



Impact of MGNREGA on Rural Employment and Livelihood: An Empirical Analysis

Manjit Tiwari, Research Scholar, Department of Political Science
Mahatma Gandhi Kashi Vidyapith, Varanasi, Uttar Pradesh, INDIA

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Author

Manjit Tiwari, Research Scholar

E-mail : manjittiwari7@gmail.com

shodhsamagam1@gmail.com

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ABSTRACT

This paper empirically explores the impact of the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) on rural employment, income stability, and livelihood enhancement in India. MGNREGA, introduced in 2005, aims to provide one hundred days of guaranteed wage employment to rural households, particularly those in poor regions. Despite its ambitious scope, questions remain about its effectiveness in various states. Focusing on three districts in Uttar Pradesh, this study assesses the program's success in enhancing employment opportunities and boosting rural income. The research employs a mixed-methods approach, utilizing household surveys from three hundred beneficiaries and focus group discussions (FGDs) to provide qualitative insights into the experiences of MGNREGA workers. The study analyses how the scheme has contributed to employment generation, income enhancement, and the reduction of seasonal migration. The findings reveal that MGNREGA has had a positive impact on rural employment, with an increase in job opportunities, particularly for marginalized communities. Beneficiaries also reported moderate improvements in income and livelihood security. However, significant challenges persist, particularly in terms of implementation, including delayed wage payments, lack of awareness about entitlements, and the presence of local corruption that hampers access to the scheme. The study concludes that while MGNREGA has contributed to rural development and poverty alleviation, structural reforms are needed to address operational inefficiencies. Ensuring timely payments and enhancing program awareness are

critical to realizing the full potential of the scheme in improving rural livelihoods.

KEY WORDS

MGNREGA, Rural Employment, Income Stability, Livelihood Enhancement, Poverty Alleviation.

INTRODUCTION

Rural poverty and unemployment have been persistent challenges in India, where a significant portion of the population still relies on agriculture and allied activities for their livelihoods. Recognizing the need for direct intervention to support vulnerable rural communities, the Government of India enacted the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) in 2005. Designed as a legal guarantee for wage employment, MGNREGA provides one hundred days of employment to every rural household that volunteers for unskilled manual work. It is not just a social security program but a rights-based legislation that aims to promote sustainable rural development through employment generation, social inclusion, and poverty reduction.

MGNREGA is built on several fundamental principles. First, it is demand-driven, meaning that employment must be provided within 15 days of a request, failing which unemployment allowances are to be given. Second, it emphasizes the creation of durable assets that can contribute to long-term economic development in rural areas, such as water conservation, drought-proofing, and land development projects. Third, the program mandates transparency and accountability through social audits and the direct disbursement of wages to workers' bank or post office accounts.

The importance of MGNREGA cannot be overstated, particularly in its role as a social safety net for millions of rural households. The scheme is lauded for empowering marginalized groups, such as women, scheduled castes (SCs), and scheduled tribes (STs), who traditionally face significant barriers to employment. By setting a minimum wage, the program also plays a critical role in raising wage levels in rural labour markets, thus contributing to economic parity.

However, the effectiveness of MGNREGA in fulfilling its objectives has been widely debated. In theory, the program is intended to mitigate the vulnerabilities of rural communities by providing immediate employment, thus addressing cyclical rural distress, especially during agricultural lean seasons. It also aims to reduce distress migration by providing rural populations with viable employment options close to home. Furthermore, the program is expected to foster financial inclusion by transferring wages through formal banking systems, thereby reducing the exploitation of informal moneylenders.

Despite these laudable goals, the real-world implementation of MGNREGA has faced significant challenges. Research indicates that while MGNREGA has been instrumental in improving rural livelihoods, it has not uniformly achieved its objectives across the country. States with stronger governance structures and administrative efficiency tend to perform better in terms of implementation. For instance, Kerala and Andhra Pradesh have been recognized for more effective execution, while states like Jharkhand and Bihar have struggled with issues such as corruption, irregularities in fund disbursement, and poor infrastructure.

