

Rights, Employment and Rural Development: A Review of MGNREGA's Journey

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Abstract- The Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA), initiated in 2005, stands as a landmark legislation in India's pursuit of rural poverty alleviation and livelihood enhancement. This review paper delves into the historical context, objectives, and evolutionary trajectory of MGNREGA, emphasizing its transition from traditional welfare schemes to a rights-based approach. Guaranteeing a minimum of 100 days of wage employment annually to every rural household willing to undertake public work, MGNREGA aims at multifarious goals including poverty reduction, gender parity, durable asset creation, and sustainable rural development. While the act has been instrumental in empowering marginalized communities and fortifying rural infrastructure, it grapples with challenges related to implementation, wage disparities, and awareness. The paper synthesizes findings from various studies, offering a comprehensive insight into MGNREGA's impact, achievements, and areas necessitating attention. Through this review, we underscore the significance of continuous assessment and adaptation of MGNREGA to harness its full potential and meet its overarching objective of fostering sustainable rural growth.

Index Terms- MGNREGA, Sustainable Development, Rural Infrastructure, Employment Guarantee, vernance Challenges

Introduction

The Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA), introduced in 2005, stands as one of India's most ambitious social security and employment measures, aimed at alleviating rural poverty by providing a legal guarantee of at least 100 days of wage employment per fiscal year to every rural household willing to engage in public work-related labor (Ministry of Rural Development, 2005). This initiative not only aspires to furnish immediate economic security but also endeavors to empower the most marginalized sections, promote gender equality, and bolster rural infrastructure, effectively laying the foundation for sustainable development (Dreze & Sen, 2013)."

Historically, the scheme was embedded in the broader narrative of India's struggle against pervasive rural unemployment and underemployment. This issue, exacerbated by seasonal agricultural patterns, compelled countless rural inhabitants to endure extended periods of joblessness or migrate in search of livelihood (Chopra, 2016). Recognizing these challenges, MGNREGA was conceptualized and subsequently enacted, marking a paradigmatic shift from traditional welfare measures to a rights-based framework where employment became an enforceable right (Khera, 2011). The historical context of the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) is rooted in India's enduring struggle with rural unemployment, underemployment, and poverty. To grasp the significance of MGNREGA's inception in 2005, it is imperative to delve into the broader socio-economic and political milieu that shaped the trajectory of rural development initiatives in post-independence India (Singh, 2016). The trauma of partition in 1947, coupled with the colonial legacy of underdevelopment, left India grappling with a vast populace of impoverished and unemployed citizens. A large chunk of the Indian population relied on agriculture, which was primarily rain-fed, rendering it susceptible to the vagaries of monsoon, causing seasonal unemployment and distress.(Chandra,1971; Guha, 2007). Recognizing the scale of the challenge, the Indian government initiated a series of employment generation programs in the 1970s and 1980s. These included the Rural Manpower Programme (1972-73), the Pilot Intensive Rural Employment Programme (PIREP, 1977-78), and the National Rural Employment Programme (NREP, 1980). While these programs had varying degrees of success, they shared a common theme of providing wage employment through the creation of community and social assets.(Shankar et al., 2011; Dreze & Sen, 1991). Drought Prone Areas Programme (DPAP) launched in the 1970s, DPAP was an early acknowledgment of the nexus between ecological degradation and rural poverty. By focusing on water conservation and afforestation in drought-prone regions, the initiative sought to enhance rural livelihoods while bolstering environmental resilience.(Venkateswarlu et al. 2014)

Evolution leading to MGNREGA: The Employment Assurance Scheme (EAS, 1993) and later, the Sampoorna Grameen Rozgar Yojana (SGRY, 2001) were precursors that directly influenced the design of MGNREGA. These

schemes aimed at creating additional employment opportunities during the agricultural off-season, paving the way for a more comprehensive and rights-based approach.(Dutta et al., 2012)

MGNREGA's Enactment: Drawing from past experiences and bolstered by a favorable political climate emphasizing inclusive growth, the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act was passed in September 2005, later renamed the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act in 2009. Unlike its predecessors, MGNREGA emphasized a rights-based paradigm where employment was not a mere benefit, but a legally guaranteed right.(Jha et al., 2011). In essence, the historical context of MGNREGA is a testament to India's evolving approach to rural development, shaped by lessons from past initiatives, civil society movements, and the imperative for a more resilient and inclusive rural economic framework.(Fischer et al., 2019). The program was not immediately rolled out across the entire country. Initiated in 200 of the most backward districts in its first phase in 2006, it was extended to an additional 130 districts in the fiscal year 2007-2008. By 2008, it had become operational in all rural districts of India.(Narayanan, et al., 2017). Originally, wage payments under MGNREGA were made in cash, but this system was rife with delays and corruption. To counter these challenges, from 2008 onwards, a push was made to transition wage payments to bank and post office accounts of the beneficiaries. This move was aimed at ensuring transparency and timely payment.(Roy, 2013)

Introduction of MGNREGA 2.0:

In 2009, the program underwent a significant overhaul with the introduction of MGNREGA 2.0. This new phase emphasized creating durable assets and strengthening the livelihood resource base of the rural poor. For instance, a greater emphasis was placed on works related to water conservation, drought proofing, and land development.(Adhikari & Bhatia, 2010). To further enhance transparency and curb leakage, MGNREGA was linked with Aadhaar, India's biometric identification system, starting from 2013. This was aimed at ensuring that benefits reached genuine beneficiaries and removed fake or duplicate entries.(Khera,2019). GeoMGNREGA initiative was launched in 2016, the GeoMGNREGA initiative aimed at using geospatial technology to create a platform for visualizing asset creation under the scheme. As of 2017, more than 30 lakh assets had been geo-tagged, offering an unprecedented level of transparency in the public domain.(Divya et al. 2019). One of the tangible impacts of MGNREGA has been the creation of community assets. For instance, in Rajasthan, numerous water conservation structures like check dams and ponds have been constructed, leading to groundwater recharge.(MUKHOPADHYAY & Sharan, 2015)

