

IMPACT OF MGNREGA ON RURAL LIVELIHOOD IN ASSAM **-with Special Reference to Kamrup District of Assam**

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The MGNREGA is expected to enhance people's livelihood security on a sustained basis, by developing economic and social infrastructure in rural areas. However, in Assam MGNREGA is gaining momentum slowly. The faulty implementation strategy has ruined the spirit of this programme. Religion and street biasness and favoritism in case of distribution of job card, dominance of leading families, defective leadership and improper coordination among the stakeholders have stood as major hurdles in this programme. The present study attempts to examine the implementation process of this programme and its impact on rural livelihood.

Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) is the remarkable programme of the Indian Government that directly touches the lives of the rural poor. The Act was enacted on 25th August, 2005 and it came into force on 2nd February, 2006. MGNREGA marked a paradigm shift from the other employment programmes with its rights based approach. The programme not only provides employment but also focuses on inclusive growth. By protecting the environment and reducing rural-urban migration this programme is set to transform the face of the rural India.

On February 2, 2006 first phase of NREGA implementation was started in 200 districts of the country in which seven districts of Assam were also incorporated. In the year 2007, the second phase of NREGA had started where five districts of Assam were also included. The third phase started on April 1, 2008 where remaining 14 districts of Assam came under the purview of the Act. Hence, at present all the districts of Assam are implementing the provisions of MGNREGA. In Assam also, MGNREGA can definitely improve the economic and social condition of beneficiaries if implemented in right directions.

After independence most of the villages of Assam have been suffering from poverty, lack of quality health services, poor infrastructure and inadequate facilities of education. The main objectives of MGNREGA are rural development and employment. But so far as Assam is concerned, these objectives have hardly been achieved. Out of the households given job cards under MGNREGA in Assam, only few got 100 days work while some did not get any work at all! The Union Ministry for Rural Development has published a report for the financial year 2012-13 on the details of MGNREGA implementation in different States. Assam's dismal performance in this regard is reflected pretty well in this report. The total number of households which got job cards in 2012-13 in all the 27 districts of the State is 39, 49,587. Of these, only 12, 10,427 households got work in the last fiscal. Among these, 9,788 job-card holding households got 100 days of work; 3,21,391 households

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got less than 10 days work and 6,90,965 households got at least 15 days work.

Various social scientists have made attempt to study the impact of MGNREGA and also its implementation procedures. Sen (2009) attempted to measure the outcome of good governance practiced by Gram Panchayats (GPs) of West Medinipur district of West Bengal. Data regarding different parameters related to core characteristics of good governance such as participation, transparency, accountability, effectiveness and efficiency, equity were taken into consideration in that study. Khan, Ullah and Salluja (2007) have discussed the direct and the indirect effects of MGNREGA on employment generation and poverty reduction in a rural area. Indian Institute of Technology, Chennai (2009), evaluated the impact of MGNREGA in the state of Tamil Nadu by taking 5 districts into account. Dey and Bedi (2010) studied the functioning of the MGNREGA between 2006 and 2009 in Birubham district, West Bengal. Their study reveals that in order to serve as an effective “employer of last resort”, the programme should provide more days of work especially during lean season and wages should be paid in a timely manner. A study by Nayak, Behera, and Mishra (2008) in Orissa looked through certain physical and financial parameters like provision of employment to those who demand jobs and maintenance of wage and non-wage ratio. However, its performance in utilization of funds and creation of demand for jobs was not very encouraging. Baruah.K (2011) looks at the corruption in rural

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employment programs in Assam. Mathur (2007) thinks that a system of regular and continuous flow of authoritative information is essential. There is room for the government to take up concurrent evaluations, more effective monitoring, time-series studies, and focused reports on critical aspects like minimum wages, muster rolls. To improve implementation, the government needs to solve problems, modify policy directives, and issue operational guidelines for the district, block and village levels. Saikia K (2012) found that in certain villages in Kamrup district, wages had not been paid for the work done. When comparisons were made of the payments as per the pass-book with the payment as per the job card, it was discovered that the job card did not contain the inner pages that record the work done by each person; the job card itself was incomplete.

Objectives and Methodology

The prime objectives of this paper are:

- i) To study the impact of MGNREGA on the rural life of the study area.
- ii) To identify the important problems associated with the implementation of the scheme.
- iii) To suggest appropriate suggestion for its effective implementation.

There are 14 blocks in Kamrup district of Assam. Out of 14 blocks a sample of 4 blocks viz. Chamaria, Goroimari, Boko and Chayani blocks have been chosen as the area for drawing sample. In forming the

sample of blocks, care has been taken on the basis of demography, location specific feature, etc. to give fair representation of the district.