One of the most common critiques of MGNREGA is the delay in wage payments. Timely disbursement of wages is critical for rural households, as delays can undermine the financial stability of the most vulnerable populations. Additionally, the lack of awareness among many rural workers about their entitlements under MGNREGA often results in their exploitation by intermediaries or local authorities. Furthermore, reports of "ghost beneficiaries" and misallocation of funds highlight the need for stricter monitoring mechanisms and increased accountability.

This paper seeks to empirically assess the effectiveness of MGNREGA in achieving its intended outcomes, focusing on three districts in Uttar Pradesh, one of the largest and most economically diverse states in India.

Uttar Pradesh presents a unique case for analysis, as it combines elevated levels of rural poverty with significant regional variation in terms of governance and economic development. By focusing on three districts that represent different socio-economic profiles, this study aims to provide a comprehensive analysis of how MGNREGA impacts rural employment, income levels, and social empowerment in these regions.

The research methodology employs a mixed-methods approach, combining quantitative data from household surveys with qualitative insights from focus group discussions (FGDs) among beneficiaries. This approach allows for a detailed understanding of both the measurable impacts of MGNREGA (such as employment generation and income enhancement) and the lived experiences of the rural population who participate in the scheme. Through this analysis, the paper will explore both the successes and the limitations of MGNREGA, shedding light on key areas where policy improvements are needed.

Ultimately, this study seeks to contribute to the ongoing debate on the efficacy of MGNREGA by offering evidence-based insights that can inform future policy reforms. By identifying both the strengths and weaknesses of the program, this research aims to highlight practical recommendations that can help maximize the scheme's potential in alleviating rural poverty and fostering inclusive economic growth.

Literature Review

The Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) has been widely studied since its inception in 2005, particularly regarding its role in improving rural employment and reducing poverty in India. The existing literature underscores both the successes and challenges of the program, highlighting its impact on employment generation, income levels, social empowerment, and its inconsistencies in implementation across states.

Dreze and Khera (2009) are among the early proponents of MGNREGA's success. They argue that the scheme has significantly improved employment opportunities in rural areas, particularly for marginalized communities such as women, Scheduled Castes (SCs), and Scheduled Tribes (STs). Their study, based on field surveys across multiple states, emphasized that MGNREGA is instrumental in enhancing rural labour market participation and reducing the vulnerability of low-income households. They also observed that MGNREGA serves as an effective tool for income redistribution, allowing poor households access to a stable source of income, which in turn contributes to food security and social empowerment.

Dutta et al. (2012) expanded on these findings by examining the broader economic implications of MGNREGA, particularly in terms of wage parity and migration. Their study suggested that MGNREGA has contributed to reducing distress migration from rural to urban areas by providing viable employment alternatives closer to home. Additionally, they highlighted how the scheme has contributed to narrowing wage gaps in rural labour markets, especially for women, by setting a minimum wage and raising overall wage levels. However, Dutta et al. pointed out that the program's success has not been uniform across states, with significant variations in implementation effectiveness. States like Andhra Pradesh and Tamil Nadu have seen more consistent results, while others, such as Jharkhand and Bihar, have struggled with issues such as irregularities in fund allocation, corruption, and inadequate infrastructure.

A study by Imbert and Papp (2015) focused on MGNREGA's impact on the rural labour market, suggesting that the program has led to an increase in rural wages, even for non-MGNREGA workers, due to the increased bargaining power of rural labourers. They argued that by providing an alternative source of employment, MGNREGA has strengthened workers' ability to negotiate higher wages in the agricultural sector, thereby benefiting rural economies as a whole. However, the authors also noted challenges such as underemployment and leakages in the system, where funds are misappropriated or do not reach the intended beneficiaries.

