
Role of MGNREGA in Rural Development: A Study of Hooghly District of West Bengal

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Abstract

Poverty and unemployment are serious problems of developing countries like India. Even seven decades after India's independence, the country still fails to tackle the creeping poverty, illiteracy, hunger, social inequality and other characteristics of a developing country. The only factor responsible for this is unemployment, especially in rural India. MGNREGS, a legally binding, rights-based and guaranteed programme, if implemented perfectly, is expected to bring about a transformation in the rural economy. By eliminating all the above social threats, MGNREGA can improve sustainable rural livelihoods and empower the rural poor to successfully manage their risks and opportunities. The Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) is an Indian employment programme passed by Parliament on August 25, 2005, whose main objective is to improve the livelihood security of people in rural areas by providing a statutory guarantee of at least one hundred days of work per financial year to every household whose adult members are willing to perform unskilled physical labour. In this study, an attempt has been made to evaluate the performance of MGNREGS based on secondary data collected in Hooghly district during 2013-14 to 2017-18 in terms of employment generation and women empowerment by providing employment opportunities to women.

Keywords: Poverty, Unemployment, MGNREGA, Employment Generation, Women Empowerment.

Introduction

The Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) is an Indian employment programme passed by Parliament on August 25, 2005, whose main objective is to ensure the livelihood of people in rural areas by providing every household whose adult members are willing to perform unskilled manual labour with a statutory guarantee of at least one hundred days of employment per fiscal year, failing which an unemployment benefit will be paid. MGNREGS began its journey on February 2, 2006, in India's 200 most backward districts. The following year, i.e., 2007-08, the Act was extended to another 130 districts and finally to the entire country in 2008-09. The programme is in place with the aim of providing a powerful safety net for the rural poor due to lack of alternative employment opportunities. The most important aspect of the law is the empowerment of the rural poor through a rights-based law. MGNREGA leads to this type of programme, which was not developed on its own initiative, but as a legally binding response by the state to a legally guaranteed right to work.

Key Features of MGNREGS

- i) It is a right-based employment programme.
- ii) It is a legally binding guaranteed employment programme for rural adults.
- iii) It emphasizes on labour-intensive works.
- iv) Time bound guarantee of employment programme.
- v) Decentralisation of authority.

MGNREGS in Hooghly District

In West Bengal, MGNREGS came into effect in February 2006` and was implemented in three phases in different districts of that state. In the second phase, which began on April 1, 2007, MGNREGS was implemented in Hooghly district to address the problem of unemployment and poverty among the rural poor.

Review of Literature

In his study, **Venkatesh (2009)** considered the impact of the economic crisis on the rural economy as a significant loss of employment opportunities. He considered that MGNREGA played an important role in mitigating the economic crisis of the rural population by creating productive jobs on a large scale in rural areas. He discussed some of the main problems in the

implementation of MGNREGS. He also reported that where the MGNREGS has been effectively implemented, the outflow of labour has decreased significantly and the living conditions of the poor have improved. The author also suggested that the law should be implemented in its true spirit, without a cap of 100 working days, as it has become a lifeline for millions of Indians who have been sidelined by high economic growth.

In his study focusing on poverty and unemployment, **Sivamurugan (2012)** looked in detail at job creation programmes implemented in the past as well as MGNREGA. Based on his observations, he concluded that poverty and unemployment are the two main problems faced by both developing and developed countries in the world due to the recent economic crisis. The author reported that the situation of most developing countries is too bad compared to developed countries. The author also reported that MGNREGA was introduced with the aim of improving the purchasing power of rural people by providing 100 days of guaranteed employment in each financial year to adult members of each rural household who are willing to do public unskilled work.

Das (2013) conducted a study titled “Performance of Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme with Special Reference to Hooghly District of West Bengal” in which the author tried to draw some conclusions about the measures of performance of MGNREGS in Hooghly District of West Bengal. The author found harmonised variations in some important indicators such as the average employment days created per household, the ratio of work completed to work taken up, and the proportion of local funds spent

Salian, Prasanna V. and D.S Leelavathi (2014) studied the implementation of MGNREGS in Karnataka: problems and challenges. The objectives of their study were: i) to examine the status of rural poverty and unemployment in Karnataka; ii) to assess the performance of MGNREGS in Karnataka since its inception; and iii) to identify the problems and challenges in the implementation of MGNREGS in Karnataka and their resolution. In their study, they assessed the programme against the prerequisites for an inclusive growth model that ensures reduction in unemployment and alleviation of poverty in the villages of Karnataka. They concluded that the performance of MGNREGS in Karnataka was not adequate given the poverty and unemployment rates in the state compared to other states with better performance.