Enhanced Livelihoods: In states like Kerala, MGNREGA has been used to develop organic farming clusters, providing sustainable livelihoods to many.(Devika & Thampi, 2012). With MGNREGA mandating at least one-third of the beneficiaries to be women, states like Himachal Pradesh have seen a surge in female participation, leading to their enhanced socio-economic status.(Singh & Sinha, 2018)

The overarching objectives of MGNREGA are multifaceted. At its core, the act seeks to enhance the livelihood security of rural inhabitants by guaranteeing wage employment opportunities(Dey & Bedi, 2010). Additionally, the act places a pronounced emphasis on the creation of durable assets to mitigate drought, flood, and other natural calamities(Narayanan & Das, 2014). Furthermore, by mandating that at least one-third of the beneficiaries be women, MGNREGA aspires for a transformative societal impact, intending to foster rural gender inclusivity and equity(Sudarshan, 2011). The implementation of the program encompasses a decentralized structure, where local gram panchayats (village councils) play a pivotal role in planning and executing works, ensuring proximity to the beneficiaries(Ambasta, Shankar, & Shah, 2008).

The purpose of this review is to synthesize and critically evaluate a plethora of studies centered around MGNREGA's multifaceted impacts and challenges across India. This review will traverse the realms of poverty alleviation, gender inclusivity, operational challenges including corruption, sustainable rural development, and the intricate dynamics of rural employment and migration patterns. Through this holistic lens, this research seeks to furnish a comprehensive understanding of MGNREGA's footprint on India's rural landscape, its successes, and the areas necessitating recalibration.

1."MGNREGA's Influence on Poverty Alleviation: Diverse Impacts and Challenges across India."

In the study conducted by Ulvin, T. (2011), a comprehensive examination is undertaken to assess the impact of social security measures on poverty reduction, with a specific focus on the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) in rural Karnataka, southern India. MGNREGA, instituted in India in 2006, has garnered international recognition as one of the largest rights-based social security schemes globally. It guarantees an annual employment opportunity of 100 days to all rural households, contingent on the willingness of adult members to engage in unskilled manual labor at a minimum wage. The research objectives revolve around deciphering the efficacy of MGNREGA in poverty reduction while delving into the benefits and challenges inherent in its implementation. Utilizing a livelihood framework, the study contextualizes the need for MGNREGA in the study area, thereby elucidating how the program is poised to bring about positive change. Employing a mixed methods approach, data collection entails surveys, semi-structured, and unstructured interviews. The findings uncover that MGNREGA was a necessity in the study area, driven primarily by factors such as poverty, landlessness, and a predominant population from backward

castes. Although MGNREGA has indeed yielded benefits in the form of durable assets, employment opportunities, and income, the study reveals certain limitations. Only a fraction of respondents, a mere 7.7 percent, secured employment for the full stipulated 100 days, and over half of them earned less than the minimum wage. These findings suggest that MGNREGA fell short of fulfilling its promise to the majority of respondents. Moreover, implementation challenges, including limited awareness of MGNREGA rights, distrust in the government's intentions, improper maintenance of Job Cards, and the use of contractors and machines in MGNREGA works, underscore the program's unrealized potential in providing comprehensive social security in the study area. In essence, Ulvin's study sheds light on the complex dynamics surrounding MGNREGA's impact on poverty alleviation, revealing both its merits and shortcomings within the context of rural Karnataka.

In 2011, a study in the Burdwan district of West Bengal assessed the socio-economic impact of MGNREGA on the rural poor, predominantly small farmers and agricultural laborers. Based on a random sample of 102 respondents, the research revealed that the MGNREGA initiative led to substantial positive shifts in several socio-economic metrics for beneficiary households. These metrics included per capita income, food and education expenditures, savings, housing quality, healthcare access, and possession of luxury items. The data showed a considerable decline in beneficiary households in poor socio-economic conditions, dropping from 43.9% in 2007-08 to 18.3% in 2009-10. Additionally, the study offered recommendations for refining the MGNREGA scheme, drawing from worker feedback.

In a study conducted by Singh, S., et al. (2014), the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) takes center stage as a vital instrument designed to bolster livelihood security for rural households. Distinguished by its unique status as a legal right to work, MGNREGA represents a departure from previous employment-generation schemes. The study's specific focus lies in scrutinizing the performance of MGNREGA within the confines of district Pauri Garhwal in the state of Uttarakhand. An intriguing finding of the research is the substantial participation of women in the program, signaling a positive shift towards gender inclusivity. Moreover, the study reveals that the scheme has notably led to the creation of assets, with a particular emphasis on rural connectivity, while also addressing drought-proofing measures, albeit to a lesser extent. This research underscores the multifaceted impact and significance of MGNREGA in enhancing the livelihoods and infrastructure of rural areas in the district of Pauri Garhwal.

The Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) offers employment opportunities during the lean season, aiding the rural poor in sustaining consumption levels and reinforcing their livelihood resources in such pivotal times. Bhat & Mariyappan (2015) studied "MGNREGA: A new hope to reduce rural poverty," and mere economic growth is insufficient to ensure social justice and well-rounded development. It emphasizes the importance of intertwining economic growth with initiatives aimed at poverty reduction and job creation, particularly for the marginalized sectors of society. Their research, set in the village of Shanoo in the Kupwara district of Jammu and Kashmir, delves into MGNREGA's potential to mitigate rural poverty.

The Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA), instituted by the Indian Government, is a pivotal social security program that assures a minimum of 100 days of wage employment yearly for rural adults. While its overarching aim is poverty alleviation and socio-economic enhancement, a 2019 study by Chowdhury, T., titled "Role of Mgnrega in Poverty Alleviation: A Study of Karimganj District in Assam," honed in on its effects within the Karimganj district. The research specifically evaluated the program's status, prospects, and overall performance in this district. The findings underscore MGNREGA's significant influence on women empowerment, creation of enduring rural assets, and fortifying the livelihood security of rural households in Karimganj. Through this focused lens, the study offers a microcosmic view of MGNREGA's impact, shedding light on its tangible benefits in a specific region.

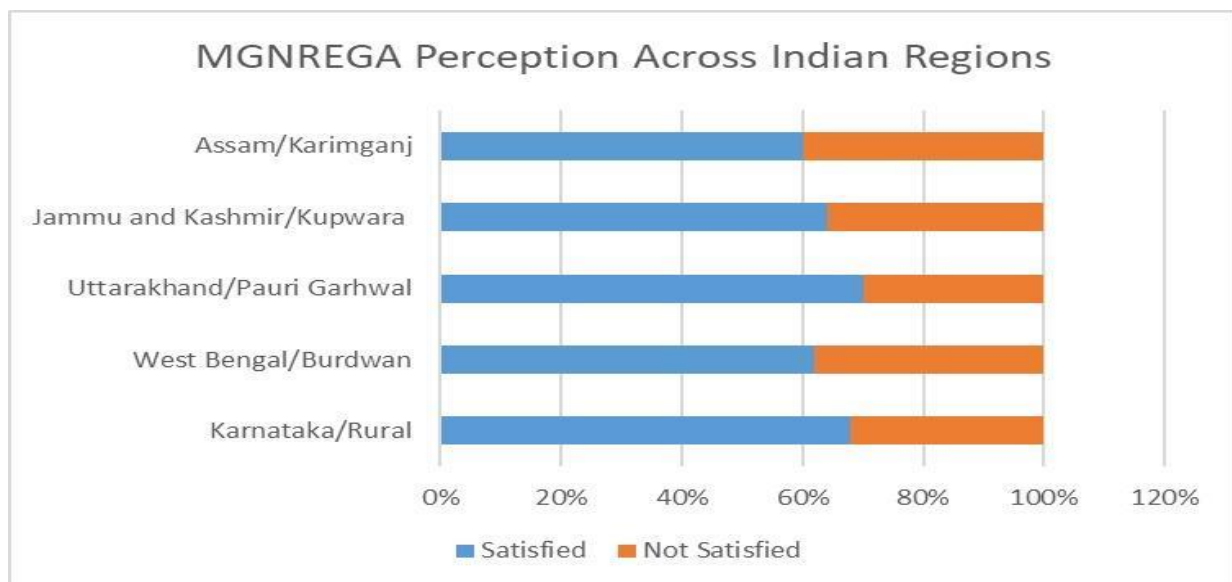


Fig. 1 Perception for MGNREGA across some Indian states

The Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) has been a pivotal initiative by the Indian government to address rural poverty. Across the five studies, there is a consensus on the program's positive impact on poverty alleviation, though the magnitude and nature of this impact vary across regions (Fig.1). Ulvin's study on Karnataka highlighted that MGNREGA has been successful in providing employment, but its potential in poverty alleviation is not fully realized due to challenges like delayed wage payments and lack of awareness among the beneficiaries. The study emphasized the need for better implementation to achieve the program's objectives fully. On the other hand, Sarkar & Kumar's research in West Bengal underscored the program's success in improving the socio-economic status of the rural poor. They noted a significant reduction in poverty levels and an increase in the standard of living among the beneficiaries. The study from Uttarakhand by Singh et al. presented a more mixed picture. While MGNREGA has positively impacted employment generation and asset creation, the actual reduction in poverty levels was found to be moderate. The study by Bhat & Mariyappan echoed this sentiment, suggesting that while MGNREGA offers hope, there are still challenges to be addressed, especially in ensuring consistent employment and timely wage payments. Chowdhury's research on Assam provided a comprehensive view of MGNREGA's role in the state. The program has significantly impacted women's empowerment, rural asset creation, and livelihood security in the Karimganj district. However, challenges persist, such as delays in unemployment allowances, wage payments, and issues related to fund allocation and corruption. The study also highlighted the program's success in reducing traditional gender wage discrimination and conserving natural resources.

While MGNREGA has undeniably played a crucial role in poverty alleviation across India, its impact varies depending on the region and the challenges faced in implementation. Addressing these challenges is imperative to harness the program's full potential in transforming rural India.

2. "MGNREGA and its Pivotal Role in Rural Gender Inclusivity and Equity in India."

Prasanna and Leelavathi (2014) emphasized the pivotal role of MGNREGA in promoting women's empowerment and rectifying gender imbalances in rural sectors. Recognizing the challenges rural women face due to prevalent gender disparities, the study argued that the demand-driven, gender-conscious design of MGNREGA holds the potential to rectify labour market anomalies and counteract gender discrimination. Implementing an efficient delivery system with a pro-women stance can empower female participation in developmental initiatives and grant them greater influence over resource utilization. Notably, Andhra Pradesh stands out among Indian states for its high female participation in MGNREGA, further underscored by the fact that women's wages within the MGNREGA framework in the state surpass those in non-public casual roles. The study ventures to assess the implications of MGNREGA on rural unemployment and poverty rates in Andhra Pradesh, especially from a gender perspective. Furthermore, it seeks to discern the rationale behind the prominence of MGNREGA in the state, explore its contribution to availing employment to rural women, and provide insights and recommendations to augment female participation in the scheme within Andhra Pradesh.