Further, Khera and Nayak (2009) investigated gender-based impacts of the scheme, revealing that MGNREGA has been a significant enabler of women's empowerment in rural areas. Their research found

that the program provides women with greater access to paid employment, financial independence, and decision-making power within households. The increased participation of women in the labour force due to MGNREGA is seen as a step toward gender equality in rural economies. However, the authors also stressed that issues like wage disparity and the lack of childcare facilities at work sites continue to hinder the full potential of women's participation.

The Government of India (2017) has also provided reports highlighting the achievements of MGNREGA, noting the construction of durable assets like irrigation facilities, water conservation projects, and rural roads that have contributed to long-term economic development. However, these reports acknowledge operational challenges such as delayed wage payments, insufficient grievance redressal mechanisms, and inadequate awareness among beneficiaries regarding their entitlements.

Despite these substantial contributions, many scholars argue that MGNREGA's effectiveness is deeply influenced by local governance structures and administrative capacities. Sharma (2016) explored the relationship between governance quality and program outcomes, concluding that effective implementation requires strong local institutions, transparent management systems, and active community participation. In areas where governance is weak, the program tends to suffer from inefficiencies, leading to lower employment outcomes and asset creation.

This paper builds upon the existing literature by empirically examining the outcomes of MGNREGA in the state of Uttar Pradesh, a region that exhibits significant socio-economic diversity and varying levels of governance. By focusing on three districts in Uttar Pradesh, the study aims to assess the extent to which MGNREGA has influenced employment generation, income enhancement, and social empowerment in these regions. The analysis provides an updated understanding of how the scheme operates on the ground, particularly considering the challenges identified in previous studies.

Objectives of the Study

The primary aim of this research is to empirically assess the impact of the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) on rural households in Uttar Pradesh, with a focus on employment generation, income enhancement, and the challenges faced by beneficiaries. The specific objectives of the study are as follows:

To analyse the impact of MGNREGA on rural employment in selected districts of Uttar Pradesh

This objective seeks to evaluate the effectiveness of MGNREGA in providing employment opportunities for rural households. By focusing on three districts in Uttar Pradesh, the study aims to quantify how MGNREGA has contributed to reducing unemployment, particularly for marginalized communities, such as women and Scheduled Castes (SCs). It will examine the extent to which the program has generated meaningful employment, the nature of the jobs provided, and the frequency of workdays available to beneficiaries. Additionally, the study will investigate whether the program has helped mitigate seasonal unemployment and reduced the need for migration to urban areas in search of work.

To assess how MGNREGA has influenced household income and livelihood

A key goal of MGNREGA is to improve the economic stability of rural households by offering a reliable source of income through wage labour. This objective will explore the extent to which MGNREGA has contributed to raising household income levels and improving the overall quality of life for beneficiaries. The study will assess how the additional income from MGNREGA has been used, such as for meeting basic needs, investing in education or health, or improving household assets. Furthermore, it will evaluate whether MGNREGA has helped households cope with economic shocks, such as agricultural failures, and provided them with greater financial security.

Examine the challenges faced by beneficiaries in accessing the scheme

Despite its intended benefits, several challenges often hinder the effective implementation of MGNREGA. This objective aims to identify the key obstacles faced by beneficiaries in accessing the scheme, including issues like delayed wage payments, lack of awareness about entitlements, difficulties in job application processes, and corruption at the local administrative level. The study will also investigate the accessibility of support mechanisms, such as grievance redressal systems, and the extent to which they are utilized by beneficiaries. By highlighting these challenges, the research will provide insights into areas where improvements are needed to ensure that MGNREGA can achieve its full potential.

Research Methodology

This study employs a mixed-methods research design, integrating both quantitative and qualitative approaches to comprehensively assess the impact of MGNREGA on rural employment and livelihoods in Uttar Pradesh. The mixed-method approach allows for a deeper understanding of the program's outcomes by combining statistical analysis with individual experiences and narratives from beneficiaries.

Study Area

The research was conducted in three districts of Uttar Pradesh: Varanasi, Jaunpur, and Allahabad (now known as Prayagraj). These districts were selected due to their socio-economic diversity, varying levels of MGNREGA implementation, and the presence of rural populations reliant on agriculture and manual labour. Each district exhibits unique demographic and economic characteristics, providing a broad perspective on how MGNREGA operates across different contexts within the state.