Objective of the study

The primary aim of the study is to assess the role of MGNREGS in rural development in Hooghly district of West Bengal and the specific objectives are as follows:

- i) To find out the extent of creation of employment through this scheme in Hooghly district.
- ii) To examine the role of MGNREGS in women empowerment in Hooghly district.
- iii) To provide some suggestions that can improve the functioning of the scheme in this district.

Methodology and Data Base

This research draws upon secondary data, which has been sourced from a variety of published materials including books, handbooks, research articles, magazine publications, Government reports, the MGNREGS website, as well as records at both the block and district levels. The collected data have been analysed by using various statistical tools like tables ,averages, percentages, bar diagram etc. to arrive at precise results relating to the objectives of the study.

Employment Generation through MGNREGS in Hooghly District

Let us now consider employment generation in the Hooghly district of West Bengal during 2013-14 to 2017-18.

Table I Employment Generation under MGNREGS in the Hooghly District during 2013-14 to 2017-18

Year	No.of HHs applying for job cards	No. of HHs to whom job cards were issued	% of HHs who are issued job cards among HHs applying for the same	No.of HHs demanding work	No. of HHs provided with Work	HHs provided with work as % of HHs demanding work
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2013-14	684104	676746	98.92	499692	484028	96.87
2014-15	704016	699646	99.38	429336	389449	90.71
2015-16	719612	714039	99.23	503044	481729	95.76
2016-17	739416	732050	99	504493	472697	93.7
2017-18	727896	717146	98.52	514563	485827	94.42
Average for the period	715009	707925	99	490226	462746	94

Reference: www.nrega.nic.in

Table I depicts the employment generation data, illustrating the issuance of job cards and the employment opportunities extended to households seeking work within the Hooghly district of West Bengal. The district level data show that the Hooghly district of West Bengal is able to issue job cards on an average for 99 percent of households applying for the same for the year 2013-14 to 2017-18. When examining the proportion of households that requested employment and subsequently received work at the district level, it stood at 96.87 percent during the 2013-14 period, which subsequently decreased to 94.42 percent in the 2017-18 timeframe. It indicates that though government (Implementing agencies) was able to issue job cards to households applying for the same, it was unable to provide employment opportunities to all those households who demanded employment.

Let us now consider the block-wise employment generation in the Hooghly district of West Bengal during 2013-14 to 2017-18.

Table II shows block-wise performance of MGNREGA in the Hooghly district of West Bengal in terms of employment generation. During 2013-14, the average of employment provided as percentage of employment demanded for the district was 96 per cent and it is observed that 11 blocks out of 18 blocks performed above the district average, the top three performing blocks being Dhaniakhali (98.77 per cent), Jangipara (98.54 per cent) and Srirampore-Uttarpara (97.91 per cent). In this year, according to district average, the block at

the bottom of the district was Singur (92.36 per cent). In 2014-15, the district average was 90 per cent. Out of 18 blocks 11 performed above the district average and 7 blocks performed below the district average value. In order of performance first three blocks were Dhaniakhali (97.09 per cent), Srirampore-Uttarpara (92.96 per cent) and Chanditala-I(92.89 per cent) ,while Singur (83.9 per cent) took the lowest position in the district. Similarly, focusing on the year 2015-16, we observed that 8 blocks of the district performed above the district level value (95per cent). Dhaniakhali (99.05 per cent),Pandua (98.02 per cent) and Goghat-II (96.91 per cent) were the first three position holder blocks and the last one was Singur (90.54 per cent). In the year 2016-17, the average of employment provided as percentage of employment demanded for the district was found to be 93 per cent. Among the 18 blocks 8 were recorded as performing below the district level average having lowest value of 86.06 per cent in Tarakeswar. Among the rest 10 better performing blocks the top three were Dhaniakali (98.26 per cent), Balagarh (96.21 per cent) and Pandua (95.48 per cent).

