

A Brief Scanning on Performance of Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act in Assam, India

Sanjay Kanti Das*

Department of Commerce Lumding College; Lumding, Nagaon, India
*Corresponding author: sanjay19711123@rediffmail.com

Received April 26, 2013; Revised May 02, 2013; Accepted May 03, 2013

Abstract 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 guaranteed wage employment. MGNREGA has positive impact on employment pattern of women. Using official data this paper evaluates India's National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (NREGS) according to criteria viz. average number of days of employment per household; percentage of households completing 100 days of employment under NREGS; percentage of expenditure against total available funds etc. Performance across the first two criteria has been disappointing and has deteriorated over time. Percentage of expenditure against total available funds has risen sharply. Finally, it is difficult to escape the conclusion that the NREGS has not performed well. It was found that 158.63 lakhs households in the state were provided job cards, whereas 80.92 lakhs households only were able to get job during the study period. It means 51.01% households with job cards did not have any opportunity of working in this scheme during this period. During the whole period Assam could provide 100 days employment to only 3.7% of job card holders which is one of the sad parts on its performance. The paper makes a number of policy suggestions to improve the performance of the NREGS.

Keywords: *assam, hundred days guaranteed employment, job card holders, national rural employment guarantee act, panchayati raj institution*

1. Introduction

Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (henceforth MGNREGA) is a revolutionary Act of the Government of India with tremendous potentiality of eradicating unemployment situation in the country. The National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (henceforth NREGS) implemented by the Ministry of Rural Development is the flagship programme of the Central Government that directly touches the lives of the poor and promotes inclusive growth in the country. The NREGA was notified on September 7, 2005 and was the first of its kind in the world (Bordoloi, 2011 [1]). It was brought under purview of an Act for rural employment at an unprecedented scale in order to provide employment when other employment alternatives are scarce or inadequate. The Act is considered as a significant vehicle for strengthening decentralised and deepening process of democracy by giving a pivotal role to the Panchayati Raj Institution (henceforth PRI) concerning planning, monitoring and implementation [2]. Unique features of the Act include, time bound employment guarantee within 15 days, and incentive-

disincentive structure to the State Government for providing employment as 90% of the cost for employment is borne by the Centre or payment of unemployment allowance at their own cost and emphasis on labour intensive works prohibiting the use of contractors and machinery. The Act also mandates 33% participation for women. The major landmarks in the history in the passing of MGNREGA are presented in Figure 1.

The principal objective of launching of NREGS is to uplift the backward socio-economic conditions of rural people of India. It indicates that the socio-economic backwardness of rural India has profound impact in launching of NREGS and therefore, the central Government has implemented the Scheme with a lot of enthusiasm.

The first phase of NREGA was started on February 2, 2006 in 200 districts of the country including seven districts of Assam. 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 scheme of MGNREGA. On March 31, 2013 Assam completed seventh year of MGNREGA implementation. Under this Act any rural

family is guaranteed to provide at least 100 days unskilled employment at minimum wage in a financial year. All together there were 10 works taken up under MGNREGA such as rural connectivity, flood control, water conservation and water harvesting, drought proofing including afforestation and tree plantation, micro irrigation, provision of irrigation facility to land development, renovation of traditional water bodies, land

development, any other activity approved by MRD and work under Bharat Nirman, Rajiv Gandhi Seva Kendra under NREGA. Among all the programmes, the scheme rural connectivity got top priority. It may be happened due to the prevailing poor road connectivity in the villages of Assam for which it assumed top priority among all the ongoing work schemes under NREGA.

<u>Milestones of the Indian Journey towards MGNREGA</u>
1952 Community Development Programme (CDP)
1960 Rural Manpower Programme (RMP).
1971 Crash Scheme for Rural Employment (CSRE).
1972 Intensive Rural Employment Programme (IREP) on Pilot basis.
1973 Small Farmers Development Agency (SFDA), Marginal Farmers and Agricultural Labour Scheme (MFAL).
1977 Food for Work Programme (FWP).
1980 National Rural Employment Programme (NREP).
1983 Rural Landless Employment Guarantee Programme (RLEGP).
1993 Jawahar Rozgar Yojana (JRY) and Employment Assurance Scheme (EAS).
1999 Jawahar Gram Samridhi Yojana (JGSY).
2001 Sampoorna Grameen Rozgar Yojana (SGRY).
2004 National Food for Work (NFFWP).
2005 Notification of NREGA.
2006 Implementation of Phase I- NREGA in 200 districts of India.
2007 Extension of Phase II -NREGA to additional 130 Districts.
2008 NREGA Phase III-Extended to cover all districts of India.
2009 NREGA renamed as Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MNREGA) and extended whole country.
Source: History of Development & Employment Programmes in India: at a Glance. Available at http://tarunguptaitian.wordpress.com/ias/187-2/

Figure 1. Milestones of the Indian Journey towards MGNREGA (1960-2009)

The comparative analysis on major works undertaken under MGNREGA reveals that in India as a whole around 71 lakh works were undertaken (including new works as well as spill-over works from the previous year), of which 60% relate to water conservation, 12% for the provision of irrigation facility to land owned by SC/ST/BPL, IAY beneficiaries, small farmers or marginal farmers as defined in the Agriculture debt waiver & debt relief schemes or beneficiaries under the Scheduled Tribes & other traditional forest dwellers (Recognition of forest right) Act 2006, 17% rural connectivity and 8% for land development in 2012-13 (up to December, 2012). Table 1 depicts the percentage of expenditure incurred in the different heads of works undertaken under MGNREGA during 2012-13.

