



IMPACT OF *MGNREGA* ON RURAL EMPLOYMENT GENERATION IN ASSAM: AN OVERVIEW

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Abstract- Poverty alleviation has been one of the objectives of the employment generation programmes in India since independence. As a part of India, Assam has also been experiencing the impact of various employment generation schemes initiated by central government on rural poor's. The National Rural Employment Guarantee Act 2005 (NREGA) renamed as Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) is the boldest and most pragmatic approach to the problems of rural poverty and unemployment. In fact, the Scheme ensures the economic security of the rural poor by providing 100 days guaranteed employment. In the present study, an attempt has been made to assess the efficiency of MGNREGA on employment generation in Assam by employing the indicators viz. total number of households provided employment; percentage of households providing 100 days of employment; job cards issued etc. by using secondary data.

Index Terms- Assam, Employment Generation, Impact, MGNREGA.

I. INTRODUCTION

Majority of the poor in rural areas of the state depend mainly on the wages they earn through unskilled labour. They are often on the threshold level of subsistence and are vulnerable sinking from transient to chronic poverty, in the event of inadequate labour demand or in the face of unpredictable crises that may be general in nature like natural disaster or personal like ill-health, all of which adversely impact their employment opportunities.

Poverty alleviation has been one of the major objectives of the employment generation programmes in India since independence. To achieve this goal, various wage-employment programmes have been initiated by the Government of India during various plans. However, these programmes could not make adequate dent on unemployment in the countryside, because the problem of seasonality in employment of unemployment and underemployment, remained unsolved. In order to overcome all these problems, government of India introduced National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (NREGS) in September 2005 and was implemented from February 2, 2006 and finally Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) in 11th plan. Its introduction was a paradigm shift in India's history of wage-employment generation with the unparalleled attributes such as bottom up approach, right based design, demand driven, self-selecting. It is the country's largest wage-employment programme ever launched with 25 per cent of all rural households participating and an annual central government expenditure of about 0.5 per cent of GDP. The main objective of MGNREGA is to provide at least 100 days work as per demand resulting in creation of productive assets of prescribed quality and durability.

The NREGS is one of the most significant interventions of United Progressive Alliance Government of India in the generation of rural employment in India. The MGNREGA is a landmark in the economic history of independent India which provides legal rights on employment to the rural citizens (Chhabra & Sharma, 2010). The scheme, addressed especially to the problem of galloping rural unemployment, commands a position of an unparalleled significance in amelioration of poverty and unemployment in the post-independent era.

In fact, the MGNREGA was designed as per the NREGA 2005 which provides a legal foundation of work to NREGS and the schemes are the means through which this guarantee comes into effect. The underlying objective of the scheme is to ensure livelihood security of the rural people by providing at least 100 days guaranteed wage employment to every rural household in a financial year whose adult member volunteers to do unskilled manual labour at a statutory minimum wage. Apart from, this work guarantee can also serve other objectives such as generating productive assets, protecting the environment, empowering rural women, reducing rural-urban migration and fostering social equality among others (NREGA, 2005). The promise of providing at least 100 days guaranteed wage employment to every rural household in a financial year and implementation of other pertinent feature of the Act in each and every state is a matter of study.

The significance of MGNREGA lies in the fact that it creates a right based framework for wage employment programme and makes the government legally bound to extend employment to those who demand it (Shah, 2012). While the Act provides a legal framework, the state governments have the legal liability and the central government provides the fiscal guarantee. The Act ensures that there is decentralized planning, which means a perspective plan needs to be prepared for whole district with a list of permissible works. In this way the legislation goes beyond providing a social safety net, and towards guaranteeing the right to employment. There has been a spate of studies designed to assess the performance of MGNREGA ever since the Act relating to it came into being. While some studies have drawn attention to huge leakage and fudging of muster rolls, others are not that critical and have been ecstatic over the number of jobs created, and number of beneficiaries from disadvantaged groups such as the Scheduled Tribes (ST), Scheduled Castes (SC) and women. This is symptomatic of the fact that while some studies have debunked this nation-wide programme, others are seen to endorse it on the grounds that it will transform the lives of poor and make them aware of their entitlement. In the light of this backdrop, this study attempts to investigate the implementation of MGNREGA in the state of Assam with emphasis on coverage of households, employment guaranteed, works undertaken, strengths, bottlenecks and strategies for further strengthening the programme.

II. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The study has been undertaken with the following objectives.

1. To highlight the actual picture of employment generation under MGNREGA in Assam.
2. To analyze the major causes of inefficiency of the scheme and suggest some measures for further improvement in implementation of it.