Table II: Block-wise Employment Generation under MGNREGA in the Hooghly District during 2013-14 to 2017-18

BLOCK	2013-14			2014-15			2015-16			2016-17			2017-18		
	HHDE	HHPE	%	HHDE	HHPE	%	HHDE	HHPE	%	HHDE	HHPE	%	HHDE	HHPE	%
ARAMBAGH	43766	41781	95.46	43341	39212	90.47	46739	43749	93.6	48396	44448	91.84	49822	46981	94.3
BALAGARH	28538	27339	95.8	22215	19328	87	26400	25106	95.1	29602	28480	96.21	30595	29697	97.06
CHANDITALA-I	12980	12378	95.36	11341	10535	92.89	12326	11679	94.75	14005	12889	92.03	15100	14067	93.16
CHANDITALA-II	4584	4377	95.48	4645	4297	92.51	5652	5365	94.92	6354	5958	93.77	5511	5106	92.65
CHINSURAH-MOGRA	11299	10744	95.09	9145	8261	90.33	10651	9865	92.62	10242	9637	94.09	9590	9103	94.92
DHANIAKHALI	67186	66357	98.77	60395	58640	97.09	67524	66884	99.05	69846	68630	98.26	71949	70762	98.35
GOGHAT-I	18908	17964	95.01	17289	14723	85.16	19282	18162	94.19	18668	17027	91.21	19941	18296	91.75
GOGHAT-II	23477	22877	97.44	21107	18815	89.14	24960	24189	96.91	26132	24669	94.4	25857	24068	93.08
HARIPAL	35580	34348	96.54	34676	32190	92.83	33614	31492	93.69	34170	31593	92.46	32235	29368	91.11
JANGIPARA	30275	29833	98.54	26551	23077	86.92	31731	30399	95.8	34198	31791	92.96	34512	32377	93.81
KHANAKUL-I	36637	35802	97.72	33477	30813	92.04	37077	35166	94.85	32550	29030	89.19	33840	30221	89.31
KHANAKUL-II	20580	19870	96.55	17067	15735	92.2	21671	20969	96.76	22080	20794	94.18	22573	21151	93.7
PANDUA	48353	46865	96.92	36155	31531	87.21	51992	50963	98.02	54901	52418	95.48	54232	51754	95.43
POLBA-DADPUR	43960	42984	97.78	35629	32783	92.01	46208	44534	96.38	42718	40662	95.19	49950	47955	96.01
PURSURAH	25149	24181	96.15	19961	18498	92.67	23864	22959	96.21	22770	21304	93.56	22028	20582	93.44
SINGUR	16502	15241	92.36	13489	11317	83.9	13917	12601	90.54	13207	11877	89.93	10774	10086	93.61
SRIRAMPURE-	3819	3739	97.91	3721	3459	92.96	3867	3612	93.41	3769	3517	93.31	3818	3530	92.46

BLOCK	2013-14			2014-15			2015-16			2016-17			2017-18		
	HHDE	HHPE	%	HHDE	HHPE	%	HHDE	HHPE	%	HHDE	HHPE	%	HHDE	HHPE	%
UTTARPARA															
TARAKESWAR	28099	27348	97.33	19132	16235	84.86	25569	24035	94	20885	17973	86.06	22236	20723	93.2
Average for the District	27761	26890	96	23852	21636	90	27947	26763	95	28027	26261	93	28587	26990	94

Source:www.nrega.nic.in

HHDE represents the number of households requesting employment, while HHPE indicates the count of households that received employment opportunities. The symbol %= denotes the proportion of employment provided in relation to the employment demanded.

Repeating the same analysis, it is observed that only 6 blocks out of 18 blocks performed above the district level value (94 per cent) in terms of employment provided as a percentage of employment demanded and the top three performing blocks were Dhaniakhali (98.35 per cent), Balagarh (97.06 per cent) and Polba-Dadpur (96.01 per cent).Khanakul-I (89.31 per cent) occupied the lowest position. As a whole, it is seen that the percentage of employment provided against employment demanded had come down to 94 per cent in the year 2017-18 from 96 per cent in 2013-14 and Dhaniakhali is the most performing block of the Hooghly district.

