non-food items. Kumar and Joshi (2013) have also noticed improvement in income which has led to an increase in food consumption level of both cereals and non-cereals by all the categories of rural households. These have resulted into a substantial increase in calorie-intake as well as protein-intake by different categories of households, leading to a decrease in undernourished and nutrition-deficit households by 8 to 9 percent.

**5. Migration:** Morten (2015) in her research article has pointed on impact of MGNREGA on migration of labourers. She pointed out that in India; migration is usually of short-term, where labourers are seen to be migrating away from their own villages towards the urban areas to work in factories and other industries. Her study gives a look on the economic effects of temporary migration in South India. Rural households are using migration as a mechanism to respond to the various shocks they face in the village and it is correlated to rainfall. The economic hypothesis of her study was that households don't like variation in income and so they try to smooth out income shocks by migrating. She studied the implications of development policies,

particularly, MGNREGA both in cases of 'migration' and 'no migration'. In case of 'migration', she found that the welfare effect of the MGNREGA policy is smaller once the channel is incorporated because migration had been a mechanism for households to smooth income shocks.

Samon (2015) in his article has highlighted the fact that MNREGA has helped to bring back the displaced people of the ethnic clashes in early nineties to their native villages in Manipur's Churachandpur district. The Centrally sponsored scheme has brought changes in the economy of Manipur's Churachandpur district bordering Mizoram and Myanmar. People who were displaced during the ethnic violence in the Churachandpur area of Manipur during 1992-1998 returned back to their native land due to the introduction of MNREGA.

**6. Social Participation:** Bora et al. (2010) have observed in their study that the rural people have been highly benefited by the implementation of NREGA and it has helped in gearing up the social responsibility among the rural poor.

Azam (2012) in his study has found that the impact of NREGA on wages has only been marginal i.e., about 1 percent but noticed a strong gender dimension to the impacts of NREGA. It has positive impact on the minds of the rural women workers. The study shows that women workers have reaped the benefits of NREGA as there was nearly 8 percent increase in wages of women workers in NREGA districts as compared to the non-NREGA districts.

Siga (2015) in his research paper has found that the Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) in Chetam Anchal Block and Daporijo Anchal Block in Arunachal Pradesh have been

interfering too much with very low assignment of the functions to the PRIs. He observed that the Government authorities lack willingness to devolve power and transfer functions to PRIs. Many of the Panchayat representatives and people were not aware about the power, functions and responsibilities of the PRIs.

Aiyer & Mehta (2015) in their article had made an analysis of India's experience with implementing Social Audits for the MGNREGA in Andhra Pradesh. They had conducted an intensive survey with MGNREGA wage-seekers and examined the role of social audits in providing a platform for citizens to engage with the state. They had made a pessimistic assessment and the pessimism arises from the limitations of the current implementation architecture of MGNREGA to respond to social audit complaints.

### **Performance Of MGNREGA In The North East India**

The data on population below poverty line as shown in Table 2 indicates at the deteriorating condition on poverty. The population below poverty line in the year has increased considerably in the year 2011-12 from the 2004-05 level. The scheme could able to give a support to the rural labour force by providing income opportunity but the condition on poverty has not improved yet. This explains the necessity of immediate attention from the policy formulators. Again, studying the data provided in Table 3, it can be observed that participation from SC and ST communities in the MGNREGA scheme is quite encouraging whereas participation of women of the North East India is below the national average. This indicates that the benefits of the programme are yet to reach the women work force in the North East India.

**Table 2: Population below Poverty Line**

States	2004-05		2011-12	
	No. of person below poverty line (in lakhs)	Percentage of person below poverty line	No. of person below poverty line (in lakhs)	Percentage of person below poverty line
Arunachal Pradesh	2.03	17.6	4.91	34.67
Assam	55.78	19.7	101.27	31.98
Manipur	3.96	17.3	10.22	36.89
Meghalaya	4.52	18.5	3.61	11.87
Mizoram	1.18	12.6	2.27	20.40
Nagaland	3.99	19	3.76	18.88
Sikkim	1.14	20.1	0.51	8.19
Tripura	6.38	18.9	5.24	14.05
<b>India</b>	<b>3017.20</b>	<b>27.5</b>	<b>2697.83</b>	<b>21.92</b>

Source: Govt. of India, Planning Commission Press Release on Estimates of Poverty, 2013.

**Table No 3: Performance of MGNREGA in the North East India in FY 2014-15**

States	Total Person days worked	Person days worked by SCs	Person days worked by STs	Person days worked by Non SCs/STs	Person days worked by women
Arunachal Pradesh	1905022	1108 (0.06)	1713082 (89.92)	190832 (10.02)	576146 (30.24)
Assam	21086787	1279491 (6.07)	3196750 (15.16)	16610546 (78.77)	5932344 (28.13)
Manipur	10117209	309725 (3.06)	5216499 (51.56)	4590985 (45.38)	3871385 (38.27)
Meghalaya	16735268	119971 (0.72)	15732836 (94.01)	882461 (5.27)	7116676 (42.53)
Mizoram	4359635	837 (0.02)	4344009 (99.64)	14789 (0.34)	1755454 (40.27)
Nagaland	9045768	51224 (0.57)	8536495 (94.37)	458049 (5.06)	2817500 (31.15)
Sikkim	2412513	101460 (4.21)	861413 (35.70)	1449640 (60.09)	1160917 (48.12)
Tripura	51175744	8823079 (17.24)	22706520 (44.37)	19646145 (38.39)	25262839 (49.36)
India	1558057595	347265242 (22.29)	262942422 (16.88)	947849931 (60.84)	848564177 (54.46)

Note: Figures in parentheses are percentages.

Source: <http://www.nrega.nic.in>

### Conclusion

The Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme is one of the largest rights based social protection initiatives in the world. The scheme empowers rural population with the legal right to demand work and thus aims at enhancing livelihood securities of the households in rural areas of the country by providing 100 days of assured employment in a financial year to every household whose

adult members volunteer to do unskilled manual labour. The Act is the first tangible commitment to the poor and aims at providing employment as a source of income by ensuring their dignity. If we look in a different way, MGNREGA is making an attempt to provide decent work to the people. Decent work involves opportunities for work that is productive and delivers a fair income, security in the workplace and social protection for families, better



prospects for personal development and social integration, freedom for people to express their concerns, organize and participate in the decisions that affect their lives and equality of opportunity and treatment for all women and men.

A review of various research works on MGNREGA, reveals that the scheme has succeeded in providing employment to the rural people, both as main employment and alternate employment. During the lean season when adequate work opportunity is absent in rural area, the scheme has created alternative opportunities to work and add to their income. Thus, it has helped them to raise their purchasing power and economic condition. In other words, the scheme could able to extend a decent job by providing opportunity to work for a fair and reasonable income for both men and women. The scheme has also succeeded in reducing the migration of labour to the urban area; bring a positive change in consumption pattern and extending equal rights of earning to women labour force. However, the performance in the North East India shows that these states are still struggling to reduce the poverty level and the performance of this scheme does not seem to address the problem in a remarkable way. The benefits of the scheme have not reached to the women as compared to the national average. Hence, government and policy formulators need to take up the issue on priority. Further, the research work needs to be done at grass root level in this region so as to assess the achievements as well as problems and leakages of resources in the implementation of the scheme.

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