It is reported by Ministry of Rural Development, 2013 [3] that in the year 2011-12, Assam could complete 9970 numbers of projects by creating equal numbers of rural assets. It is reported that Sonitpur district of Assam could complete highest 2163 numbers of work, whereas Chirang and Nalbari districts of Assam bottomed the list by completing one (1) and seven (7) works respectively in the whole year. It is also reported (NEST Report, 2013[4]) that out of ten categories of works approved in the MGNREGA, 62% of works were completed only under rural connectivity and drought proofing types. Only 19 works of Rajiv Gandhi Seva Kendra was completed in Assam. In Assam 51964 numbers of works are running

behind schedule, out of which 48013 numbers of works are delayed by more than three months. 3094 numbers of registered households in Assam are not given job cards even. Besides 2443 Job card holders have not been paid the unemployment allowances.

Table 1. Percentage of Expenditure Incurred in the Different Heads of Works, 2012-13 (up to Dec'2012)

Major Works Under MGNREGA.	Assam	NER	India
Water conservation	11%	9%	60%
Provision of Irrigation facility to land owned by SC/ST/ BPL and IAY beneficiaries	32%	26%	12%
Rural Connectivity	47%	52%	17%
Land Development	1%	6%	8%
Any other activity including Bharat Nirman Rajiv Gandhi Seva Kendra, Rural Drinking Water, Fisheries, Rural Sanitation etc.	9%	7%	3%
Source: Ministry of Rural Development, 2013.			

2. Statement of the Problem

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 NREGS is a landmark in the economic history of independent India which provides legal rights on employment to the rural citizens (Chhabra & Sharma, 2010 [5]). 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 NREGS 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 [6]). 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 NREGA 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 [7]). 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 NREGS 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 NREGA in the state of Assam, India with emphasis on coverage of households, employment guaranteed, works undertaken, strengths, bottlenecks and strategies for further strengthening the programme.

3. Review of Literature

The main purpose of the review of literature pertaining to the evaluation of performances of NREGS in Assam is to give a proper orientation and perspective to the present work. A survey of literature places a significant role in establishing the backdrop for any research work in social sciences. It is felt that justification of present study can be made by reviewing the available literature on the subject.

Therefore, an attempt has been made to review the literature on the subject so as to establish the relevance of the present study.

3.1. In All India Contexts

A lot of literature are found from different studies in India wherein the details about the salient features of NREGA and its several relevant issues are narrated (e.g. Trivedi and Aswal, 2011 [8]; Thomas, 2008 [9]; Mahapatra, 2008 [10]; Patra and Dhal, 2009 [11]; Shamsi, 2007 [12], Singh, 2008 [13]). A few studies of these further observed that the scheme is quite different from other employment scheme launched by the Government on many grounds. Some studies dealt with the performance of NREGA in some selected states of India which are satisfactory and some are not well (e.g. Trivedi and Aswal, 2011 [14]; Jacob and Varghese, 2006 [15]; Louis, 2006 [16]; Khera, 2008 [17]; Jeyaranjan, 2011 [18]; Jandu, 2008 [19]; Khera and Muthiah, 2010 [20]; Shrinivasan, 2012 [21]; Khera and Nayak, 2009 [22]). A lot of studies are also available which observed that NREGA is the successful scheme of the central Government of India to improve the condition of rural people (e.g. Puri (2008 [23]; Bhatia and Dreze, 2006 [24]). Some specific studies were also available which explained the other segments of rural development issues in the context of NREGA (e.g. Das, 2007 [25]; Dreze, 2008 [26]). Patel (2006 [27]) in his research paper has pointed out some important constraints of existing rural employment generation programmes and highlighted the Government's keenness to involve Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) directly in NREGS. Saha Roy (2013 [28]) observed from different studies that there is continued illegal presence of contractors and delay in payments is a significant negative factor affecting the availability of work. In another study Goswami (2009 [29]) expressed that the Government of Andhra Pradesh has successfully implemented NREGA and the significant development regarding implementation of NREGA in the state of AP was that the use of Information Technology (IT) in all stages of implementation of NREGA work. Many research works have done on wage system in MGNREGA scheme (e.g. Anindita & Bhatia, 2010 [30]; Vanaik & Siddarth, 2008 [31]; CAG, 2007 [32]; NCAER, 2009 [33]). MGNREGA has a demand driven Scheme so under this scheme part of funds 60% expended on wages but due to irregularities in some cases work has been completed but wages have not been given to beneficiaries. Payments of wages through bank are another safe guard of this scheme but due to corruption and irregularities wage has been not received by beneficiaries as reported in different studies. Employment and unemployment allowance have important part of MGNREGA scheme, this scheme given an assurance to rural people 100 days employment on nearer at home but unfortunately works were not provided within 15 days its provision under NREGA Act to provide unemployment allowance on this theme many research works have been done (e.g. Chandrashekhar & Ghosh, 2005 [34], Dreze Jeans et al., 2006 [35], Rai, 2010 [36], Jha et al., 2012 [37], Datta et al.,

2012 [38], Tiwari et al., 2011 [39], Chowdhury, 2011 [40], Hirway and Shah, 2011 [41]).