Now, we will examine the involvement of vulnerable groups, namely Scheduled Castes (SCs), Scheduled Tribes (STs), and women, in employment within the Hooghly district of West Bengal from the years 2013-14 to 2017-18.

In the Hooghly district of West Bengal, the total population of Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes was recorded as 1,344,021 and 229,243, respectively, according to the 2011 census, representing 24.35 percent and 4.15 percent of the total population. As indicated in Table III, the involvement of Scheduled Castes in employment generation decreased from 48.51 percent in 2013-14 to 46.31 percent in 2017-18, with an average of 47 percent over the period from 2013-14 to 2017-18. Conversely, the participation of Scheduled Tribes in employment increased from 9.1 percent in 2013-14 to 9.6 percent in 2017-18, with an average of 9 percent during the same time frame. Notably, both Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes exhibit a higher participation in employment than their proportional representation in the total population of the Hooghly district. This demonstrates the effectiveness of MGNREGA schemes in reaching out to these communities for employment opportunities.

The scenario regarding women's participation in employment generation is distinct. There was a noticeable upward trend in women's participation, rising from 37.03 percent in 2013-14 to 42.94 percent in 2017-18. The Act mandates a minimum requirement that at least one-third of total workers must be women, a target consistently met by MGNREGS in the Hooghly district throughout the years 2013-14 to 2017-18.

Table III: Employment Generations to SCs, STs and Women in Hooghly District during 2013-14 to 2017-18

Year	Percentage of SC person-days in relation to total person-days	Percentage of ST person-days in relation to total person-days	Percentage of women person-days in relation to total person-days
2013-14	48.51	9.1	37.03
2014-15	46.43	7.91	40.76
2015-16	47.01	9.44	40.48
2016-17	45.47	9.84	41.59
2017-18	46.31	9.6	42.94
Average for the period	47	9	41

Source: Author's calculation from data obtained from official website of MGNREGS

Women Empowerment

Let us consider the role of MGNREGA scheme towards women empowerment through providing employment opportunities for women in Hooghly district of West Bengal during 2013-14 to 2017-18.

Within the Hooghly district of West Bengal, the census of 2011 recorded a total women population of 2,704,492, constituting 49 percent of the overall population. Table-IV provides a comprehensive breakdown of women's person-days, expressed as a percentage of the total person-days generated, both on a block-wise basis and for the entire Hooghly district, over the period spanning from 2013-14 to 2017-18.

For the 2013-14 fiscal year, the proportion of women's person-days in relation to the total person-days generated for the entire district was 37.03 percent.

Table-IV: Block wise Participation of women under MGNREGA in the Hooghly district during 2013-14 to 2017-18

Block	Percentage of women person-days in relation to total person-days				
	2013-14	2014-15	2015-16	2016-17	2017-18
Arambagh	39.64	42.5	41.9	44.62	42.45
Balagarh	36.47	43.77	41.85	42.33	44.85
Chanditala-I	38.74	39.62	39.11	38.05	40.18
Chanditala-II	49.03	50.29	53.98	54.74	53.45
Chinsurah-Mogra	50.33	58.84	55.66	53.22	52.14
Dhaniakhali	33.82	37.14	37.45	37.78	39.69
Goghat-I	39	39.37	41.18	37.87	40.93
Goghat-II	33.41	39.31	35.85	34.14	39.49
Haripal	35.35	39.87	38.53	40.74	42.61
Jangipara	33.89	36.91	38.38	40.1	42.06
Khanakul-I	31.56	36.34	34.86	36.92	35.76
Khanakul-II	41.94	44.75	42.14	40.49	45.57
Pandua	45.08	46.61	45.81	46.24	46.43
Polba-Dadpur	35.12	37.65	40.27	42.41	43.45
Pursurah	34.63	41.86	39.79	47.42	48.5
Singur	31.81	40.9	37.1	36.52	47.54
Srirampore-Uttarpara	53.79	63.87	63.4	63.55	59.2
Tarakeswar	38.35	41.76	42.82	40.68	43.45
Total	37.03	40.76	40.48	41.59	42.94

Source: Author's calculation from data obtained from official website of MGNREGS

Using this as a reference point, it becomes evident that within the Hooghly district of West Bengal, there are significant variations in the participation of women in the workforce across different blocks during the years 2013-14 to 2017-18.