The study is based on both primary and secondary data. Primary data has been collected through structured and unstructured questionnaires/schedules. And secondary has been collected from publication of various bodies data published by research investigators, data published by technical journals and various necessary websites, periodicals, bank report .Collected data has been tabulated in systematic way and treated them with different statistical methods so that certain pattern or relation can be derived.

Socio-Economic Background of the Respondents

Kamrup District is situated between 25.46 and 26.49 North Latitude and between 90.48 & 91.50 East Longitude. It is bounded by Udalguri and Baksa districts in the north, Meghalaya in the south, Darrang and Kamrup Metropolitan in the east and Goalpara and Nalbari district in the west. It has a total geographical area of 4, 34,500 acres with 1.26 million (2011) population. As per the Census data 2001, the demographic profile of the district shows that 34.17 percent of the total rural population in the district belongs to the minority community of which Muslims comprise 93 percent. The population density in the district which stands at 581 percent per sq.km is second highest in the state and is significantly higher than the state average which stands at 340 persons as per the 2001 census. The distribution of work forces in

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the district as per the Census 2001 data shows that of the total rural population 32.42 percent are total workers while 67.58 percent are non workers. Cultivators comprise 39.11 percent, agricultural workers comprise 14.19 percent, 6.89 are household industry workers and 39.81 are other workers.

The study reveals that 58 % respondents are from general category, 21.% are OBC, 14.5% are SC and only 6.5% are from General category. 41.5% beneficiaries are engaged in agricultural activities, 55.0% are labourer, and 23% respondents have reported that they possess higher education. Very few family lives in pucca houses, many of them live in huts on the top of a small hill. Main source of drinking water in this area is the hand pump. It is reported by the respondents that even if there were public taps installed, but availability of water is rare and does not fulfill their requirement. The large section of the respondents falls in the income group of 10,000 to 45,000 Rs. in a year. 72% families have their own land, but the land size is very small. The study shows that the basic facilities available in survey area. It includes electricity, television and toilet facilities. The use of cycle, motorcycle and mobile is very common in survey area. Only 22% families have gas connection in their kitchen. The basic toilet and sanitation facilities are available to 68% of households.

Impacts of MGNREGA

Agriculture and labour work is the prime source of income in the survey areas. The study reveals MGNREGA has been successful in increasing the income by providing wage employment to rural households in Kamrup district. 66% households, who reported yearly income up to Rs. 30,000, have admitted that MGNREGA jobs have contributed somewhat from Rs. 5,000 to 20,000 in the yearly income of their family. Similarly 19% of the total households reported that yearly income from MGNREGA has been more than Rs. 25,000.

As a whole the impacts of MGNREGA on rural livelihood are discussed in following points:

Increase in Income: It has been observed that MGNREGA helped to put cash incomes into the hands of rural poor that create a greater degree of economic independence. The survey shows that rural workers are more confident about their roles as contributors to family expenditure and their work decisions, and that they are also becoming more assertive about their space in the public sphere.

Improvement in Consumption Level: MGNREGA works increase earnings of rural household income. It has been found, a large majority (82 %) of the respondents said that they spent wages earned at MGNREGA works on regular food and consumer goods. The increased income locally available through MGNREGA work, they felt, was helping ensure at least two regular meals a day. It could reduce infant

malnutrition through positive effects on household's food security and infant feeding.

Reduction in Indebtedness: MGNREGA helps to reduce the burden of indebtedness of the rural households. 62% of the respondents said that they had spent their wages on repaying small debts. It also helps them to keep themselves away from the clutches of local mahajans and moneylenders.

Improved Literacy: MGNREGA helps to improve the education level of the rural people of Assam. The percentage of literacy rate increases gradually through the MGNREGA act. A significant percentage of workers - almost 57 % spent their MGNREGA wages on their children's education.

Enhanced Healthcare: MGNREGA works also help in improving the health condition of the poor people in both rural and urban areas in Assam. A part of expenditure is met through MGNREGA wages in health care. Around 44 %of the respondents have spent earnings on this. Therefore, the health condition of the selected areas seems a lot better after implementation of MGNREGA act. This Act also has provisions for medical facilities, drinking water facilities etc. during the working hours.

Improved Standard of Living: After implementation of MGNREGA it is noticed that the standard of living of the rural poor in Kamrup district is improving. The total number of job card issued has increased up to 2.05 lakh 2012-13. This ultimately increased the income of the people and helps to reduce the poverty level. As a result the living condition is also improved.