3.2. In the Context of North East India and Assam in Particular

So far as the successful implementation of NREGA in North East India, most particularly in Tripura, but have dearth of literature about the impact and performance of NREGA in Assam except a few wherein the poor performance and rampant misuse and corruption in implementation articulated (North East Social Trust Report, Indo-Global Social Service Society, other NGO report etc). A brief review on the literature available from North East India is made as below.

Borgohain (2005 [42]) highlighted that enactment of NREGA is a bold step addressed especially to the problem of galloping rural unemployment, commands a position of an unparallel significance in the eradication of unemployment in the rural areas. Hazarika (2009 [43]) examined the impact of MGNREGA on gender empowerment in Morigaon and Bongaigaon district of Assam. According to him majority of the respondents felt that they are now in better position to fulfill their own requirement without looking at others. He further observed that in Bongaigaon district, a large number of job card holders were found who have become Panchayat representatives. In this way he explained the negative side of the existing practices of NREGA.

Goswami (2008 [44]) described that NREGA of 2005 has had a positive impact on the lives of millions of people across the poorest districts in the country. He observed that perhaps the most remarkable feature of NREGA is the programme which implemented without the agency of local contractors, who have emerged as major agents of exploitation of the rural poor. Panda et al. (2009 [45]) found that NREGA empowered rural tribal women in Sikkim and Meghalaya by enhancing their confidence level and by ensuring some degree of financial independence. Panda & Umdor (2011 [46]) conducted a field study on the impact of MGNREGA in Assam and found that on an average only 42% respondents remarked that MGNREGA had helped to uplift women. There has been no change in the status of women in four sample districts except Tinsukia. Bordoloi (2011 [47]) observed that the NREGA is a new lifeline 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. Ministry of Home Affairs, 2011 [48] reported that MGNREGA has ushered in a new era of hope for the downtrodden states of Manipur & Nagaland. It is slowly and steadily transforming the 'Geography of Poverty.' The villager profusely thanked the Govt. of India as MGNREGA programme has contained both hunger and poverty. Hazarika (2009 [49]) observed that the NREGA is a wage employment programme, providing minimum wage employment to casual, unskilled labour, especially during lean season. Its larger aim is to generate savings and assets in the countryside, to promote a growth process based on local

development. The researcher found that the programme has indeed a positive impact on women empowerment, in so far as it has addressed a number of practical gender needs. Bhowmik (2013 [50]) put forward the argument that MGNREGS is of great importance in the state of Tripura. In terms of equity, the state appears to be doing pretty well, while from the point of efficiency, it is better than many states but there are scopes of improvement. The most important issue that crops up here is the low level of awareness regarding the features of the scheme among the rural people. Most of them are not aware that it is a 'Rights based approach' and feels privileged if favoured by the authorities with work. The stakeholders however feel that the scheme suffers from the lack of sufficient monitoring and implementing staff as they present strength is inadequate to fulfill.

4. Objectives

The main focus of the present study is to examine the performance of NREGS in Assam. Therefore, the study is based on the following objectives:

1. To review the working and functioning on NREGS in Assam.
2. To examine the performance of NREGS in Assam and to identify the obstacles in the path of the implementation of the scheme.
3. To suggest suitable measures for the effective implementation of the scheme.

5. Methodology

This study uses mainly secondary data. The sources of the data are published and unpublished sources like books, journals, reports, publications, unpublished doctoral dissertation and concerned web sites etc. For assessing the performance of NREGS in Assam, data relating NREGS are compiled from the secondary sources and the study covers 2007-08 to 2011-12. Using official data this paper evaluates India's NREGS according to criteria: a) average number of days of employment per household; b) percentage of households completing 100 days of employment under NREGS; c) percentage of expenditure against total available funds etc.

6. Result & Discussion

6.1. MGNREGA: A Public Wage Programme with Right to Employment

National Rural Employment Guarantee Act later renamed as Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) in 2009 passed with the objectives to provide work at remunerative wages to landless labourers and marginal farmers; and to create assets for raising agricultural productivity and so on. The act became effective at the state level in February 2006 in 200 districts, guaranteeing employment up to 100 days a year to poor rural households on demand. Significantly,

MGNREGA is a right-based programme, unlike earlier employment schemes. The rights of MGNREGA workers include employment on demand, minimum wages, gender parity of wages, and payment of wages within 15 days, as well as the provision of basic worksite facilities, among others [51]. Further, 33% works are reserved for women participation vide Acts purview.

There are many factors that encourage the women workers to participate in this scheme include nature of work, which do not need skilled worker, the limited hours of work, availability of work locally, reduction of migration of male member, substantial jump in the wage rate etc. Participation of women varies widely across the nation which is measured in persondays or mandays.

At the national level participation of women has increased significantly from 46.41% in 2010-11 to 48.81% in 2011-12 and further to 53.01% in 2012- 13 (till January, 2013) which are exceeding expectations and the stipulated 33% share. Highest participation is seen in states like Kerala (92.66%) followed by Poducherry (83.96%) in 2011-12. The share of women was less in states like Bihar, Punjab, West Bengal and most of North Eastern States of India. The participation rate of women in North Eastern States of India is mentioned in the following Table 2.

From the above data it has come to light that none of the North Eastern States of India could able to cross the national level participation of women in 2010-11 (46.41%) and 2011-12 (48.81%). Among the North Eastern States of India, Tripura had the highest percentage in 2010-11 and Meghalaya in 2011-12 in case of women participation. Assam ranks the lowest category state in all the respective year just above Mizoram in respect to women participation.