Gupta (2017) elucidated the intrinsic link between the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) and its pivotal role in advancing sustainable development in India. Sustainable development, fundamentally, seeks to harmonize economic growth, environmental stewardship, and social inclusion, ensuring that current advancements don't jeopardize future generations. MGNREGA, while primarily viewed as an anti-unemployment measure, significantly contributes to overarching sustainability objectives, encompassing the economic,

agricultural, forestry, health, and income sectors, among others. The Act serves as both a safety net for vulnerable communities and a catalyst for agricultural and economic progression, particularly for the rural poor. Emphasizing a rights-based approach and innovative occupational methods, MGNREGA employs the principle of "convergence," interlinking various sectors for holistic sustainable outcomes. This approach fosters the development and enhancement of sustainable rural infrastructure, such as water harvesting, irrigation, and rural connectivity, propelling workers from mere wage employment to lasting, sustainable occupations. Gupta's research underlines the substantial accomplishments in sustainable development made possible through MGNREGA's framework.

Dheeraja et al., (2015) deeply entrenched gender imbalances prevalent in India's traditional rural societies are spotlighted. Such disparities have been a longstanding challenge, making gender justice at both household and societal levels in rural areas a critical objective for development professionals, state entities, and civil society. The established consensus is that patriarchal society's inherent gender inequalities can only be significantly addressed when women's access to and control over economic resources and institutions are enhanced. Over the past six decades, various socio-economic and political strategies and interventions have been introduced to foster gender equity and harmony. The Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) stands out as a groundbreaking labor market initiative, intentionally designed with a gender-positive inclination. The Act's ambition is to boost the livelihood security of rural households by guaranteeing at least one hundred days of paid employment annually to any household's adult members willing to undertake unskilled labor. The financial scope, the act's universal targeting, and its aim to ensure at least one-third female participation, are all expected to substantially address gender-centric issues. The study confirms the anticipated outcomes, highlighting the rise in women's participation in MGNREGS, subsequently altering gender dynamics at both the household and community tiers. The researchers deduce that social advancement, inclusive economic growth, women's education, and their organization are crucial prerequisites for achieving genuine gender justice and effective governance.

Tripathi and Wadhawan (2018) conducted a study on assessment of socioeconomic status of MGNREGA women beneficiaries in Baran district (Rajasthan) and discussed its significant initiative aimed at offering employment to rural inhabitants in India. The primary objective of MGNREGA is to boost the livelihood security of households in rural settings. This scheme promises employment for 100 days to unskilled rural workers. When executed effectively, schemes like MGNREGA can serve as powerful tools in the battle against poverty and can catalyze transformation in rural zones by enhancing socio-economic circumstances. The research specifically aimed to analyze the socio-economic conditions of MGNREGA's female beneficiaries in the Baran district of Rajasthan. The study encompassed five villages: Laxmipura, Chainpura, Ratanpura, Govindpura, and Khedliganj, all under the Atru panchayat samiti. From these villages, 25 female beneficiaries were chosen from each, totaling 125 participants. All these women were between 30-45 years of age. A substantial majority (86.4%) were married, while 17% were widowed. The majority of these women, who availed MGNREGA work, were from schedule caste and schedule tribe (57.6%), with the rest from backward castes (25.6%) and a minor portion (2.4%) from the general caste. Most (86.4%) worked as farm laborers. Fifty-eight percent hailed from nuclear families, while the rest (42.4%) were from joint families. Education-wise, a staggering 91.2% were illiterate with no affiliations to any organizations. A notable 72.8% did not own land, and just 18.4% possessed land up to 4.5 bighas. Over half (52%) lived in kutcha (temporary) houses. A socio-economic status assessment revealed that every single respondent (100%) was classified under a low socio-economic status.

Datta & Goyal (2020) study delved into the "Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act" (MGNREGA), originally named the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act 2005. This pivotal Act enshrines the "right to work" for rural inhabitants of India. Central to MGNREGA's framework is the creation of lasting rural assets, overseen by the Panchayats, the grassroots-level governing bodies responsible for issuing job cards. Notably, the Act integrates employment guidelines and is consciously gender-sensitive, aiming to facilitate the involvement of rural female workers. With MGNREGA having surpassed a decade in operation, the paper seeks to discern its efficacy in fostering sustainable assets via employment. The findings indicate that a significant 70% of the program's total expenditure has been allocated to wages, amplifying employment prospects. However, the correlation between employment and asset creation varies considerably among states. The study identifies a marked increase in female employment in most states under MGNREGA, although certain states exhibit room for enhancement. This disparity in outcomes, especially concerning women's employment and asset creation, is attributed to both technical and administrative implementation challenges. The study's focal areas include MGNREGA, female employment, asset generation, and related challenges.