III. DATABASE AND METHODOLOGY

Present study has been conducted mainly on the basis of secondary data. The sources of the data are published and unpublished sources like books, journals, reports, publications, unpublished doctoral thesis and concerned web sites etc. For assessing the performance of MGNREGA in rural employment generation in Assam, data relating to MGNREGA are compiled from the secondary sources (Statistical Hand Book, Assam) and the study covers 2013-14 to 2022-23. Using official data, this paper evaluates impact of MGNREGA on rural employment generation of Assam by using indicators- a) total number of households provided employment; b) percentage of households providing 100 days of employment under MGNREGA; c) Percentage of disabled persons provided employment etc.

IV. DISCUSSION AND FINDINGS

4.1 Employment Generation

The MGNREGA is an unparalleled rural reconstruction programme to transform the Indian rural economic scene. It has already been stated that the MGNREGA is a unique weapon in the economic history of independent India to remove rural poverty and unemployment. It is a revolutionary step for India as well as Assam's poor which are

lives in rural areas. This would not only help the eradication of rural unemployment but would put a check on migration of rural people to the urban areas.

Assam, one of the major states of North-East India is also covered under MGNREGA. In Assam, the five tribal dominated districts i.e. Karbi Anglong, Kokrajhar, Dima Hasao, Lakhimpur and Dhemaji were the beneficiaries of MGNREGA in the first phase of implementation of the Scheme (2006-07). The Scheme was extended to Barpata, Bongaigaon, Cachar, Darrang, Goalpara, Hailakandi, Morigaon and Nalbari districts of Assam in 2007-08 and from 1st April, 2008 the Scheme was implemented in all the remaining districts of Assam. It is observed that since the inception of MGNREGSA in Assam, there has been a welcome and widespread social acceptance of the scheme and the scheme has received an overwhelming response from the people living in the rural areas. Therefore, in this paper an attempt has been made to examine the performance of MGNREGA about employment generation in Assam during 2013-14 to 2022-23. The performances of MGNREGA in Assam during 2013-14 to 2022-23 have been presented in terms of physical achievements, job card issued and employment provided under MGNREGA.

Table 1. Physical Achievement under MGNREGA in Assam, 2013-14 to 2022-23.

| Year | Employment Generated (Lakh Mandays) | | | | | | |
|---------|--------------------------------------|------|--------|-------|---------|-------|---------|
| | SC | % | ST | % | Others | % | Total |
| 2013-14 | 19.24 | 6.45 | 48.17 | 16.14 | 231.06 | 77.41 | 298.47 |
| 2014-15 | 12.61 | 6.06 | 31.76 | 15.26 | 163.80 | 78.68 | 208.18 |
| 2015-16 | 25.38 | 5.22 | 91.15 | 18.74 | 369.89 | 76.04 | 486.42 |
| 2016-17 | 21.95 | 4.69 | 92.96 | 19.89 | 352.54 | 75.42 | 467.44 |
| 2017-18 | 21.75 | 4.52 | 73.61 | 15.30 | 385.83 | 80.18 | 481.19 |
| 2018-19 | 27.42 | 5.14 | 106.98 | 20.04 | 399.33 | 74.82 | 533.72 |
| 2019-20 | 29.46 | 4.72 | 109.83 | 17.60 | 484.53 | 77.67 | 623.83 |
| 2020-21 | 40.32 | 4.41 | 132.41 | 14.50 | 740.40 | 81.08 | 913.12 |
| 2021-22 | 38.98 | 4.25 | 148.08 | 16.14 | 730.14 | 79.60 | 917.21 |
| 2022-23 | 33.50 | 4.24 | 112.33 | 14.23 | 643.71 | 81.53 | 789.54 |
| Total | 270.61 | 4.73 | 947.28 | 16.56 | 4501.23 | 78.70 | 5719.12 |

Source: Statistical Hand Book Assam; 2014, 2015, 2016, 2017, 2018, 2019, 2020, 2021, 2022 & 2023.

The above Table 1 depicts the physical achievements of MGNREGA in case of employment generation in Assam during 2013-14 to 2022-23. It is apparent from the above table that during reference period, the MGNREGA was able to generate 5719.12 lakh mandays of employment in which 4.73% was SC. The employment generated to ST and others was 16.56% and 78.70% respectively. Thus, the lion's share of the employment was occupied by the other communities including OBC and MOBC etc.