Chart 1 depicts that the share of women in Assam in MGNREGA is in decreasing trend. At an average only 27.06% women are provided with MGNREGA employment network.

Table 2. Participation Rate of Women in North-Eastern States in India

State	Women Participation Rate (%)		
	2009-10	2010-11	2011-12
Assam	18.92	21.22	24.91
Manipur	30.34	29.87	33.58

Meghalaya	32.13	36.54	41.59
Mizoram	21.23	20.45	23.61
Nagaland	23.78	25.12	27.05
Tripura	36.67	37.67	38.64
Arunachal Pradesh	36.43	35.44	40.33
INDIA	45.65	46.41	48.81

Source: MGNREGA MIS Report of 2007 to 2012. Available at http://nrega.nic.in/netnrega/MISreport3.aspx?fin_year

The MGNREGA plays a significant role to meet the practical as well as strategic needs of examined through the following parameters (Das, 2012 [52]; Kar, 2013 [53]):

i) Income-Consumption Effects: An Income-consumption effect means an increase in income of women workers and consequent ability to choose their consumption baskets. In examining MGNREGA more emphasis is given to consumption because it is the main factor for judging income-consumption effects. If a woman earns but unable to spend for her own needs or surrender her income to the head of the household then the element of empowerment does not come. MGNREGA empowers women by giving them a scope of independent earning and spend some amount for their own needs.

ii) Intra-Household Effects: Women play a major role in raising the economic resources for their family but their contribution remains uncounted because of their performance is not considered monetarily (unpaid work). In rural areas, the dominance of male in intra-household decisions has been seen. MGNREGA has significant impact in converting such unpaid work of women into paid work and widen the scope of decision making role of women in household matters. As the wages are paid through formal institutions, the intra-household status of women increases and they can control cash resources because withdrawn can be made only as per her own decision.

iii) Enhancement of Choices and Capability: MGNREGA has widened the choice set for women by giving them independent income-earning opportunity. If a woman depends on the head of the household then her choice become the subject of household direction. It is reported that MGNREGA has enhanced the choice of women to use earnings.

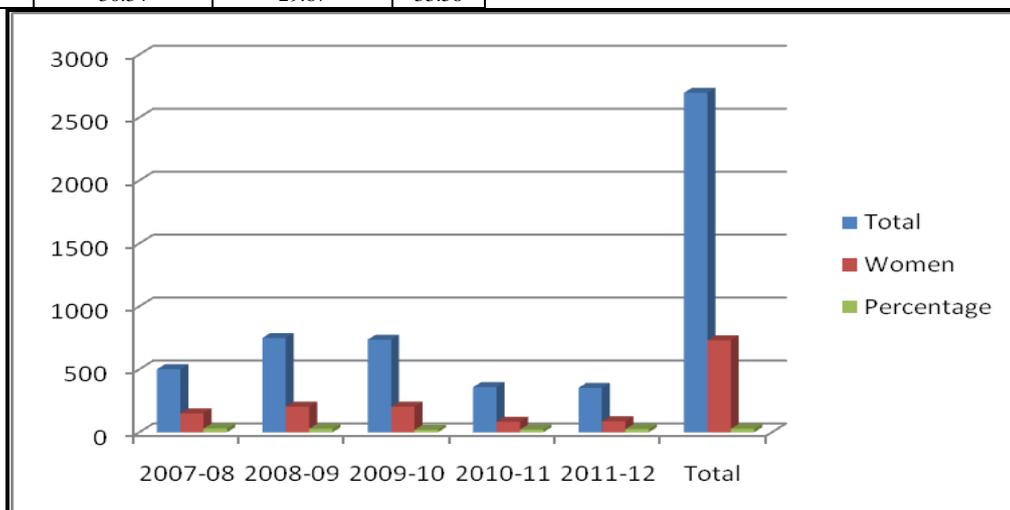


Chart 1. Women Employment Generated in Assam (2007-08-2011-12)

Source: MGNREGA MIS Report from 2007 to 2012. Available at: http://nrega.nic.in/netnrega/MISreport3.aspx?fin_year

iv) **Community-Level Effects:** Women's participation at the local or district level of governance process is low in spite of 73rd Amendments of the Constitution. But women participation has increased after the implementation of MGNREGA in many areas. A large number of women workers attended the *gram-sabha* meeting held in connection with MGNREGA. Community level empowerment of women is one of the great achievements of this Act.

6.2. Performances of NREGS in Assam

The NREGS is an unparalleled rural reconstruction programme to transform the Indian rural economic scene. It has already been stated that the NREGS is a unique weapon in the economic history of independent India to remove rural poverty and unemployment [54]. It is a revolutionary step for India's poor. This would not only help the eradication of rural unemployment but would put a check on migration of rural people to the urban areas. In this section an attempt has been made to examine the performances of NREGS in Assam.

Assam, one of the major states of North-East India is also covered under NREGS. In Assam, the five tribal dominated districts i.e. Karbi Anglong, Kokrajhar, Dima Hasao, Lakhimpur and Dhemaji were the beneficiaries of NREGS 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 NREGS 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 performances of NREGS in Assam and this section basically deals with detail analysis regarding performances of the NREGS in Assam and other North Eastern States of India during 2007-08 to 2011-12. The performances of NREGS in Assam during 2007-08 to 2011-12 have been presented in terms of physical achievements, financial performance, job card issued and employment provided under NREGS.