Major Problems

However, MGNREGA suffers from some serious Problems:

Worksite Facilities: According to MGNREGS guidelines, it is mandatory to have basic facilities such as safe drinking water, first-aid kits, shades, period of rest and also crèche facility. But it was found that except drinking water no other facilities were arranged near worksite in the sample blocks. Even some respondents claimed that in some cases drinking water was also not available. Thus manipulation by the local implementing agencies and absence of any monitoring mechanism at the same time resulted in the creation of unsafe and sub-standard working conditions.

Delayed Wage Payment: The data from the field indicated that there are huge irregularities in payment of wage. While only 29.1% of beneficiaries claimed that they received the wages within a month, the rest claimed that there is no certainty in getting wages. Most received it mostly after 2 months. Delay in payments is also responsible for poor participation of women particularly in case of single women if they are

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the main earners in the family. It is observed that around 77% of the beneficiaries are not having the minimum wages fixed by the centre. As per the views of few villagers widow and old women are receiving lesser wages in comparison to men.

No Social Audit Held: The operational guideline details the procedure of Social Audit forum to be held by Gram Sabha on MGNREGS works on 6 months basis. But most of the villagers are not aware about the concept of social audit.

Children on Work: As per the MNREGA guidelines, only adult members above 18 years who are interested to do unskilled work at the statutory minimum wage can work under MGNREGA. But in Kamrup district, it has been found that small children work under it.

Under Employment: Regarding employment, respondents shared that they have not availed complete 100 days in a year. Even in last two years most of the respondents have got 100 days of employment. Only 18% households received around 50 days of works in last two years.

Anomaly in Job Cards: One of the important problems with MGNREGS is that, no proper verification is made while allotting the job card and assigning the works. There are some incident found in field that the children are using job card of their father who is already dead.

Grievances Redressal: Redressal of grievances is an integral part of the MGNREGS scheme. Majority of the respondents did not know that there is provision for grievance redressal.

Low level of Awareness: It is also found that women participation in Assam is low because of low level of awareness about the process and entitlements of the programme. Many of the male folks have withdrawn from agricultural activities and joined works in MGNREGA.

Suggestions

All the loopholes of the MGNREGA act can be reduced easily if the schemes and its execution are reviewed frequently and cases of lapses are immediately rectified. For this purpose, the followings suggestions can be considered:

The success of the programme depends upon its proper implementation. Much of the pitfalls of MGNREGA implementation can be overcome if proper processes and procedures are put in place. Thus, there should be continuous efforts towards creating adequate awareness on different provisions of MGNREGS amongst the people. Creating awareness is necessary not only to motivate the people to work under the scheme but also to encourage them to participate in its planning and implementation.

The MGNRGEA has much more to do to strengthen the Panchayati Raj System and curtailment of direct intervention of other departments or agencies associated with it, would be a welcome step in this regard. The village administration should be brought down to Taluka or lower level so that all the development programmes under MGNREGA can reach the villages situated at a distance from Development Block.

Efficient utilization of resources under the scheme requires bringing in transparency and accountability. Provision for social audit at the panchayat level on a regular basis can play a significant role in this regard.

The leadership style should be democratic in nature. This will facilitate greater community participation, information sharing, expression of opinion by the rural mass, and development of social networks.

There is also the important role of the Govt. of Assam in implementation of MGNREGS. The state Govt. must take immediate steps to stop corruption from grass roots to top level in its implementation by which the MGNREGA wages reaches to the workers directly.

There should be the ability and willingness of local Governments and Panchayat to plan works and run the programmes effectively.

A proper monitoring mechanism should be developed that can assured correct procedure in job card.

Social Audit should be carried out in regular interval.

Any kind of political intervention should be stopped.

Panchayats should be empowered financially and job responsibility should be distributed to all the elected members.

Conclusion

If The MGNREGS is implemented in a proper way as in Assam, it can reduce poverty at the bottom level and it can empower the poor in the short run. The Government has taken various programmes in order to create employment opportunities and to eradicate poverty. Many of these are partially successful in achieving their goals. The MGNREGA programme, being implemented everywhere in Assam, has not achieved its goal fully. In Kamrup district also the programme has not succeeded much. The scheme could not ensure the 100 days job guarantee to the majority of the job card holders. We have observed that the scheme fails in respect of providing employment avenues to the unemployed to a large scale.

In fact, the tune and essence of the Act could not shine in the State of Assam because of worksite facility, faulty wage payment, illegal presence of contractors etc. Apart from these, the potential beneficiaries are not yet well-informed about the objectives and process of this programme. The effectiveness of this programme would improve if the

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poor could be made fully aware of this programme. Therefore, government should take step for providing adequate information of MGNREGA through panchayats and the development blocks among the rural people in time to time through Gram Sabha or other such meeting so that the rural job seekers get easily involved in the work. Otherwise, the success story of MGNREGA implementation will remain confined only to the policy documents and the plan papers of the programme.

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