

## **Impact of MGNREGA on Rural livelihood in Sivasagar District of Assam**

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### **Abstract**

*The MGNREGA is expected to enhance people's livelihood. security on a sustained basis by developing economic and social infrastructure in rural areas. However, in Assam particularly in Sivasagar district MGNREGA is gaining momentum slowly. The faulty implementation strategy has ruined the spirit of this programme. Biasness and favouritism have been found in the distribution of job card, improper co-ordination among the stakeholders, inefficient leadership have stood as major hurdles in the programme. The present study attempts to examine the implementation process of this programme and its impact on the rural livelihood.*

**Keywords:** *MGNREGA, Rural livelihood, Economic and social infrastructure, Employment generation, Gram Panchayat*

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### **I. Introduction**

India virtually lives in villages. Being a pre dominant agrarian economy, agriculture continues to be a major source of income for rural livelihood. It also gives employment to a major chunk of rural population. Agriculture being seasonal in nature, the existing farming practices provide limited scope of man - days generation. As the existing agricultural practices in most parts of the country are still primitive in nature, there is a little scope for extensive use of man days utilisation. The farmers, therefore, have to remain idle during the lean agricultural season. Thus, seasonality in agriculture and its low productivity combined with absence of alternative source of income are responsible for higher incidence of poverty in rural areas. As a result, poverty combined with unemployment in rural areas is a major issue. Even after more than seven decades of India's independence, poverty is still a major issue among the rural population. Therefore, the Government has been given top priority in rural development in the planning process. The thrust of the rural development programme has been to eradicate poverty through special employment generation along with assets creation.

Since independence, employment generation programme in India have been repeatedly redesigned to generate productive employment and income of the marginal population. For the first time policy makers of India used the approach of rural development and rural employment programme for the eradication of rural poverty. During the period of nineteen seventies, the Government of India had implemented three major anti-poverty programmes namely, Integrated Rural Development Programme (IRDP), National Rural Employment Programme (NREP) and Rural Landless Employment Generation Programme

(RLEGP). Apart from these rural development programmes, different Ministries implemented different employment generation programmes. However, not a single programme has proved highly successful to meet the demand of employment generation in rural areas.

The Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) 2005, previously known as the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA), is a unique policy intervention by the State for providing livelihood, security to resource poor people in rural India. The primary objective of the Act is to provide gainful employment through creation of assets to at least one member of every household upto 100 days in a year. The MGNREGA, with its legal framework, provides a statutory guarantee of wage employment and marks a shift from a 'government providing approach' to an 'entitlement-based approach'. It came into force on 2<sup>nd</sup> February, 2006. MGNREGA marked a paradigm shift from the other employment programmes with its rights-based approach. The programme not only provides employment but also focuses on inclusive growth. By protecting the environment and reducing rural-urban migration this programme is set to transform the face of the rural India.

On February 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2006 first phase of MGNREGA implementation was started in 200 districts of the country in which seven districts of Assam were also incorporated. In the year 2007, the second phase of MGNREGA had started where five districts of Assam were also included. The third phase started on April 1<sup>st</sup>, 2008 where the remaining 14 districts of Assam came under the purview of the Act. Hence, at present all the

districts of Assam are implementing the provisions of MGNREGA. In Assam also, MGNREGA can definitely improve the economic and social condition of beneficiaries if implemented in right directions.

Various social scientists have made attempts to assess the impact of MGNREGA and also its implementation. Khan, Ullah and Salluja (2007) have discussed the direct and the indirect impact of MGNREGA on employment generation and poverty reduction in the rural area. Sen (2009) attempted to measure the outcome of good governance practiced by Gram Panchayats (GPs) of West Medinipur district of West Bengal. Data regarding different parameters related to core characteristics of good governance such as participation, transparency, accountability, effectiveness and efficiency, equity were taken into consideration in that study. Indian Institute of Technology, Chennai (2009), evaluated the impact of MGNREGA in the state of Tamil Nadu by taking 5 districts into account. Dey and Bedi (2010) studied the functioning of the MGNREGA between 2006 and 2009 in Birubham district, West Bengal. Their study reveals that in order to serve as an effective “employer of last resort”, the programme should provide more days of work especially during lean season and wages should be paid in a timely manner. A study by Nayak, Behera, and Mishra (2008) in Orissa looked through certain physical and financial parameters like provision of employment to those who demand jobs and maintenance of wage and non-wage ratio. However, its performance in utilization of funds and creation of demand for jobs was not very encouraging. Mathur (2007) thinks that a system of regular and continuous flow of information is essential. There is room for the government to take up concurrent evaluations, more effective monitoring, time-series studies and focused reports on critical aspects like minimum wages, muster rolls. To improve implementation, the government needs to solve problems, modify policy directives, and issue operational guidelines for the district, block and village levels.