The Table 3 presents the achievements of NREGS in Assam during 2007-08 to 2011-12. It is apparent from the Table 4 that during reference period, the NREGS was able to generate 2695.82 lakh mandays of employment of which 24.91% to women. The employment generated to SC and ST was 9.62% and 30.06% respectively while 60.32% of the total employment belonged to the other communities. Thus, the lion's share of the employment was occupied by the other communities including OBC and MOBC etc.

Table 3. Physical Achievements under NREGS in Assam, 2007-08 to 2011-12

Year	Employment Generated (Lakh Mandays)						
	SC	%	ST	%	Others	%	Total
2007-08	40.69	8.13	191.37	38.26	268.19	53.61	500.25
2008-09	78.08	10.42	258.32	34.50	412.40	55.08	748.80
2009-10	89.03	12.11	227.36	30.92	418.78	56.97	735.17
2010-11	19.78	5.53	69.94	19.51	268.58	74.96	358.30
2011-12	31.72	8.99	63.28	17.91	258.30	73.11	353.3
Total	259.3	9.62	810.27	30.06	1626.25	60.32	2695.82

Source: Statistical Hand Book Assam 2007; 2008; 2009; 2010 and 2011

The financial performances of NREGS in Assam during 2007-08 to 2011-12 are shown in the Table 4. It is evident from the table that during 2007-08 to 2011-12, the total expenditure incurred under NREGS in Assam was 383774.72 lakh as against 467992.96 lakh available funds.

The percentage of expenditure was 82% during the study period. It is pertinent to note that during 2010-11, the expenditure was much higher (165.48%) than the total fund released under the Scheme while the percentage of expenditure is too low in 2007-08.

Table 4. Financial Performances under NREGS in Assam, 2007-08 to 2011-12

Year	Total Available Fund (Rs. in Lakh)	Total Expenditure (Rs. in Lakh)	%
2007-08	80609.74	54914.93	68.12
2008-09	132229.22	95380.77	72.13
2009-10	131203.57	97155.57	74.05
2010-11	40888.47	67662.34	165.48
2011-12	83061.96	68661.11	82.66
Total	467992.96	383774.72	82.00

Source: Statistical Hand Book Assam 2007; 2008; 2009; 2010 and 2011

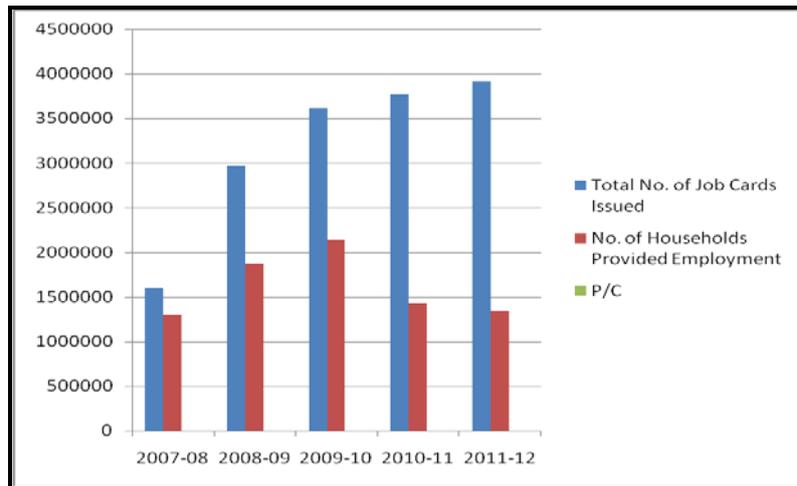


Chart 2. Job Card Issued and Employment Provided in Assam, 2007-08 to 2011-12

Source: Statistical Hand Book Assam 2007; 2008; 2009; 2010 and 2011

The Chart 2 represents the Job card issued and employment provided under NREGS in Assam during the period 2007-08 to 2011-12. It is evident from the Chart 2 that during 2007-08 to 2011-12, the NREGS could provide employment to 80.92 lakh rural households as against 158.63 lakhs Job Cards. It shows that during 2007-08 to 2010-11, the Scheme was able to generate employment to only 51.01% of the total Job card holders which means half of the job card holders do not get the required number of guaranteed job which is more acute in the initial years.

Table 5 provides the data on 100 days of employment provided under NREGS in Assam during 2007-08 to 2011-12. It reveals that during the reference period 80.92 lakhs rural households provided employment under NREGS. Out of these, only 5.86 lakhs households (7.25%) provided 100 days employment opportunities under the Scheme.

Table 5. 100 Days of Employment Provided in Assam, 2007-08 to 2011-12

Year	No. of Households Provided Employment	No. of Households Provided 100 Days Employment	%
2007-08	1301078	239543	18.41
2008-09	1873629	176757	9.43
2009-10	2137270	130457	6.10
2010-11	1432424	22497	1.57
2011-12	1347201	17050	1.27
Total	8091602	586304	7.25

Chart 3 depicts the gap in the existing demand and supply of employment avenues in NREGS in Assam in different years. The success of the movement can better be explained that the scheme is not sufficient enough to provide employment to all unemployed masses of the state which is evident from number of issuing job card or number of households demanded employment.

