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EFFECTIVENESS OF MGNREGA IN ASSAM: A CASE STUDY

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ABSTRACT

The creation of adequate employment has been an important policy of the Government of India in the nation-building process since independence. Various employment generation programmes have been launched by the Government of India from time to time. Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) is one among the major programmes implemented by Govt. of India in their plan period who provide the 100 days job guarantee for the unemployed. This paper, drawing upon a primary research conducted in 2010-11 in one district of Assam, namely in Lakhimpur, assess the success and failure of MGNREGA programme in the rural area of the state.

KEYWORDS

employment, investment, job market, poverty, unemployment.

INTRODUCTION

The creation of adequate employment has been an important policy of the Government of India in the nation-building process since independence. Various employment generation programmes have been launched by the Government of India from time to time. In spite of these programmes, the rate of unemployment remains high in the country. As per the National Sample Survey Report (2012), about seven crore people are unemployed. The Planning Commission of India has taken various programmes with a focus on three major objectives: the employment generation, poverty eradication and public assets creation. During the initial plan period, India had a low level of per capita income, investment and literacy. Gradually the situation has changed. Education has spread, per capita income has increased, the level of investment has grown up and the economy has also taken the track of speedy growth. But there are still many people without work and the situation is becoming serious day by day. Therefore, Indian Government has formulated programmes for augmenting employment opportunities especially in the rural areas. In 2005, the Govt. of India subsumed the ongoing programme Sampoorna Gramin Rojgar Yojana (SGRY) and National Food for Work programme (NFWP) under the newly launched wage employment programme, "National Rural employment Guarantee Act" (NREGA) which aimed at providing 100 days' guaranteed employment to the rural poor on various local public works. This is the first time that a government is guaranteeing work, failing which an unemployment allowance has to be given. In the absence of employment they would be paid unemployment allowance. The programme also meant to use labour for development of rural infrastructure. Since 2011 the NREGA has been renamed as Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA).

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The wage rate plays a crucial role in the job market since the time of classical thinkers. The classical concept of unemployment is based on the real wage rate. It occurs when the real wage rate for a job is set above the market clearing level, which leads to the number of job seekers exceeding the number of vacancies. The cyclical or Keynesian unemployment broadly known as deficit demand unemployment occurs when there is not enough aggregate demand in the economy to provide jobs for everyone who wants to work. A low demand means that there is low level of production. Consequently fewer workers are required resulting in unemployment. The cyclical unemployment so common in recessions tends to get reduced with the recovery of the economy. The frictional unemployment can occur independent of the cyclical condition of the economy. In a market economy unemployment may occur due to the technological change. Karl Marx finds unemployment a normal condition in capitalist system. According to him unemployed labourers constitute "a reserve army" that creates downward pressure on wages (Mark, 1997).

Focusing on the rural employment opportunities, Mathur (1998) argues, based on his empirical findings, that in developing countries like India the lack of employment opportunity arises essentially from inadequate stock of physical capital and infrastructure, although inadequate aggregate demand could also coexist. The Government of India has taken adequate step through the MGNREGA programme for developing rural infrastructure by the rural worker. This is not only helpful for infrastructural development of the rural area, but also for the development of working skill and the economic condition of the rural people as well (NREGA act, 2005). MGNREGA is the first programme that compels the state to provide a social safety net for the poorest people of this country and seeks to address the urgent issues of hunger and rural distress that afflict large parts of India (Lakshman, 2007). But studying the impact of employment generation schemes Saikia (1985) observed that the success of such schemes depends much on selection of area, selection of employment generating schemes and the deserving beneficiaries. The schemes are meant to create durable community assets and provide employment to the weaker section of the society.

OBJECTIVE, HYPOTHESIS AND METHODOLOGICAL ISSUE

Since the status of providing employment opportunities is inversely related with the state of unemployment and poverty, the paper has been made an attempt to study the status of MGNREGA in Assam along with its pros and cons in real sense.

The main hypothesis of this study is formulated as "MGNREGA is successfully implemented everywhere of the state."