In the context of Assam, however, there have not been many studies either at the State level or the micro level with regard to the implementation of the MGNREGA. Moreover, the existing studies have also confined themselves into certain dimensions of the Act only. Hazarika (2009) examined the impact of the MGNREGA on women empowerment only. Saikia K (2012) found that in certain villages in Kamrup district, wages had not been paid for the work done. When comparisons were made of the payments as per the pass-book with the payment as per the job card, it was discovered that the job card did not contain the inner pages that record the work done by each person; the job card itself was incomplete. Goswami and Dutta (2014) studied the Impacts of the MGNREGA on the standard of living of the beneficiary households under consideration have been found to be merely visible. In view of the dearth of literature and the gap in research in the context of Assam, the present study was undertaken.

### **Objectives:**

The prime objectives of this paper are:

- i) To identify the important problems associated with the implementation of the scheme ii) To study the impact of MGNREGA on the rural life of the study area.
- iii) To suggest appropriate suggestion for its effective implementation.
- iv) To assess the awareness level about various provisions in the MGNREGA among the beneficiaries.

## **II. Methodology:**

There are five blocks in Sivasagar district of Assam. Out of the five blocks a sample of two blocks viz. Khelua and Demow blocks have been chosen as the area for study. These two blocks for being the advanced and backward blocks of the district respectively the study is based on both primary and secondary data. Primary data has been collected through structured and unstructured questionnaires/schedules. From each block, two G.P. have been selected randomly. Again, from each G.P. 3 (three) per cent the households registered under MGNREGA with a minimum of 25 households were selected. A structured schedule has been used to collect the necessary information. The primary data has been collected from two G.P. in the block of Khelua are, DissangMukh and Khelua of which former is a tribal dominant block where majority of the population belongs to Missing community while the latter is comprised of mixed population. (Mostly Ahom community). In the block of Demow, two GP namely, Panidihing which is completely a flood prone area specially during summer season and the other is Netai which is remotely situated. While collecting the sample from the GP, care has been taken on the basis of demography, caste, location specific feature etc. to give fair representation of the district. The secondary information has been collected from publication of various bodies, data published by research investigators and various necessary websites, periodicals, bank report. Collected data has been tabulated in systematic way and treated them with different statistical methods so that certain pattern or relation can be derived.

Intra block level efficiency in the implementation of the scheme is addressed on the basis of the three major desired objectives of the scheme - average per day generated per household, the number of households

completed more than 100-man days of work and work completion rate with an idea that if these achievements are made then the life and livelihood of participatory households would have a face lift.

### **Socio-Economic status of the Sivasagar District**

Sivasagar District is situated between 26.45 and 27.15 North Latitude and between 94.25 & 95.25 East Longitude. It is bounded by the Brahmaputra River and Dhemaji district in the north, Charaideo district in the south, Dibrugarh district in the east and Jorhat district in the west. The undivided Sivasagar district is having total population of 11.51 lakh as per census 2011. Out of total population, 9.60 per cent people live in urban areas while 90.40 per cent live in rural area. The total literacy rate of Sivasagar district is 80.41%. The population density of the district is 431. Out of the total population, 485,717 were engaged in work activities of which 65.7 per cent of workers describe the work as main worker. Almost 70,255 numbers of persons were cultivators (owner/ co-owner) while 14,008 were agricultural labourer.

### **An overview of MGNREGA in Sivasagar district**

Under MGNREGA, total man days generated in the district during the year 2019-20 were 6,22,194 numbers involving 34,002 number of households covering five Community Development Blocks. Total assets created during the period were 731 numbers involving (i) rural connectivity-144 nos, (ii) micro irrigation works -190 nos, (iii) land development -213 nos, (iv) flood protection-30 nos, (v) drought proofing -38 nos. Total financial performance under MGNREGA during the period 2019-20 was 1336.01 lakh covering five blocks of the district.