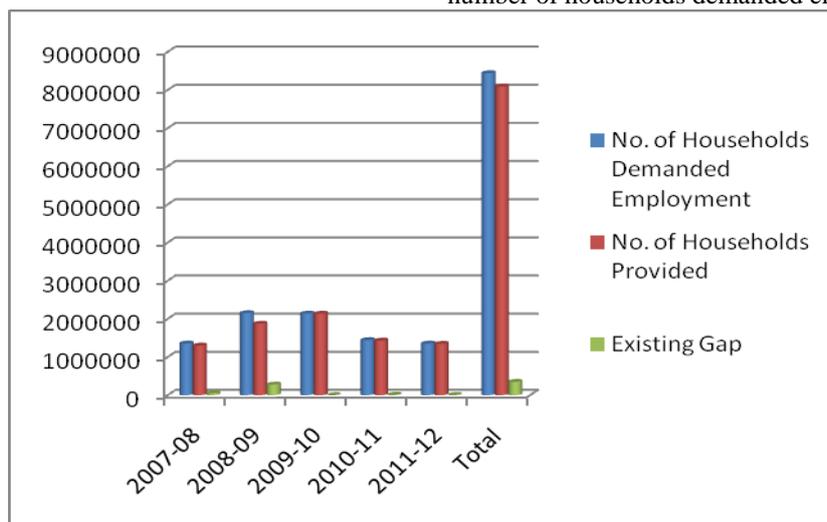


Chart 3. Gap in Employment in Assam, 2007-08 to 2011-12

Source: Statistical Hand Book Assam 2007; 2008; 2009; 2010 and 2011

It is further observed from Table 6 that only 3.7% of job card holders were accommodated 100 days guaranteed employment during the study period. This scene is very

acute in last two year i.e. in 2010-11 (0.6%) and 2011-12 (0.44%).

Table 6. 100 Days of Employment Provided in Assam, 2007-08 to 2011-12

Year	Total No. of Job Cards Issued	No. of Households Provided 100 Days Employment	%
2007-08	1599659	239543	14.97
2008-09	2969266	176757	5.95
2009-10	3611714	130457	3.61
2010-11	3769550	22497	0.60
2011-12	3913176	17050	0.44
Total	15863365	586304	3.70

Source: Statistical Hand Book Assam 2007; 2008; 2009; 2010 and 2011

Table 7 depicts the number of disable person employed in Assam provided employment in different years. During the study period a total of 12274 number of disable persons were provided employment. As per the Persons with Disability Act (PWD) of 1995, NREGA should provide 3% employment to the disabled. However, Assam provided 0.036% employments only to the disabled in the last year.

Table 7. Number of Disable Person Employed in Assam, 2007-08 to 2011-12

Year	No of Disable Persons Provided employment
2007-08	2949
2008-09	2934
2009-10	1989
2010-11	2152
2011-12	2250
Total	12274

Source: Statistical Hand Book Assam 2007; 2008; 2009; 2010 and 2011

Thus, it appears from the above that though the NREGS is the bold and most pragmatic approach to the problems of rural poverty and unemployment but the success of the scheme in Assam is very poor. In fact, the Scheme fails to ensure the economic security of the rural poor by providing guaranteed wage employment in Assam. Though the Scheme is an important milestone in the eradication of rural poverty and unemployment problem in India which has added a new dimension to the unemployment problem of the country but the success of the movement still remains questionable. The Government of India though has kept high hopes on NREGS to achieve its noble objectives but needs more steps for its successful implementation.

In Assam, the Scheme has been implemented with a lot of enthusiasm and initiatives. It is observed that since its inception the State receives overwhelming response from the rural poor. The Scheme has been implemented in Assam with a view to eradicate rural unemployment and to improve the living conditions of the poor and other vulnerable sections of society. During 2007-08 to 2011-12, the Government of Assam has spent Rupees 383774.72 lakh under NREGS to generate 5863.04 lakh mandays of employment. It is pertinent to note that during the reference period NREGS could provide employment to 80.92 lakhs rural households out of which 5.86 lakhs households i.e. 7.25% of the total households have been provided 100 days of wage employment. This clearly indicates the poor performance of the scheme in Assam.

6.3. Impact of National Rural Employment Guarantee Act on Rural Poor

Any Act has three types of impact on the society-short term, medium term and the long term. It may also affect a given society at three levels-the value system, the institutions, and the processes. NREGA is one of the most recent Act of India and have very limited empirical evidences to present any observation regarding the medium term and long term effects. Moreover we also have insufficient basis to discuss the nature of impact of this Act upon the values or institutions in the State. But there are enough studies to help us in finding out the short term as well as the procession aspects of the impact this step by the Indian state in the context of empowerment of the rural poor particularly the more vulnerable sections of the society like women, SCs and STs.

The NREGA will have significant positive impact on seasonal rural-urban migrations by providing employment to rural workers during the lean season (Das, 2013 [55]). This will reduce the problem of excessive population pressures in Indian cities as surplus rural labour will find employment in their own districts. The NREGA may also have an impact on permanent migrations trends.

Though it is difficult to ascertain the impact, one can assume that the created infrastructure and the increased activity in the rural economy due to increased purchasing power will lead to higher rates of permanent job creation, thereby mitigating the urgency to migrate. Further, the public works have the potential to develop human capital by promoting skills in rural India. This may be through 'learning-by-doing' kind of processes or through formal training of the workers by trained personnel (Khandelwal & Chawla, 2006 [56]). This shall reduce the dependence of the rural population on agriculture by enabling them to move on to other activities. Thus, NREGA has several potential benefits of reviving the economy as it is self targeting, self adjusting and self liquidating.