The present study is largely an empirical one. The universe of the study consists of all the rural households of Assam. One representative district, one with most of the characteristics of the state is selected. Since Assam economy is primarily agrarian and industrially backward, district Lakhimpur appears to be a good representative and it is selected. The district is composed of two subdivisions: North Lakhimpur and Dhakuakhana. Keeping the general characteristics of the state in mind 12 villages, five from Dhakuakhana subdivision and seven from North Lakhimpur subdivision are selected in such a way that all major communities of Assam are represented. From these villages 220 households from different communities are selected. The method used is stratified random sampling. The total numbers of people sampled are 1180. All social and religious groups are covered in the sample. The study is not based only on the primary data, whenever necessary the study also utilizes the secondary information.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Assam is one of the eleven special category states in the country. Like other poor states, Assam has a low level of income, low rate of saving and investment, low rate of industrialisation and high unemployment rate. Moreover, the state suffers from social instability inflicted by a large number of insurgent groups. A land of diversity, Assam has different ethnic groups with their distinctive cultures. The state is home to 2.58 per cent people (as per 2011 population census) of the nation while it covers 2.40 per cent area of the country. There are 27 districts in the state which vary considerably in size and population. Most of the population lives in two valleys, the Brahmaputra and Barak. These two valleys are separated by two hilly districts – Karbi Anglong and Dima Hasao.

Most of the people in Assam (85.9 per cent) live in rural areas. In Baksa district about 89.2 per cent of the population live in villages. Except Kamrup (metro) all other districts have a majority of rural population. Most of the people in the state depend on traditional activities. Though diversified to some measure yet Assam's rural economy depends largely on agriculture. This has made agriculture the main source of employment in the rural areas. The cropping intensities and

productivities in the state remain low, and the crop diversification is also low. The fragmentation of land holdings, low irrigation coverage and low rate of mechanization are still some constraining factors. Moreover the types and patterns of cultivation are traditional; the farmers of the plan area practise the settled cultivation while jhuming, the slash-and-burn method of cultivation, is still practised in the hilly areas. In spite of the traditional technology still being followed, the problem of rural unemployment has become serious day by day in the state. Therefore the employment generation programme can play an important role in the state in order to generate employment opportunities as well as the eradication of rural poverty.

STATUS OF MGNREGA IN ASSAM

As per the report of Employment and Unemployment survey 2009-10, Government of India, the rate of unemployment by broad usual activity was 4.1 per cent in rural Assam against 2.1 per cent in rural India. Similarly, the rate of unemployment in urban Assam was 5.8 per cent against 3.7 per cent at all-India level. There is a significant difference between unemployment status of males and females. In 2009-10, 3.6 per cent male and 6.8 per cent female workers in Assam were found unemployed against 1.9 per cent male and 2.4 per cent female workers in the country. Similarly, in urban areas, there were 4.4 per cent male and 14.3 per cent female workers unemployed in Assam against 3.0 per cent male and 7.0 per cent female workers in urban India (Government of India, 2011). The rate of unemployment in the state is not decreasing, rather it is increasing day by day. As per 66th round of NSSO report, the unemployment rate was 4.3 per cent in rural and 7.6 per cent in urban Assam, in the age group (15-59) according to the usual principal status.

The provision of wage employment is an attractive instrument for poverty eradication and employment generation in the rural areas. The poor people basically depend upon the wage employment for their income. In this regard Khan *et al.* (2007) observed that the provision of wage employment is an attractive instrument for poverty alleviation and employment generation. In fact, the wage employment programme sought to achieve multiple objectives. They not only provide employment in the lean agricultural season but also in the time of floods, droughts and other natural calamities. These programmes also put an upward pressure on the market wage rate in the rural areas by attracting people to public work programmes thereby reducing the unemployment. MGNREGA is also designed as a safety net to reduce migration by rural poor in the lean period through at least a hundred days' of guaranteed work provided on demand to each household on a sustained basis. In rural Assam 13.48 per cent households got employment under MGNREGA during 2011-12 (Government of India). Beneficiary households in Assam are proportionally high, being 2.70 per cent of all beneficiary households in the country. However in terms of person days of employment generated under MGNREGA, the position of Assam is lower than the national average. In 2011-12 the person days of employment generated under MGNREGA in Assam is 4.98 crore which is 1.67 per cent of 211.71 crore person days of employment generated in the country as a whole. It may be noted here that population of Assam constitutes 2.58 per cent of India as per 2011 census.

TABLE 1: STATUS OF EMPLOYMENT UNDER MGNREGA IN 2011-12

Employment	India	Assam
No of households having demand (in lakh)	504	14
No of beneficiary households (in lakh)	499	13
Average person days	42.43	26.23
Households availing 100 days	3896589	17009

Source: Department of Rural Development, Govt. of India, 2013, (Accessed on 21st Feb. 2013).