Sampling Technique

A stratified sampling method was employed to ensure that the study captured a diverse range of households. Households were stratified based on gender, caste (particularly focusing on marginalized groups such as Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes), and economic status. A total of three hundred households were selected using purposive sampling, with approximately one hundred households surveyed in each district. This method ensured that the sample was representative of the target population and allowed for an in-depth analysis of MGNREGA's impact on different socio-economic groups.

Data Sources

Both primary and secondary data were used in the study to provide a comprehensive assessment:

- **Primary Data:** Structured questionnaires were administered to the selected households to gather information on employment, income, and challenges related to MGNREGA. The questionnaire covered key aspects such as the number of days worked, wage rates, household income, expenditure patterns, and satisfaction with the scheme. In addition to surveys, focus group discussions (FGDs) were conducted with beneficiaries to capture qualitative insights into their experiences, perceptions, and the challenges they faced in accessing the program.
- **Secondary Data:** Data from official Government reports, MGNREGA portals (such as the Ministry of Rural Development's NREGA website), and published reports were analysed to corroborate the primary findings. These sources provided information on fund allocation, employment statistics, and district-wise performance of MGNREGA.

Data Collection

Data collection was conducted over a period of three months. Field surveys were conducted in collaboration with local community leaders and Government officials to ensure efficient administration of questionnaires and access to accurate records. FGDs were organized in each district, consisting of 6-10 participants from different backgrounds, including women, daily wage labourers, and members of SC/ST communities.

Data Analysis

A combination of quantitative and qualitative data analysis techniques was employed:

- **Descriptive Statistics:** The quantitative data from the household surveys were analysed using descriptive statistics to summarize employment levels, wage rates, and household income variations.
- **Regression Analysis:** Assess the relationship between MGNREGA participation and household income, regression models were employed. These models helped determine the extent to which MGNREGA influenced changes in income and employment status across different demographic groups.
- **Content Analysis:** The qualitative data from FGDs were analysed using content analysis, which allowed for the identification of recurring themes and patterns regarding beneficiaries' experiences with MGNREGA, including the challenges they encountered and suggestions for improvement.

Limitations

The study acknowledges potential limitations, including the geographic focus on only three districts, which may limit the generalizability of the findings to the entire state. Additionally, the reliance on self-reported data may introduce biases related to recall or misreporting. Despite these limitations, the study provides valuable insights into MGNREGA's functioning and its impact on rural employment and livelihoods in Uttar Pradesh.

Results and Discussion

The findings of the study are presented under three major themes: employment generation, income and livelihood enhancement, and challenges in accessing MGNREGA. These themes reflect the core objectives of the research and provide a comprehensive understanding of how MGNREGA has impacted rural households in Uttar Pradesh.

Employment Generation

One of the primary objectives of MGNREGA is to provide consistent employment opportunities to rural households. The findings reveal that 75% of the surveyed households benefited from the scheme in the last year, indicating that the program plays a crucial role in employment generation. However, the average number of workdays generated per household was 72 days, falling short of the promised one hundred days of employment. This gap suggests that while MGNREGA provides substantial employment, it is not fulfilling its full potential in terms of workdays offered.

The shortfall in workdays is attributed to several factors, including administrative delays, lack of available work projects, and local governance issues. Nevertheless, despite this gap, MGNREGA has contributed to a 40% reduction in seasonal migration to urban areas. The ability of the scheme to stabilize rural employment, particularly during agricultural lean seasons, has been a critical factor in curbing distress migration, which is often driven by the need to seek employment opportunities in urban areas. The reduction in migration highlights MGNREGA's role in ensuring that rural labourers have access to employment closer to home, thereby reducing the socio-economic pressures associated with long-term migration.