A panel survey conducted by the National Sample Survey Organisation (NSSO) on the MGNREGA in 3 states shows that the Scheme provides work at a time when no other work or alternate employment opportunities exist. The Scheme has also contributed to ensuring greater food security, monthly per capita expenditure, savings etc (MGNREGA Sameeksha, 2013 [57]). In fact, a recent report by a global research organisation indicates that for the first time in nearly 25 years, growth in rural spending outpaced urban consumption in the two years between 2009-10 and 2011-12. It also concluded that the increase in rural consumption is driven in significant part by the MGNREGA (CRISIL Research Insight, 2012 [58]).

To ensure transparency in wage payments and prevent misappropriations, the Government of India mandated that all MGNREGA wage payments should be made through banks/post office accounts opened in the name of the worker. As a result, nearly 8.6 crore bank/post office accounts (as per MIS data) of rural people have been opened under MGNREGA and around 80% of MGNREGA payments are made through this route. There are 4.08 crore accounts in banks and 4.53 crore in Post Offices (as per MIS data). The opening of accounts has brought the poor into the organised sector and in some cases provided them with better access to credit, an unprecedented financial inclusion initiative.

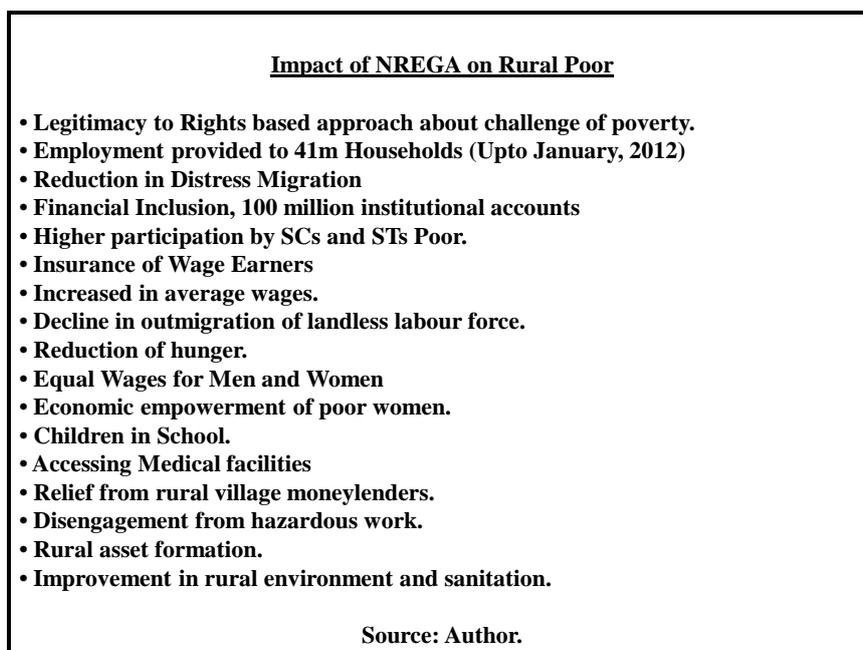


Figure 2. Impact of NREGA on Rural Poor

The Scheme also provides an alternative source of income for rural labourers, raising the reservation wage and implicitly offering labourers bargaining powers in an otherwise inequitable rural labour market. The Scheme has provided labourers (particularly those who are in debt bondage or contract labour) with a dignified choice of work (MGNREGA Sameeksha, 2013 [59]). MGNREGA has also reduced distress migration from traditionally migration-intensive areas.

Provision of water is vital for agriculture and ensuring food and water security in rural India. Research suggests that water-related assets created under MGNREGA have increased the number of days in a year water is available and also the quantity of water available for irrigation. The increased availability of water has also led to changes in cropping patterns and increased area under cultivation according to some studies.

In brief the major dimensions related to the impact of NREGA can be summarised as the following (see Figure 2).

6.4. Reality Check of NREGA in Assam

NREGA has made a dent on poverty by increasing employment opportunities in India. During the first year of implementation (2006-07) in 200 districts, 2.10 crore households were employed and 90.5 crore mandays were generated in India. In 2007-08, 3.39 crore households were provided employment and 143.59 crore mandays were generated in 330 districts of India. In 2008-09, 4.51 crore households have been provided employment and 216.32 crore mandays have been generated across the country.

A survey by the North East Social Trust (NEST Report, 2013 [60]) and a few other voluntary organisations of Assam monitoring the impact of this Act and implementation during last couple of years has found the result very disappointing. For the financial year 2011-12 NEST carried out an intensive research on the basis of the