The data published by the Government of India in 2013 show that in Lakhimpur, MGNREGA generated employment for 99.6 percent of deserving households which amounted to 11.97 lakh person days of employment. The average person days per deserving household are 26.85. Comparing different districts it is found that almost every district of Assam has provided employment to more than 95 per cent of poor households which wanted to work under MGNREGA. The outcomes of the programme in some selected districts of Assam are shown in Table 2. Among the districts, Kokrajhar has provided employment of 48.50 person days per deserving household and 100 days' employment guarantee for 5367 people. It is followed by Dhemaji District generating 33.23 person days per deserving household. In this district MGNREGA guaranteed 100 days' employment for 1010 people. It is lowest in North Cachar Hills (i.e. 13.48 person days per household) where 100 days' job guarantee was given only to seven people. Moreover, district Karimganj was totally unable to provide 100 days' job guarantee in the reference period.

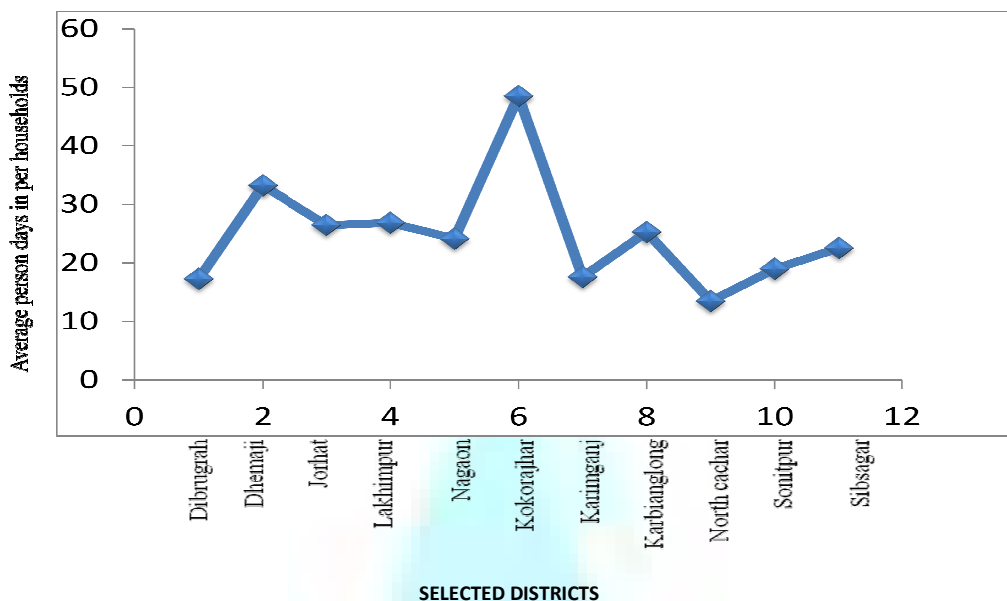
TABLE 2: OUTCOMES OF MGNREGA IN SELECTED DISTRICTS OF ASSAM (IN 2011-12)

District	Households Demanding employment	% of households receiving employment	Total Person days provided (in lakh)	Average person Days for per household	No of Households availing 100 days' employment
Dibrugrah	34308	98.9	5.85	17.25	70
Dhemaji	53411	99.0	17.57	33.23	1010
Jorhat	39928	99.9	10.56	26.45	286
Lakhimpur	44753	99.6	11.97	26.85	641
Nagaon	79143	99.9	19.07	24.13	331
Kokrajhar	68660	99.9	33.26	48.50	5367
Karimganj	27851	99.7	4.89	17.60	0
Karbi anglong	95330	99.5	23.94	25.25	2277
North Cachar	7739	95.8	1.00	13.48	7
Sonitpur	93511	98.9	17.55	18.98	99
Sivsagar	51131	99.6	11.47	22.52	471
Assam	1353548	99.6	353.44	26.23	17009

Source: Department of Rural Development, Govt. of India, 2013, (Accessed on 21st Feb. 2013).

The data reveal that MGNREGA is comparatively effective in some districts like Kokrajhar, Karbi Anglong, etc. which are suffering from instability due to social conflict and violence. Many people in these districts are provided employment through the scheme for rehabilitation and reestablishment. Moreover in the heavily flood effected districts such as Dhemaji, Lakhimpur, etc. the scheme has played a vital role in employment generation. But in industrially developed districts like Dibrugrah, Jorhat, Sivsagar, MGNREGA is not much effective. This may be due to the availability of industrial employment in those districts. The trends of employment provided by MGNREGA in some districts of Assam are shown in figure 1.