Table 1. Role of MGNREGA in rural gender inclusivity and equity in India

| Themes/Factors | (Role of Women) | (Role of Youth) | (Food Security) | (Role of Technology) | (MGNREGA) |
|-----------------------------|---------------------------------|-----------------------|-------------------------|----------------------|---------------------------------|
| Contribution to Agriculture | Crucial role in food production | Future of agriculture | Vital for food security | Increases efficiency | Aims for overall sustainability |

| | | | | | |
|----------------------------------|--|--------------------------------|--------------------------------|-----------------------------|---|
| Challenges Faced | Limited access to resources | Migration to urban areas | Land degradation | Accessibility of technology | Poverty, environmental degradation |
| Impact on Sustainability | Contributes to land and water management | Can bring innovative solutions | Focuses on conservation | Reduces resource use | Focuses on water harvesting, rural connectivity |
| Solutions/Recommendations | Empowerment of women | Engage and train youth | Increase sustainable practices | Leverage modern technology | Provide safety-net for vulnerable groups |
| Outcome/Benefits | Increased agricultural productivity | Modernized farming methods | Improved livelihoods | Improved yields | Growth engine for sustainable development |

The Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) has been a cornerstone for rural employment in India, especially for women. Salian and Leelavathi (2014) highlighted that MGNREGA has significantly improved women's participation in Andhra Pradesh, but there remain challenges in its implementation. Gupta (2017) emphasized the sustainable development achieved through MGNREGA, suggesting that the program has been instrumental in promoting gender inclusivity and equity. Dheeraja, Madhuri, and Rao (2015) presented a compelling case for MGNREGA's role in achieving gender justice, emphasizing the guaranteed rural wage employment as a significant step towards gender equity. Tripathi and Wadhawan (2018) assessed the socioeconomic status of MGNREGA women beneficiaries in the Baran district of Rajasthan, shedding light on the tangible benefits women have received from the program. Goyal and Datta (2020) provided a comprehensive review of MGNREGA's performance concerning women's employment. Their study revealed that about 70% of MGNREGA's total expenditure has been on wages, which has significantly increased employment opportunities for women. However, the link between employment generation and asset creation varies across states. While there has been significant employment generation for women in most states, some states lag behind due to technical and administrative constraints. The study also highlighted that MGNREGA has been particularly successful in states like Rajasthan, where women's participation reached up to 68%. Such statistics underscore the pivotal role MGNREGA plays in promoting rural gender inclusivity and equity in India (Table 1).

MGNREGA has undeniably played a transformative role in promoting gender inclusivity and equity in rural India. The act has not only provided employment opportunities for women but has also empowered them to assert their rights and improve their socioeconomic status. However, for MGNREGA to realize its full potential, it is imperative to address the challenges and constraints in its implementation across different states.

3. Operational, Corruption, and Policy Hurdles in MGNREGA Implementation.

The study by Raabe et al. (2012) explored the intricate governance issues surrounding large-scale social safety net programs like India's National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA). Such programs often grapple with challenges such as elite capture, corruption, and resource leakages. To address these challenges, there's a need for a comprehensive understanding of the program's implementation process, which includes identifying sources of mismanagement, comprehending the influence of various actors, understanding local power dynamics, and recognizing informal bureaucratic procedures. The study introduced "Process-Influence Mapping," a participatory research method, to unravel these complexities. Utilizing this tool provides insights into the bottlenecks of NREGA's implementation, such as the undue influence of elites in decision-making and the challenges posed by staffing and training inadequacies. By pinpointing these specific issues, the study suggests targeted policy reforms to enhance the efficacy of NREGA, transforming it into a robust social safety net.

Anderson et al., (2013) presented preliminary findings from a baseline survey undertaken to measure the impact of UID-linked wage payments on corruption in NREGA (National Rural Employment Guarantee Act) projects. This research explored the potential benefits of combining biometric-based identification (using the UID or Universal Identification platform endorsed by the Indian government) with electronic money transfers to enhance the governance of NREGA initiatives. Their study focuses on the Karjat block of the Ahmednagar district, where wage payments

through UID are being tested, in contrast with the Shevgaon block, where traditional wage payment methods remain in place. The baseline survey, spanning October 2012 to January 2013, involved interviews with over 8000 households in these regions, gathering data on NREGA operations, local governance, and other pertinent household information. However, the current data offers insight into governance quality and corruption levels in the existing pre-UID system. The study outlined the NREGA initiative, its intended guidelines, the actual implementation processes, and the responsibilities of local officials. The study revealed the existing monetary delivery system for wage payments, identifying potential vulnerabilities. Drawing from their baseline survey, the paper provides a snapshot of the current system's functioning, specifically spotlighting the potential for corruption.

Chandra (2015) studied India's efforts to combat poverty and unemployment through employment generation programmes initiated since 1980. Notably, many of these initiatives were marred by ineffective targeting, leakages, and poor asset creation. Thus, while framing the MGNREG Act 2005, it's crucial to incorporate lessons from these past setbacks. The Act not only has the potential to bolster social security and provide employment for the neediest, but it also offers an avenue to uplift living standards. However, the study candidly acknowledges the presence of corruption within MGNREGA. The research cautions against relying solely on simplistic indices that claim to measure corruption, as they can often present misleading interpretations of inter-state corruption levels.

Choudhari (2016) critically assesses the role and effectiveness of Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) in implementing the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) in Uttar Pradesh. MGNREGA, renowned for its accountability framework with legally enforceable provisions, mandates that a minimum of fifty percent of its funds be utilized through gram panchayats, highlighting their crucial role in executing the Act. However, field studies indicate that the institutional capability of these gram panchayats is limited, negatively impacting the anticipated outcomes of the program. Even though MGNREGA was rolled out across all districts of Uttar Pradesh, encompassing approximately fifty-two thousand gram panchayats, by April 1, 2008, and introduced distinctive features like proactive information disclosure, IT and Management Information System (MIS) use, social audits, and stringent transparency and accountability mechanisms, the ground reality reflects glaring gaps. These gaps include the absence of minimum essential infrastructure at the gram panchayat level, such as adequate staffing, office buildings, skilled engineers, and IT-trained personnel. The paper underscores these institutional shortcomings and constraints, emphasizing the challenges faced by PRIs in discharging their MGNREGA-mandated duties. Choudhari's paper aims to provide policy recommendations to bolster the competencies of PRIs in Uttar Pradesh.

The Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) is a landmark social safety net program in India, but its implementation has been fraught with challenges. A multifaceted landscape of issues, from operational bottlenecks to corruption and policy hurdles.

Raabe et al. (2012) introduced the "Process-Influence Mapping" method to dissect the complexities of NREGA's implementation. They highlighted the undue influence of elites in decision-making and the challenges posed by staffing and training inadequacies. Anderson et al. (2013) provided a more granular look at corruption within the program, revealing that while there are instances of wage theft and fund diversion, the majority of funds do reach the intended beneficiaries. However, they also noted that the program's design, which emphasizes labor-intensive projects, might not be the most efficient way to provide rural employment. Chandra (2015) echoed these sentiments, emphasizing the need for better monitoring and evaluation mechanisms to curb corruption and ensure effective implementation.

Choudhari (2016) focused on the role of Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) in MGNREGA's implementation in Uttar Pradesh. The study underscored the institutional weaknesses and capability constraints of PRIs. Challenges such as the absence of adequate staff, lack of office buildings, and shortage of engineers and IT-skilled staff at the gram panchayat level were highlighted. The study also pointed out that the PRIs' role in the scheme has not been commensurate with their capacity, and their institutional structure is still too weak for the delivery of such a rights-based policy. While MGNREGA is a pioneering initiative, its implementation is riddled with challenges. From the undue influence of local elites to institutional weaknesses in PRIs and corruption, there's a pressing need for targeted reforms. Addressing these issues requires a comprehensive understanding of the program's operational intricacies, the influence of various actors, and the local power dynamics. Only then can MGNREGA truly realize its potential as a robust social safety net for India's rural populace.

The studies converge on several issues, including the undue influence of local elites, institutional weaknesses, and corruption. Raabe et al. offer a methodological approach to dissect these challenges, while Anderson et al. delve deeper into the corruption aspect. Chandra's emphasis on better monitoring resonates with the findings of Anderson et al. Choudhari's focus on PRIs brings to light the structural and capacity challenges at the grassroots level. Lastly, the findings of Dutta et al. and Dreze and Ritika underscore the disparities in participation rates across states, suggesting a need for targeted interventions in specific regions. Collectively, these studies highlight the multifaceted challenges in MGNREGA's implementation and underscore the need for comprehensive reforms.

4. MGNREGA's Role in Advancing Sustainable Rural Development and Infrastructure.

Chakraborty and Das (2014) highlight the transformation of rural sustainability in India, particularly since the introduction of the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Generation Act (MGNREGA) in 2005. While vernacular structures in rural India were once lauded for their inherent sustainability owing to their deep-rooted connections with local environments, MGNREGA has drastically altered this with interventions like road networks, water management systems, and land development. The study critically assesses the Act's ambitions of bridging rural voids and fostering sustainability, especially in water management within two diverse regions of West Bengal. Despite apparent short-term benefits, concerns surrounding long-term sustainability persist. The one-size-fits-all implementation approach, which overlooks regional differences, is identified as a primary issue. The authors advocate for a more tailored approach, emphasizing the need for customized construction specifications based on regional needs. Bhat and Yadav (2015) emphasize the pivotal role of the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MG-NREGA) in advancing sustainable development, an essential concept in modern society that intertwines human well-being with environmental and economic progress. MG-NREGA, beyond addressing unemployment, champions broader sustainability facets such as economic stability, agricultural advancement, forest conservation, and health improvement. The Act's cornerstone is its provision of a dependable employment safety net for vulnerable populations, especially when other employment avenues falter. As a catalyst for bolstering the agricultural sector and empowering the rural impoverished, MG-NREGA employs a rights-based legal approach and novel occupational methods. The authors underscore the importance of "convergence" – the government's strategy of harmonizing inter-sectoral efforts – as a tool for MG-NREGA to achieve its sustainability objectives, all while delving into the challenges and opportunities associated with MG-NREGA's sustainable development goals.

Jena and Ghosh (2013) emphasized MGNREGA's role in generating demand for productive labor in villages, thereby offering an alternative livelihood source. This, in turn, impacts various socio-economic aspects, such as reducing migration, curbing child labor, alleviating poverty, and fostering village self-sustainability through the creation of productive assets. However, the paper also highlights challenges in the program's implementation, particularly in the Sundargarh district of Odisha. Issues like religious and street biases, favoritism in job card distribution, dominance of influential families, and lack of coordination among stakeholders have been identified as significant hurdles. The study underscores the need for proper implementation to realize MGNREGA's full potential.

Narayanan (2017) studied the role of the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) in fostering rural development in India. The act, initiated to provide employment for at least one person in a rural household for a hundred working days annually, emphasizes reducing poverty and generating employment, particularly for women. The study focused on the Choondal Grama Panchayat in Thrissur District and revealed that MGNREGA has significantly impacted the socio-economic landscape of the region. A majority of the beneficiaries belong to Below Poverty Line families, and the program has enhanced their standard of living. The study also highlights that 78% of the respondents possess job cards, and 57% are satisfied with the program's current status in the Panchayat. The act has also positively impacted various indicators like regular meals, debt repayment, clothing, health, and education of children. The study concludes that MGNREGA has not only provided a survival means for unskilled laborers in rural areas but has also instilled confidence among the rural poor, especially women. The scheme's potential has addressed issues of poverty, education, and health to a significant extent.