In the initial year, 2013-14, the top three performing blocks out of the 18 in the district were Srirampore-Uttarpara (53.79 percent), Chinsura-Mogra (50.33 percent), and Chanditala-II (46.22 percent) in terms of women's person-days as a percentage of the total person-days generated. Conversely, Khanakul-I exhibited the lowest performance (31.56 percent).

Progressing to the subsequent years, the standard for comparison shifted. In 2014-15, the leading blocks were Srirampore-Uttarpara (63.87 percent), Chinsura-Mogra (58.84 percent), and Chanditala-II (50.29 percent). The weakest performance remained with Khanakul-I (36.34 percent). Similarly, in 2015-16, the top performers were Srirampore-Uttarpara (63.4 percent), Chinsura-Mogra (55.66 percent), and Chanditala-II (53.98 percent), while Khanakul-I still struggled at 34.86 percent. Moving forward to 2016-17, the standout blocks included Srirampore-Uttarpara (63.55 percent), Chanditala-II (54.74 percent), and Chinsura-Mogra (53.22 percent), with Goghat-II at the bottom (34.14 percent). By 2017-18, the leading blocks were Srirampore-Uttarpara (59.2 percent), Chanditala-II (53.45 percent), and Chinsura-Mogra (52.14 percent), and Khanakul-I continued to lag behind (35.76 percent).

Based on this analysis, it is clear that Srirampore-Uttarpara consistently emerges as the top-performing block in terms of women's participation under the MGNREGA scheme. Additionally, the overall trend highlights an increase in women's participation from 37.03 percent in 2013-14 to 42.94 percent in 2017-18, meeting the statutory minimum requirement of one-third women beneficiaries for each year between 2013-14 and 2017-18. This data analysis underscores the positive impact of women's involvement in the MGNREGA scheme, contributing to improved employment opportunities and enhanced social status for women in the rural areas of Hooghly district.

Summary and conclusion

Performance in employment generation has been judged in terms of several criteria such as households issued job cards as percentage of household applying for the same, and work provided to households as percentage of households demanding work. At the same time participation of SC, ST in total person days has also been taken account of. Regarding issue of job cards and providing work, it is observed that MGNREGA authority of Hooghly district was able to issue job cards to households applying for the same but it was unable to provide employment opportunities to all those households who demanded employment. It is also seen that the percentage of employment provided against employment demanded has gradually decreased and the Dhaniakhali block is the most performing block of the Hooghly district in terms of employment provided as a percentage of employment demanded. However in the matter of providing jobs to SC and ST persons, Hooghly district is able to reach the SCs and STs to a great extent in respect of employment generation through MGNREGA schemes.

Suggestions and Recommendations

1. The effectiveness of any program primarily hinges on its meticulous execution. To address the challenges associated with MGNREGS, it is imperative to ensure the diligent application of rules and regulations. Enhancing the program's efficacy necessitates the ongoing organization of awareness initiatives concerning the Act's provisions within rural communities. This approach serves a dual purpose: motivating individuals to engage in the scheme and fostering their active involvement in both planning and executing MGNREGS.
2. Both the Government officials and the civil society should actively participate in developing awareness on MGNREGA among the beneficiaries.
3. As per the Act it is mandatory for the job card holders to make an application for individual demand for work and the respective panchayat is responsible to issue acknowledged receipts to them, but it is not always practicable for the workers who are living far away from the panchayat office. An alternative facility may be established in this regard like introduction of the practice of sending demand applications through mobile SMS. For this purpose a toll free number may be set up for each gram panchayat, to which the workers may send their SMS regarding application of demand for work along with their names and job card numbers. This message should be treated as an application for work and be transmitted to the block and district level authorities. It will reduce both time and cost of processing the implementation of the scheme.
4. Democratic leadership style should be established in all affairs of MGNREGS. It will enhance greater community participation, sharing of information, expression of opinion by the rural people, and development of social networks.
5. The wage rate should be periodically updated, considering the prevailing local wage rates and the overall cost of living.

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