FIGURE 1: STATUS OF AVERAGE PERSON DAYS GENERATED BY MGNREGA



MGNREGA IN SURVEYED AREA

There are very few villages in the surveyed area where the scheme has been run successfully. During the field visits, it was observed that many job card holders had no idea about the work and the existing wage rate. They, in general, lacked awareness about MGNREGA. They even did not know that they were to apply for work. Some job card holders thought that once they got the job card, they would be called for work by their *panchayat*. Moreover, a few job card holders were able to get work under MGNREGA. There were only four villages – Kharkati, Brishnupur, Tiokia and Bharaluwa where MGNREGA was operationalised. As low as nine households out of 220 surveyed, got employment under the scheme. In this sense our hypothesis is partially accepted. As for the households’ guaranteed employment is concerned, the average person days generated by MGNREGA in the surveyed villages are just 54 days. There is not a single case in any village where at least one worker had got 100 days’ guaranteed work. Most of the beneficiaries worked for less than 50 days. The activities of MGNREGA in the surveyed villages are shown in Table 3.

TABLE 3: STATUS OF EMPLOYMENT UNDER MGNREGA IN THE SURVEYED VILLAGES

Villages	No of beneficiary households	Person days	Average person days	No. of Job card holders	Beneficiaries’ as % of Job card holders	Wage rate
Kathabari	2	150	75	16	12.5	120
Brishnupur	2	150	75	10	20.0	115
Tiokia	2	90	45	15	13.3	120
Bharaluwa	3	100	33	15	20.0	115
Total	9	490	54	56	16.07	118

Source: Primary Survey, 2010-11.

It can be highlighted that only nine out of 56 job card holding households in the four villages got employment. There are many reasons behind the low incidence of MGNREGA in the surveyed villages. The wage rate for MGNREGA employment is less than that existing in the villages. The average daily wage rate provided by MGNREGA is ` 118 whereas the existing average wage rate for the unskilled workers in surveyed villages is ` 153 (as shown in appendix I). Moreover, the main reason behind low demand for MGNREGA in the surveyed villages is inordinate delay of wage payments. Apart from this, many contractors executing the public works prefer the more experienced labourers from other districts. In the process, the local labourers lose the opportunity to work, but when they put pressure, the contractors pay them a little amount and use their job cards for official purposes.

TABLE 4: STATUS OF BPL AND THE JOB CARD HOLDERS IN THE SURVEYED VILLAGES

Status	All villages		Beneficiary villages	
	Numbers	Percentage	Numbers	Percentage
Job card holders	159	72.27	9	16.07
BPL card holders	137	62.27	5	55.55
Illiterate BPL card holders	34	24.82	2	22.22
Total surveyed households	220	100	-	-

Source: Primary Survey, 2010-11.

MGNREGA aims at generating employment for rural unskilled labourers with a view to reducing their poverty. Table 4 shows the status of the programme. Amongst the 220 surveyed households there are 137 BPL card holders (62.27 per cent) and 159 job card holders (72.27 per cent) in the study villages. Many BPL people are not aware about the MGNREGA and many APL households have little interest in the type of employment provided by the programme. Out of all beneficiary households 44.4 per cent belong to APL while the remaining belong to BPL category. It also highlights that a high proportion (i.e. 75.2 per cent) of the job card holders are literate and only 24.8 per cent illiterate. Among the beneficiaries, the rate of illiteracy is 22.2 per cent. It is evident from the data that every job card holder does not belong to BPL category.

CONCLUSION

The Government has taken various programmes in order to create employment opportunities and eradicate poverty. Many of these are partially successful in achieving their goals. The MGNREGA programme is being implemented everywhere in the country including Assam yet it has not achieved its goal fully owing to the lack of adequate information. In the survey area the programme has not succeeded much, because the potential beneficiaries are not yet well-informed about the objectives of this programme. The effectiveness of this programme would improve if the poor could be made fully aware of this programme. Therefore, government should take step for providing adequate information of MGNREGA through the *panchayats* and the development blocks among the rural people in time to time through *Gramsava* or other such meeting so that the rural job seekers easily involved in the work. Otherwise the success story of MGNREGA implementation is limited only in the policy documents and the plan papers of the scheme.

APPENDIX I

AVERAGE WAGE RATE OF UNSKILLED LABOUR IN THE SURVEYED VILLAGES (WAGES IN ₹)

Villages	Average Wage rate
Bamchapori	155
Batchoramukh	144
Bharaluwa	155
Brisnupur	140
Choraimoria	140
Dhemagrah	142
Duliagaon	156
Joriguri	150
Kathabari	150
Kharkati	200
Soriyah Bari	146
Tiokia	155
Average	153

Source: Primary Survey, 2010-11.

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