A study conducted by Nazeer (2015) emphasized MGNREGA's potential as a significant force in combating rural poverty and unemployment by creating demand for productive labor in villages. This act offers an alternative livelihood source, aiming to reduce migration, alleviate poverty, and make villages self-reliant through the creation of productive assets like road construction and soil and water conservation. The research employs qualitative methodologies, including Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) and Key Informant Interviews (KIIs). The findings revealed that MGNREGA has been successful in generating demand for productive labor in Indian villages, leading to poverty alleviation and the creation of self-sustaining villages through the development of social and physical infrastructure. The study concludes that MGNREGA has played a pivotal role as a safety net for unemployed individuals in the areas studied.

The Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) has been a cornerstone in India's efforts to promote sustainable rural development and infrastructure. While understanding of the act's impact, challenges, and potential in achieving its objectives. Chakraborty and Das (2014) focus on the intersection of MGNREGA and water management, highlighting the sustainability issues of built forms in rural India. Their research underscores the act's potential in addressing water scarcity and promoting sustainable water management practices. Bhat and Yadav (2015) extend the sustainability discourse, positioning MGNREGA as a pathway to achieving sustainable development. They emphasize the act's role in creating durable assets, conserving natural resources, and promoting eco-friendly practices. Jena and Ghosh (2013) presented a case study of the Koraput District of Odisha, portraying MGNREGA as a "silver bullet" for sustainable poverty eradication. Their findings suggest that the act has significantly improved livelihood security and reduced distress migration in the region. Narayanan (2017) offers a broader perspective on MGNREGA's contribution to rural development. The study underscores the act's role in enhancing rural livelihoods,

promoting gender equality, and fostering community participation. Nazeer (2015) complements this by analyzing MGNREGA's role in inclusive development. The research emphasizes the act's potential in generating demand for productive labor in villages, leading to poverty alleviation and the creation of self-sustaining villages.

It becomes evident that MGNREGA, while not without its challenges, has been instrumental in advancing sustainable rural development and infrastructure. The act's multifaceted approach, encompassing employment generation, asset creation, and natural resource management, positions it as a pivotal tool in India's rural development arsenal. There's a consensus on the act's potential in driving sustainable rural development. However, challenges like the sustainability issues of built forms in water management projects (as highlighted by Chakraborty & Das) need to be addressed to fully harness the act's potential. However, for this, continuous monitoring, evaluation, and adaptive strategies are essential.

5. MGNREGA's Influence on Rural Employment and Migration Patterns in India.

Ahuja et al. (2011) conducted a comparative analysis in Haryana, focusing on two distinct districts: agriculturally-prosperous Karnal and agriculturally-challenged Mewat, to discern the ramifications of MGNREGA's deployment. By evaluating 120 farm households (60 from each district) on parameters like employment status, income, and assets, the study identified varied participation in MGNREGA-related activities: 13.7% in Karnal and a notably higher 24.6% in Mewat. Additionally, the investigation, segmented by households engaging in MGNREGA versus those who didn't, unveiled insights into the program's influence on factors such as income stability and migration. Interestingly, even though MGNREGA furnished employment avenues, it couldn't deter migration from the more developed Karnal, due to enticing market wage rates elsewhere. The study further highlighted that farmers with expansive land and considerable livestock showed limited inclination towards MGNREGA engagements.

Bhaskar, D. (2014) delves into the impact of the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MGNREGS) on the migration of labor from rural regions in India. Labor, being a pivotal production factor, not only plays a productive role but also activates other production factors. Although agriculture remains India's largest employment sector, its capacity to accommodate the swelling population has been stretched thin, leading to issues like underemployment and disguised unemployment. The reliance of the working populace on agriculture is a pattern seen in many developing countries. The National Sample Survey Organisation (NSSO) reveals a growth in unemployment among rural workers, highlighting the seasonal unemployment prevalent in Indian agriculture. The Indian Government, recognizing this issue, introduced various employment programs such as SGSY, SGRY, SJSRY, PMRY, NREP, and others. However, their execution was often found lacking. To counter these challenges, the government unveiled the MGNREGA, aiming to guarantee a minimum of 100 days of paid employment to rural inhabitants. This paper provides a critical assessment of the scheme's execution, accomplishments, and its influence on the migration tendencies of rural labor.

Korra (2015) studied the efficacy of the MGNREGA scheme on beneficiary households and critically analyzed based on field research in three villages of Mahabubnagar district, Telangana State, India. The study, utilizing a multi-stage random sampling approach, discovered that most job card holders under the scheme secured employment for only 30-60 days and were paid daily wages ranging from Rs.60 to 70, with noticeable gender-based wage discrimination. Although MGNREGA has instilled hope for livelihood security among the rural poor by offering guaranteed employment, it falls short in providing full employment days and adequate wages, resulting in persistent migration of the working class to urban areas for better employment opportunities.

Parida, J. K. (2016) conducted a study in the Mayurbhanj and Jajpur districts of Odisha, encompassing a primary survey of 400 households, to assess the impact of the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) on distress migration and rural livelihoods. The findings reveal that MGNREGA effectively addresses the unemployment challenges during agricultural off-seasons, particularly benefiting the socio-economically marginalized sections. The scheme significantly curbs seasonal distress migration from the studied regions. Furthermore, enhanced earnings during slack periods bolster household consumption levels, suggesting a positive ripple effect on the broader socio-economic framework of these rural areas. Key findings center around themes of employment guarantee, migration, improved living conditions, and rural poverty alleviation.