Further analysis revealed that most beneficiaries were from marginalized communities, including Scheduled Castes (SCs), Scheduled Tribes (STs), and women. The participation of these groups underscores the scheme's role in promoting social inclusion and ensuring that historically disadvantaged populations gain access to formal employment opportunities.

Income and Livelihood Enhancement

The study also found that MGNREGA has had a significant positive impact on household income. On average, household income among beneficiaries increased by 18%, with families from the below-poverty-line (BPL) category experiencing a higher increase of 22%. This rise in income is particularly important for households that rely on agriculture and other seasonal employment, as it provides an alternative source of income during times when agricultural work is unavailable. For many households, MGNREGA wages are used to meet basic needs such as food, education, and healthcare, thereby contributing to overall livelihood enhancement.

For BPL households, the income earned from MGNREGA was found to be critical in stabilizing household finances, reducing vulnerability to economic shocks, and improving food security. However, despite these benefits, delayed wage payments emerged as a significant issue. Beneficiaries reported delays in payments ranging from one to three months, which severely disrupted household financial planning. Many households, particularly those from the poorest sections, rely on timely wage payments to meet immediate consumption needs. Delays in wage disbursement not only create financial strain but also erode trust in the program's ability to provide reliable support.

In addition to wage delays, some beneficiaries reported discrepancies between the actual wages received and the wages stated in official records, raising concerns about transparency and accountability in fund disbursement. These issues point to systemic inefficiencies within local administrative structures and suggest the need for stronger monitoring mechanisms to ensure that beneficiaries receive their full entitlements in a timely manner.

Challenges in Accessing MGNREGA

Although MGNREGA has been successful in generating employment and enhancing incomes, several challenges continue to hinder its effective implementation. One of the key challenges identified in the study is low awareness among beneficiaries regarding their entitlements under the scheme. Many rural labourers were unaware of their right to demand work, the stipulated wage rates, or the grievance redressal mechanisms available to them. This lack of awareness often resulted in beneficiaries being underpaid or exploited by intermediaries.

Additionally, the process of accessing work under MGNREGA was found to be cumbersome for many households. Respondents reported difficulties in registering for the scheme, delays in receiving job cards, and a lack of clarity about the types of work available. In several cases, local authorities were found to be unresponsive to work demands, leading to under-utilization of the scheme's potential.

Another significant challenge is the gender disparity in wage payments. Although women constitute a substantial portion of MGNREGA workers, many female beneficiaries reported being paid less than their male counterparts for the same amount of work. This is even though MGNREGA stipulates equal pay for equal work. The issue of wage disparity points to deeply ingrained gender biases in rural labour markets, which require targeted interventions to address.

Lastly, delays in the release of funds from the central and state Governments were identified as a structural issue that contributes to the inefficiency of the scheme. These delays often lead to interruptions in ongoing projects, leaving workers idle and unpaid for extended periods.

Policy Implications

The findings of this study offer several important policy implications for improving the effectiveness of the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) and maximizing its impact on rural employment and livelihoods. These implications are critical for policymakers, local administrators, and other stakeholders aiming to enhance the scheme's outcomes and address its current challenges.

Timely Wage Payments

One of the most pressing issues identified in the study is the delay in wage payments, which significantly affects the financial stability of rural households. Beneficiaries, particularly those from economically vulnerable groups, rely on timely payments to meet their daily expenses, and delays can push these households deeper into financial stress.

Policy Recommendation: It is crucial that the central and state Governments collaborate to ensure the timely release of funds to local authorities. The wage payment process can be streamlined by integrating digital payment systems and strengthening real-time tracking mechanisms, which would minimize delays and ensure that beneficiaries receive their dues within the stipulated period. Additionally, ensuring strict enforcement of penalties for delayed payments, as outlined in the MGNREGA Act, will enhance accountability.

Increasing Awareness Among Beneficiaries

The study found that many beneficiaries lack adequate knowledge about their entitlements under MGNREGA, including their right to demand work, the minimum wage rates, and the grievance redressal mechanisms available to them. This lack of awareness can lead to exploitation, underpayment, and an under-utilization of the scheme's potential.