Table 2. 100 Days of Employment Provided in Assam, 2013-14 to 2022-23.

| Year | Total No. of Households Provided Employment | Total No. of Households Provided 100 Days Employment | % |
|---------|---------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------|------|
| 2013-14 | 1261778 | 15505 | 1.23 |
| 2014-15 | 959562 | 10241 | 1.07 |
| 2015-16 | 1502375 | 42362 | 2.82 |
| 2016-17 | 1572427 | 11501 | 0.73 |
| 2017-18 | 1685285 | 10938 | 0.65 |
| 2018-19 | 1744719 | 18468 | 1.06 |
| 2019-20 | 1930419 | 30053 | 1.56 |
| 2020-21 | 2512406 | 71701 | 2.85 |
| 2021-22 | 2736880 | 52308 | 1.91 |
| 2022-23 | 2303101 | 21512 | 0.93 |
| Total | 18208952 | 284589 | 1.56 |

Source: Statistical Hand Book Assam; 2014, 2015, 2016, 2017, 2018, 2019, 2020, 2021, 2022 & 2023.

Table 2 provides the data on 100 days of employment provided under MGNREGA in Assam during 2013-14 to 2022-23. It reveals that during the study period 18208952 rural households provided employment under MGNREGA. Out of these, only 284589 households (1.56%) provided 100 days employment opportunities under the Scheme.

It is further observed from following table 3 that total number of job cards issued to the rural household was 44870266, but only 0.63% of job card holders were accommodated 100 days guaranteed employment during the study period.

Table 3. Job Cards Issued and 100 Days of Employment Provided in Assam, 2013-14 to 2022-23.

| Year | Total No. of Job Cards Issued | Total No. of Households Provided 100 Days Employment | % |
|---------|-------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------|------|
| 2013-14 | 4148981 | 15505 | 0.37 |
| 2014-15 | 4183913 | 10241 | 0.24 |
| 2015-16 | 4588555 | 42362 | 0.92 |
| 2016-17 | 4215181 | 11501 | 0.27 |
| 2017-18 | 4363920 | 10938 | 0.25 |
| 2018-19 | 4567589 | 18468 | 0.40 |
| 2019-20 | 4811137 | 30053 | 0.62 |
| 2020-21 | 3603949 | 71701 | 1.99 |
| 2021-22 | 3961115 | 52308 | 1.32 |
| 2022-23 | 6425926 | 21512 | 0.33 |
| Total | 44870266 | 284589 | 0.63 |

Source: Statistical Hand Book Assam; 2014, 2015, 2016, 2017, 2018, 2019, 2020, 2021, 2022 & 2023.

Following table 4 depicts the number of disable person provided employment in Assam under MGNREGA in the study period. During the study period a total of 52359 number of disable persons were provided employment. As per the Persons with Disability Act (PWD) of 1995, MGNREGA should provide 3% employment to the disabled. However, Assam provided 0.38% employments only to the disabled in the year 2023.

Table 4. No. of Disabled Persons Provided Employment in Assam, 2013-14 to 2022-23.

| Year | No. of Disabled Persons Provided Employment |
|---------|---------------------------------------------|
| 2013-14 | 2372 |
| 2014-15 | 1441 |
| 2015-16 | 3734 |
| 2016-17 | 5549 |
| 2017-18 | 7844 |
| 2018-19 | 5586 |
| 2019-20 | 5478 |
| 2020-21 | 6619 |
| 2021-22 | 6855 |
| 2022-23 | 6881 |
| Total | 52359 |

Source: Statistical Hand Book Assam; 2014, 2015, 2016, 2017, 2018, 2019, 2020, 2021, 2022 & 2023.

A survey by the North East Social Trust (NEST Report, 2023) and a few other voluntary organizations of Assam monitoring the impact of this Act and implementation during last couple of years has found the result very disappointing.

4.2. Major Causes of Inefficiency of the Scheme

Number of poverty alleviation schemes has been put in rural part of India since independence. MGNREGA one of them but important thing is that it's provided 100 days legal jobs guarantee in rural households for who is willing to do unskilled manual work under this scheme. Since implemented year in North Eastern Region of India many irregularities were evidenced in implementation of this scheme like irregularities in Job card distribution, delay in wage payment, poor selection of work projects, Muster roll has not been prepared properly. Lack of awareness about this scheme is another important issue of ineffectiveness.