Prasad, B. (2016) delved into the issue of rural-to-urban migration in India, attributing it primarily to the dearth of employment prospects in rural regions. In response to such challenges, the Indian Government, post-independence, has unveiled various initiatives to curb this migration trend, foster rural employment, and bolster rural infrastructure. The MGNREGA program, launched in February 2006, stands out as a significant endeavor, pledging 100 days of guaranteed employment at a minimum wage for rural households willing to undertake unskilled manual tasks. Prasad's research centered on Ranga Reddy district in Telangana State, aiming to discern MGNREGA's influence on migration patterns and rural job availability. The study also offers insights into the characteristics of migrating households and evaluates the grassroots execution of the MGNREGA initiative.

Dodd et al. (2018) investigated the interrelation between MGNREGA, which embodies India's 'right to work', and internal labor migration, a topic of considerable public discourse that often positions the two as substitutes. By analyzing data from 300 household surveys in the Krishnagiri district of Tamil Nadu, the study revealed distinct demographic and

socioeconomic traits between households depending solely on MGNREGA versus those relying solely on internal labor migration remittances. Interestingly, 20% of the surveyed households utilized both MGNREGA and internal labor migration as complementary income sources. This finding underscores the need for a more nuanced comprehension of how MGNREGA and internal labor migration can coalesce as complementary strategies rather than mere substitutes. Choudhary (2020) studied the effectiveness of the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Programme (MGNREGA) in curtailing rural to urban migration by offering guaranteed employment. Drawing from primary data of 240 households in Jodhpur district, the study finds that MGNREGA has been particularly effective during critical seasonal migration periods. However, its long-term effectiveness is debatable, as migration is driven by multifaceted reasons, not just employment scarcity. While MGNREGA has elevated wage rates, especially drawing more female participation, the growth in agricultural wage rates has been modest in comparison to non-agricultural and construction sectors. The program has further enhanced food security, increased household income and spending, and broadened awareness of other government schemes. Yet, participants highlighted areas for improvement, including timely payments, wage rate adjustments in line with inflation, and a more efficient job card system. The study underscores that while MGNREGA has made strides in addressing rural distress and migration, there remains considerable scope for optimization.

The Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) was introduced with the aim of providing guaranteed employment to the rural populace and thereby curbing distress migration. The studies from Haryana, as presented by Ahuja et al. (2011), highlighted that MGNREGA played a significant role in reducing migration in agriculturally backward districts. Similarly, Bhaskar (2014) emphasized the act's influence in reducing labor migration from rural areas. Korra (2015) provided micro evidence from Telangana, suggesting that while the scheme has given rural poor a sense of hope about livelihood security, it hasn't been entirely successful in preventing migration to cities. This sentiment is echoed in the study from Odisha by Parida (2016), which highlighted MGNREGA's role in providing employment during agricultural slack seasons, thereby controlling seasonal distress migration. However, Prasad's (2016) study from Telangana indicated that the act's impact on migration is still a topic of debate. MGNREGA and Internal Labour Migration was highlighted by Dodd et al. (2018) and Choudhary (2020) delved into the relationship between MGNREGA and internal labor migration. Their studies, based in Tamil Nadu and Rajasthan respectively, suggested that while MGNREGA is seen as operationalizing the 'right to work', it's not necessarily a direct substitute for internal labor migration. Households relying solely on MGNREGA exhibited different socio-economic characteristics compared to those relying on remittances from internal labor migration. Interestingly, a significant portion of households used both MGNREGA and internal labor migration as complementary livelihood strategies, indicating the potential for these two to coexist and benefit the rural populace.

Across the studies, it's evident that MGNREGA has had a varied impact on rural employment and migration patterns in India. While the act has been successful in providing employment opportunities during agricultural off-seasons and reducing distress migration in certain regions, it hasn't been a panacea for the issue of rural-urban migration. The act's effectiveness seems to vary based on regional characteristics, implementation challenges, and the socio-economic conditions of the beneficiaries. The complementary nature of MGNREGA and internal labor migration, as highlighted in some studies, suggests that there's potential for a more integrated approach, where both can be leveraged to improve the socio-economic conditions of rural India. The act's influence on wage dynamics, gender participation, and household decision-making further underscores its multifaceted impact on rural India. A common thread across most studies is the acknowledgment of MGNREGA's role in providing employment and its varied impact on migration. While some studies, like those from Haryana and Odisha, highlight a reduction or control in migration due to MGNREGA, others, like the ones from Telangana, present a more mixed or debated view. Interestingly, studies from Tamil Nadu and Rajasthan emphasize the complementary nature of MGNREGA and internal labor migration, suggesting that the two can coexist and serve as dual strategies for rural livelihoods. This table underscores the multifaceted impact of MGNREGA across different regions and its complex relationship with rural-urban migration.

Conclusion

The Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA), introduced in 2005, represents a monumental stride in India's efforts to alleviate rural poverty and enhance livelihood security. Rooted in India's historical struggle against rural unemployment and underemployment, MGNREGA marks a paradigm shift from traditional welfare measures to a rights-based framework, guaranteeing at least 100 days of wage employment per fiscal year to every rural household willing to engage in public work-related labor. The act's multifaceted objectives encompass poverty alleviation, gender inclusivity, creation of durable assets, and sustainable rural development. Over the years, MGNREGA has undergone evolutionary phases, adapting to challenges and integrating technological advancements for transparency and efficiency. While the act has made significant strides in empowering marginalized sections, promoting gender equality, and bolstering rural infrastructure, it also faces challenges in implementation, wage distribution, and awareness. The review underscores the importance of continuous evaluation and recalibration of MGNREGA to realize its full potential and achieve its overarching goal of sustainable rural development. Through a

comprehensive analysis of various studies, the review offers a holistic understanding of MGNREGA's impact on India's rural landscape, highlighting its successes, challenges, and areas for future improvement.

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