Governments data to find out the implications of the Act in the state. It was reported that during the whole year (2011-12) Assam could provide 100 days employment to only 1.04% job card holders. Further, the status of implementation of India's flagship rural job guarantee scheme MGNREGA was very poor in Assam during 2010-11. More than 24 lakh households (65% of the total registered MGNREGA card holders in the state) did not get job in the entire 2010-11 under MGNREGA. While only 16,473 households got job for 100 days in the year 6. 11 lakhs households got job for less than 15 days as reported by NEST. It is important to note here the working of NEST on MGNREGA issue in Assam. North East Social Trust (NEST) is working in the north-eastern states of India for strengthening of rural livelihood opportunities and local governance in the region. In collaboration with Centre for Microfinance and Livelihood (CML), NEST carried out the research to understand the rural livelihood status under MGNREGA in the state of Assam on completion of financial year 2010-11. Highlights of the findings on NREGA implementation in Assam in 2010-11 depict very abysmal implementation (NEST, 2013 [61]). Total number of households that got job card in Assam is 3.75 lakhs. Out of this the number of BPL families registered in NREGA is 25616 which is 0.67% of total registered household. District with highest percentage of BPL inclusion in NREGA is Dhubri with 1.53%. This figure implies a very poor implementation. It is also found that the total 6% of the job card holders belong to SC, 16% ST and 78% belongs to other categories. Further, a total of 24.37 lakhs households (65%) did not get job in the entire year under NREGA in the year 2010. While only 16,473 numbers of house hold got 100 days employment in the year which is 0.56% of the total Job card holding household. 6.11 lakhs numbers of household got less than 15 days employment in the year which is 21% of the total Job card holding HHs. What is more worrisome is that 28635 numbers of registered families

are not given job card in the year and 29,331 mandays of unemployment allowances are not paid in the state during the period. Percentage of workers having bank account numbers is 41.13%. Work Execution Level Analysis for the Financial Year 2010-2011 shows that 42.9% of the work is being executed through GPs violating the norm of minimum 50% execution through the GPs [62]. Further, the total number of households which got job cards in 2012-13 in all the 27 districts of the State is 39. 50lakhs. Of these, only 12.11 lakhs households got work in the last fiscal. Among these, 9788 number of job card holding households got 100 days of work; 3.22 lakhs households got less than 10 days work and 6.91 lakhs households got at least 15 days work. The performance of Karimganj and Dima Hasao districts is poor with none of the households with jobs cards getting 100 days work (Union Ministry for Rural Development, 2013 [63]).

6.5. Major Loopholes in the Existing 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 part of India for who is willing to do unskilled manual work under this scheme. Since implemented year in North Easter 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 another bigger issue under this Scheme because many rural peoples who are necessary want to do jobs nearer to living place was not aware from this scheme.

The major drawback in the path of smooth implementation of NERGS in India includes (Figure 3).



Figure 3. Major Loopholes in the Existing NREGS

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

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

Again, the supply side vulnerabilities of NREGS are the delivery system characterised 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 common problems of NREGS implantations are pointed out as below

- **Awareness generation and information education communication:** The NREGA has the potential to provide a “big push” in India’s region of distress as claimed by various researchers. For NREGA to be able to realise its potential, the role of civil society organisations is critical. But this calls for a new self-critical politics of fortitude, balance and restraint as reported by Shah, 2007 [64]. 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 NREGA 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 NREGS 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 [65]). 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 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 [66]).

- **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. Most of the projects selected being related to rural connectivity 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 [67]).

- **Wage payment:** 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 raises by Sankaran, 2001 [68] about an unresolved debate about the feasibility of having a national minimum wage, the NREGA with its provision for a country-wide wage rate has placed the possibility to do so squarely on the agenda. The NREGA wage rate must logically be a need-based

national minimum wage under the Minimum Wages Act. Vanaik and Siddhartha, 2008 [69] 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.

- **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 [70] 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 [71]).

- **Delay in Payments:** Delay in payments is also responsible for poor participation of women particularly in case of single women 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 that most suited to the prevailing conditions, appropriately reflects the priorities and preferences of those affected by it, and most effectively serve public interest [72]. 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 [73]. But the success of social audit still remains questionable (Gopal, 2009 [74]). 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 from the survey of literature (NEST Report) that in 2010-11, 18 districts viz., Bongaigaon, Karbi Anglong, Kokrajhar, Lakhimpur, Borpheta, 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.

7. Conclusion

From the above analysis it is concluded 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 remove these barriers. The valuable gains should not be derailed for poor implementation.

Recommendations

The NREGA 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 on the basis of literature observations.

i) All the programmes under MGNREGA must be well planned well ahead of time with a definite time frame for completion.

ii) State MGNREGA has much more to do to strengthen the *Panchayati Raj* System, 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 *Taluk* level or lower level so that all the development programmes under MGNREGA can reach the villages situated at a distance from Development Block.

iii) Present target of 100 days employment per household should be ensuring strictly.

iv) 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.

v) More transparency is needed about the sanctioned work and financial involvement therein.

vi) Auditing may be done through an extra government agency in addition to *Gram Panchayat* to check mishandling of fund.

vii) *Panchayat* should be empowered financially and job responsibility should be distributed to all the elected members.

viii) Any kind of political intervention should be stopped.

ix) Strengthening active citizenship is a must.

x) Build large scale citizen's awareness campaigns for generating demand side of NREGA.

xi) Improve institutional capacities of *Gram Panchayat*.

xii) Financial Inclusion – Banks & Insurance network must be extended.

xiii) People's participation through *Gram Sabhas* needs to be ensured.

xiv) Social Audits for transparency and accountability is a must.

xv) Access to Information at every stage of implementation is quite necessary.

xvi) IT platform for placing all information in public domain.

xvii) Innovative use of ICT for development of financial products needs to be implemented.

xviii) An effective grievance redressal mechanism needs to be evolved.

xix) A partnership with Academia, Media, Legal Fraternity and Financial Institutions is quite necessary.

Statement of Competing Interests

'The authors have no competing interests'.

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