The demand side vulnerabilities of MGNREGA are the low awareness level of workers and the existing workforce are mainly characterized by illiteracy, lack of organization, and social marginalization. Therefore enjoyment of rights affected by:

- ❖ Inabilities to acquire information, formally articulate demand, submit applications, read records (Job card, Master Roll), and enforce transparency safeguards through social audit.
- ❖ Inability to access grievance redressal system (Administrative and Legal).

Again, the supply side vulnerabilities of MGNREGA are the delivery system characterized by lack of personnel, lack of training, and legacy mindset which lead to poor quality of records maintenance; non-issue of legal documents, Job cards, dated receipts; delays-wage, work, measurement; inhibited transparency; diluted accountability and delay in responses to grievances. The major problems encountered by MGNREGA implantations are pointed out as below-

❖ **Awareness generation and information:** The MGNREGA has the potential to provide a “big push” in Assam’s region of distress as claimed by various researchers. For MGNREGA to be able to realise its potential, the role of civil society organizations is critical. But this calls for a new self-critical politics of fortitude, balance and restraint. Except a few awareness generation workshops and training of PRI functionaries, there are no regular sustained awareness programmes for the scheme for the benefit of district officials and villagers. It is observed that most of the officials at the field level do not have an overview of their project and MGNREGA programme and usually carry out the schemes according to the orders from above only.

❖ **Transparency and accountability:** Transparency and accountability are sine qua non to MGNREGA are in built in every project. As per the guidelines of the Act District Project Coordinator will be responsible to ensure transparency and accountability under the scheme (Singh, 2008). For ensuring transparency, some steps like

display of the list of works and persons employed on the Panchayats notice board and prominent places are also undertaken but still transparency remains within red tape.

❖ **Low level of awareness:** In many states in India like Assam, women participation 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. This vacated space in agriculture has been occupied by the womenfolk and this scene is observed mostly in north eastern states of India (Panda & Umdor, 2011).

❖ **Work process, planning, projects and execution:** It is reported in many studies that no consolidated list is prepared and most officials have no idea about the nature and volume of project undertaken in the district. Further, there is hardly any integration of projects taken up in various adjacent blocks because of lack of coordination among project coordinators. As a whole there is no overall district development plan leading to ad-hoc block wise shelf of projects with little integration coordination and convergence.

❖ **Nature of Work:** Most of the studies reveal that nature of work is also not helpful for women workers. The projects selected being related to rural connectivity and renovation of local water bodies involving earth work requiring application of physical force, male workers were preferred to women workers (Hazarika, 2009).

❖ **Wage payments:** It is reported in many studies that there are frequent complaints that the present wage rate which is below market rate and also about delays in making wage payment. Another issue rises about the feasibility of having a national minimum wage; the MGNREGA with its provision for a country-wide wage rate has placed the possibility to do so squarely on the agenda. The MGNREGA wage rate must logically be a need-based national minimum wage under the Minimum Wages Act. Vanaik and Siddhartha, 2008 have explained that the payment of wages into bank accounts for work carried out under the NREGA has been suggested as a way to prevent embezzlement of funds. Union Minister of Rural Development Jairam Ramesh has taken a decision favouring payment of minimum wages for agricultural workers and the wages should not be lower than the minimum wages. The wages would be revised annually and a full revision would be effected every five years in consultation with the States.

❖ **Records:** It is often reported that there is a lack of systematic maintenance of records at block level. The shortage of IT skilled staff, interruption in power supply and non-availability of technical staffs are some of the common problems in Assam.

❖ **Staff training and administrative set up:** In general there is shortage of field staff and proposal for sanction of staff are pending for approval of the state government. CAG Report, 2007 has singled out lack of dedicated administrative and technical staff for NREGA as the key constraint responsible for procedural lapses.

❖ **Monitoring:** The NREGA evolves a strict monitoring-cum-concurrent evaluation mechanism for successful implementation of NREGS in the country. The Act provides a variety of monitoring activities at the various levels of implementation i.e. from village to central level. However, it is reported in many studies that there seems to be no detailed guidelines and standard operating audit procedures except at the central level.

❖ **Non-availability of Child Care Facilities:** One of the major shortcomings of the Act is non-availability of child care and rearing facilities at the work site even though the Act includes this provision. Different studies show that women remained worried about their children while they are working at MGNREGA worksite even some women do not accept the job facilities of MGNREGA because of non-availability of proper child care facilities.

❖ **Poor worksite facilities:** MGNREGA funds have been allocated for the provision of safe drinking water, resting place, changing room, first aid, recreational facility for children etc. But most of the studies reported that except drinking water facility all other facilities were generally absent.