Policy Recommendation: There is an urgent need for comprehensive awareness campaigns aimed at educating rural communities about their rights under MGNREGA. These campaigns should be designed to reach marginalized populations, including women and SC/ST communities, and should utilize local languages and culturally appropriate methods. Village-level information centres or regular community meetings could be established to ensure that people are well-informed about the scheme. Collaborating with non-Governmental organizations (NGOs) and grassroots movements to raise awareness can also improve outreach.

Strengthening Local Governance and Accountability

The study highlights governance issues, such as corruption, mismanagement of funds, and the lack of responsiveness from local authorities, which undermine MGNREGA's effectiveness. Weak governance at the local level often results in underemployment, delayed projects, and discrepancies in wage disbursement.

Policy Recommendation: Strengthening local governance mechanisms is essential for the effective implementation of MGNREGA. This can be achieved by:

- Enhancing the monitoring and evaluation frameworks to ensure that local authorities are held accountable for fund allocation, project completion, and wage payments.
- Introducing social audits and community monitoring mechanisms to increase transparency. Active participation from local communities in monitoring MGNREGA projects can help curb corruption and ensure that funds are used appropriately.
- Providing capacity-building programs for local officials and workers to enhance their understanding of the scheme's guidelines, digital reporting tools, and grievance redressal processes.

Gender Equality and Wage Parity

The study revealed that despite provisions for equal wages, women beneficiaries continue to face wage disparities and other gender-related challenges. Ensuring gender equality in wage payments is critical to promoting women's financial independence and social empowerment in rural areas.

Policy Recommendation: Strict enforcement of wage parity policies is necessary to ensure that women receive equal pay for equal work under MGNREGA. Local authorities should be trained to monitor gender-related issues and ensure that payment records reflect the legal wage structure. Additionally, providing support services, such as childcare at work sites, can help increase women's participation in the program and improve their overall experience with the scheme.

Enhancing Asset Creation and Long-term Development

While MGNREGA is primarily focused on employment generation, it also has the potential to contribute to rural development through the creation of durable assets, such as irrigation facilities, roads, and water conservation structures. However, the study found that many projects are either incomplete or not aligned with local development needs.

Policy Recommendation: Aligning MGNREGA projects with long-term rural development goals can enhance the program's impact. Local planning bodies should ensure that the projects undertaken under MGNREGA are relevant to the community's needs and contribute to sustainable development. This may involve more robust participatory planning processes, where local communities have a say in identifying and prioritizing projects that can benefit them overall. Strengthening the technical capacity of project implementation teams will also ensure that assets are built efficiently and maintained properly.

CONCLUSION

The Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) has emerged as a crucial initiative in India aimed at alleviating rural poverty and enhancing livelihoods. This study has demonstrated that MGNREGA has played a vital role in reducing rural unemployment and improving the socio-economic conditions of households in the studied districts of Uttar Pradesh. The findings reveal significant increases in employment opportunities and household incomes, particularly among marginalized communities, highlighting the scheme's effectiveness in stabilizing rural livelihoods.

However, despite these successes, several challenges persist that hinder the program's full potential. Delayed wage payments remain a significant issue, creating financial strain on beneficiaries who depend on timely disbursements for their daily needs. Additionally, a lack of awareness among beneficiaries regarding their entitlements and the processes involved in accessing the scheme undermines the program's effectiveness, leaving many without the support they are legally entitled to.

To maximize MGNREGA's impact, it is essential to address these challenges through streamlined implementation and governance reforms. Enhancing the efficiency of wage disbursement processes, increasing awareness through targeted outreach programs, and strengthening local governance structures will be vital steps in ensuring that the program benefits reach the most vulnerable sections of society.

Ultimately, improving MGNREGA not only supports immediate employment needs but also contributes to long-term rural development and social empowerment. By focusing on these areas, policymakers can ensure that MGNREGA continues to be a powerful tool in the fight against rural poverty and unemployment in India.

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