### **An overview on the implementation of MGNREGA in Khelua and Demow blocks**

The number of man days generated in Demow Development Block during the period 2019-20 was 1,88,833 involving 11130 nos. of households. The block had a share of 30.34 per cent of total man days created in the district. The number of man days created in the block has increased considerably over the period. Whereas, in Khelua development Block, the number of men days generated during the same period was 95, 485 (15.35 percent) involving 4747 nos. of households. In the Demow Development Block during 2019-20, 34 nos, of households worked in 100-man days against 37 households in Khelua Development Block. The rationality behind the better implementation in Demow Development Block were owing to minimum industrialisation, high poverty level, stagnation of agriculture, limited employment opportunities. The importance of MGNREGA in Demow Development Block was therefore easily understood by the people and they actively participated in different activities. As most of the villages in the Block are mostly backward, hence priority is given in implementation of this MGNREGA. The average per day generated per household in Demow Development Block was 17-man days against 20-man days in Khelua Development Block. Considering the data, the performance level of blocks is not satisfactory.

## **III. Results and Discussions**

The study reveals that 26 per cent respondents are from general category, 32 per cent are OBC, 14.5 per cent are SC and only 27.5 per cent are from S/T category. Almost 65 per cent beneficiaries are engaged in agricultural activities, 35 per cent are labourer. It is observed that 23 per cent respondents have reported that they possess higher education. Main source of drinking water in this area is the hand pump. It is reported by the respondents that even if there were public taps installed, but availability of water is rare and does not fulfil their requirement. The large section of the respondents falls in the income group of Rs 30,000 to 45,000 per annum. About 72 per cent families have their own land, but the land size is very small. The study shows that the basic facilities are available in survey area. The use of cycle, motorcycle and mobile is very common in survey area. Only 82 per cent families have gas connection in their kitchen. The basic toilet and sanitation facilities are available in all the households.

Agriculture is the prime source of income in the survey areas. The study reveals MGNREGA has been successful in increasing the income by providing wage employment to rural households in Sivasagar district. Almost 68 per cent households, who reported yearly income up to Rs. 45,000 have admitted that MGNREGA have contributed in increasing their income between Rs. 5,000 to 8,000 per annum of their total income. Similarly, 32 per cent of the total households reported that yearly income from MGNREGA has been more than Rs. 8,000. As a whole the impacts of MGNREGA on rural livelihood are discussed in following points:

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

Khelua (Sivasagar) and Demow Development Blocks, 1,14,318-man days generated involving 15,877 no. of households for assets creation during the period 2019-20. Total fund flow in these two blocks were Rs 603.58 lakhs.

**Improvement in Consumption Level:** MGNREGA works has helped increase in the earnings of rural household income. A large majority (82 per cent) of the respondents said that they spent wages their earnings from MGNREGA works to buy regular food and consumer goods. The increased income locally available through MGNREGA work, they felt, was helping ensure at least two regular meals a day. Thus, it is found that MGNREGA could reduce infant malnutrition through positive effects on the household's food security and infant feeding.

**Reduction in Indebtedness:** MGNREGA helps to reduce the burden of debt of the rural households. 46% of the respondents said that they had spent their wages on repaying small debts. It also helps them to keep themselves away from the clutches of local mahajans and moneylenders.

**Improved Literacy:** MGNREGA helps to improve the education level of their children. The percentage of literacy rate increases gradually through the MGNREG Act. A significant percentage of workers – almost 74 per cent spent their MGNREGA wages on their children's education.

**Enhanced Healthcare:** MGNREGA works also help in improving the health condition of the poor people in both rural and urban areas in Assam. A part of expenditure is met through MGNREGA wages in health care. Around 55 per cent of the respondents have spent earnings on this. Therefore, the health condition of the selected areas seems a lot better after implementation of MGNREG Act. This Act also has provisions for medical facilities, drinking water facilities etc. during the working hours.

**Improved Standard of Living:** After implementation of MGNREGA it is noticed that the standard of living of the rural poor in Sivasagar district has improved. The total number of job card issued has increased up to 2.56 lakh till 2017-18 (undivided Sivasagar District). This ultimately increased the income of the people and helps to reduce the poverty level. As a result, the living condition is also improved.

**Asset's creation:** After implementation of MGNREGA, it is noticed that a lot of assets have been created in Sivasagar district such as road connectivity, flood control measures, micro irrigation system, land development and water harvesting structures. However, it was observed that assets creation was more in Demow Development Block in comparison to Khelua Development Block.

**Experience of the Scheme:** 98 per cent of the respondents are well informed and aware about the provision of unemployment allowance, of the scheme but are not aware of the provision regarding payment of compensation for moving more than 5 Km for work from their place of residence. 92 per cent of the respondents are aware regarding the provision to receive payment within 15 days of completion of works. The system of holding meeting in advance to fix /decide the work is not known to any respondent. The respondents opined that though they are aware of various features of the scheme, these are not fully implemented. None of them have received any unemployment allowances.