❖ **Illegal Presence of Contractors:** The continued illegal presence of contractors is a significant negative factor affecting the availability of work and its benefit for women (Khera & Nayak, 2009).

❖ **Delay in Payments:** Delay in payments is also responsible for poor participation of women particularly in case of single women in Assam, if they are the main earners in the family.

❖ **Social Audit:** A social audit is an ongoing process through which the potential beneficiaries and other stakeholders of an activity or project are involved at every stage – from planning to implementation, monitoring and evaluation. This process helps in ensuring that the activity or project is designed and implemented in a most suited to the prevailing conditions, appropriately reflects the priorities and preferences of those affected by it, and most effectively serve public interest. To ensure transparency and accountability, social auditing and inspection of NREGA work for proper assessment along with measuring of appropriateness, some steps are to be taken as per the Act of NREGA. But the success of social audit still remains questionable (Gopal, 2009). The social audit

process has a long way to go before it can claim to have contributed to transparency, empowerment and good governance.

Further, it is observed that in 2019-20(NEST Report), 18 districts viz., Bongaigaon, Karbi Anglong, Kokrajhar, Lakhimpur, Borpeta, Cachar, Darrang, Hilakandi, Nalbari, Dhubri, Dibrugarh, Kamrup Rural, Kamrup Metro, Nagaon, Sivasagar, Sonitpur, Tinsukia and Udalguri showed 100% social audit and no record of verification was found in 4 districts viz., Goalpara, Golaghat, Jorhat, and Karimganj. The lowest 32.14% found in North Cachar Hills. It appears that there is no established procedure and system for undertaking social audit.

4.3 Recommendations

The MGNREGA is a new life line of the rural people who earn their livelihood as wage earners. It also gears up the social relationship among the rural people which is a pre requisite condition to build a strong society or a nation. It also reduces the gender difference for some works which are in practice in rural areas. It is also observed that female workers, both urban and rural, receive lesser wages than their male counterparts for doing the same jobs. The Act of the MGNREGA removed the gender difference in wages. The right to participate in works for women was made compulsion as per the Act of MGNREGA that there must be at least 33% participation for women. Some suggestions are incorporated here for further improvement in implementation of the Act.

- All the programmes under MGNREGA must be well planned well ahead of time with a definite time frame for completion.
- MGNREGA has much more to do to strengthen the Panchayati Raj System in Assam, 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 village level or lower level so that all the development programmes under MGNREGA can reach the villages situated at a distance from Development Block.
- Present target of 100 days employment per house hold should be ensuring strictly.
- Wage rate should have parity with outside rate and ongoing price hike which would reduce the migration of labour from village to nearby township or city.
- More transparency is needed about the sanctioned work and financial involvement therein.
- Auditing may be done through an extra government agency in addition to *Gram Panchayat* to check mishandling of fund.
- Panchayat should be empowered financially and job responsibility should be distributed to all the elected members.
- Any kind of political intervention should be stopped.
- Strengthening active citizenship is a must.
- Build large scale citizen's awareness campaigns for generating demand side of NREGA.
- Improve institutional capacities of Gram Panchayat.
- Financial Inclusion – Banks & Insurance network must be extended.
- People's participation through *Gram Sabhas* needs to be ensured.
- Social Audits for transparency and accountability is a must.
- Access to Information at every stage of implementation is quite necessary.
- IT platform for placing all information in public domain.
- An effective grievance redressal mechanism needs to be evolved.
- A partnership with Academia, Media, Legal Fraternity and Financial Institutions is quite necessary for effective implementation of the Act.

V. CONCLUSION

To conclude, the objective of MGNREGA was not only created employment opportunities in rural areas but also created durable assets which in turn further improved resource base for livelihoods of rural people. But from the above analysis it is reveal that the performance of MGNREGA in Assam is not at all satisfactory. The scheme could not ensure the 100 days job guarantee to the majority of the job card holders. Even we observed that the

scheme fails in respect of providing employment avenues to the unemployed in a large scale. In fact the tune and essence of the Act could not shine in the State of Assam. Though MGNREGA has positive impact on employment pattern of women but in Assam their presence is also less in average. The gained benefits of women as community can be understood by increased presence in the *gram-sabha*, increasing number of women in speaking out in the meetings, increasing capacity of interaction etc. This unique feature little bit found in Assam too. But the poor implementation across the nation (such as lack of child care facility, worksite facility and illegal presence of contractors) accrued the gender sensitiveness of this Act mainly in north-eastern state. Certain initiatives and changes should be taken to overcome these drawbacks at government as well as individual levels.

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