### **Major Problems**

MGNREGA suffers from some serious Problems:

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

**B. Delayed Wage Payment:** The data from the field indicated that there are huge irregularities in payment of wage. While only 16 per cent of the beneficiaries claimed that they received the wages within a month, the rest claimed that there is no certainty in getting wages. Most of the beneficiaries received it after 2 months. 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. It is observed that around 62 per cent of the beneficiaries are

not getting the minimum wages fixed by the Centre. As per the views of few villagers' widows and old women are receiving lesser wages in comparison to men. Gender disparity in payment of wages was found.

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

**D. Under Employment:** Regarding employment, respondents shared that they have not availed complete 100 days in a year. Even in last two years most of the respondents have not got 100 days of employment. Only 24 per cent households received around 50 days of works in last two years.

**E. Anomaly in Job Cards:** One of the important problems with MGNREGA is that, no proper verification is made while allotting the jobcard and assigning the works. There are some instances found during field study where the children are using job card of their deceased father.

**F. Grievances Redressal:** Redressal of grievances is an integral part of the MGNREGA scheme. Majority of the respondents did not know that here is provision for grievance redressal.

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

#### **IV. Suggestions**

All the loopholes of the MGNREG Act can be reduced easily if the scheme and its execution are reviewed frequently and cases of lapses are immediately rectified. For this purpose, the following suggestions can be considered: The success of the programme depends upon its proper implementation. Much of the pitfalls of MGNREGA implementation can be overcome if proper processes and procedures are put in place. Thus, there should be continuous efforts towards creating adequate awareness on different provisions of MGNREGA amongst the people. Creating awareness is necessary not only to motivate the people to work under the scheme but also to encourage them to participate in its planning and implementation. The MGNREGA scheme has much more to do to strengthen the Panchayati Raj System and curtailment of direct intervention of other departments or agencies associated with it, would be a welcome step in this regard. The village administration should be brought down to village or lower level so that all the development programmes under MGNREGA can reach the villages situated at a distance from the Development Block. Efficient utilization of resources under the scheme requires bringing in transparency and accountability. Provision for social audit at the Panchayat level on a regular basis can play a significant role in this regard. The leadership style should be democratic in nature. This will facilitate greater community participation, information sharing, expression of opinion by the rural mass, and development of social networks. The State Govt. must take steps to ensure proper implementation of the scheme for the benefit of genuine beneficiaries, ensure that wages reach to the workers directly. There should be the ability and willingness of local Governments and the Panchayat to plan works and run the programmes effectively. A proper monitoring mechanism should be developed that can assure correct procedure in job card. Social Audit should be carried out at regular interval. Panchayats should be empowered financially and job responsibility should be distributed to all the elected members.

One of the major shortcomings is the non-availability of child care and rearing facilities in the work site even though the Act includes this provision which is an important factor to ensure quality work especially for the women workers. Some women were found to decline the job facilities under MGNREGA because of non-availability of proper child care facility. Another major shortcoming is lack of motivation for quality work and the importance of creating assets. Majority of the job card holders were found lacking interest in the job at hand and performed their duties only with the aim to secure their wages. This hampers the quality of work done through the scheme.

#### **V. Conclusion**

If the MGNREGA is implemented in a proper way in Assam, it can reduce poverty at the bottom level and it can empower the poor in the long run. The Government has taken various programmes in order to create employment opportunities and to eradicate poverty. Many of these are partially successful in achieving their goals. The MGNREGA programme, being implemented in every district in Assam, is yet to achieve its desired goal. In Sivasagar district also the programme has scope for considerable improvement to be able to write its own success story. The scheme could not ensure the 100 days job guarantee to the majority of the job card holders. We have observed that the scheme fails in respect of providing employment avenues to the unemployed

to a large scale. Lack of worksite facility, faulty wage payment, presence of middleman/ contractors etc are some of the major constraints. Apart from these, the potential beneficiaries are not yet well-informed about the objectives and process of this programme. The effectiveness of this programme would improve if the poor could be made fully aware of this programme. Therefore, the government should take step for providing adequate information of MGNREGA to the rural people from time to time through panchayats and the development blocks, through Gram Sabha or other such forums and through judicious use of media vehicles so that the rural job seekers get easily involved in the work. Otherwise, the success story of MGNREGA implementation will remain confined only to the policy documents and the plan papers of the programme.

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