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### Awareness about Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act: Some evidence from the northern parts of West Bengal, India

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#### Abstract

This study takes up the issues related to the awareness about an ambitious welfare programme targeting the rural population of India, the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA). The study is based on a primary survey and finds a general lack of awareness about the basic guidelines and the legal entitlements among the intended beneficiaries. This is attributed as one of the reasons for the underlying corruption and the programme not being so successful in the surveyed areas as compared to some other states of India. The paper also provides some suggestions that may result in better implementation of the evaluated programme in the study areas.

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## 1. Introduction

Mobilization and awareness are among the major factors that determine successful implementation of poverty alleviating schemes including public employment programmes, cash transfers and microfinance interventions. However, majority of the rural population in developing countries have low levels of literacy. Thus, creating awareness among the rural masses about any of these development programmes has been a major concern among the policy makers in these countries.

One of the most demanding challenges for any anti poverty scheme to succeed is the task of generating awareness about the scheme among the targeted population. Without awareness about these schemes, there is always a possibility that full benefits may not accrue to the intended beneficiaries. Also, some segments of the targeted population which are unaware of the implemented scheme may be left out. As a result, the impact of the implemented welfare programme, howsoever well laid, will be marginal and can lead to inequalities. Maharashtra Employment Guarantee Scheme can be taken as an example of such a case. According to Shah and Mehta (2008), lack of awareness amongst the potential beneficiaries is one of the main reasons behind the constrained impact of the aforesaid scheme.

This paper takes up the issues related to the awareness about another welfare programme targeting the rural population of India, the ambitious Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA). The act was passed in 2005 and the implementation of the programme began in 2006. While the awareness of this programme among the rural population is being investigated upon, the scope of discussion is limited to the northern parts of the state of West Bengal, which is one among the poorest states of India and lags behind the southern and western parts of India when it comes to different development indicators including demographic ones. The study is based on a primary survey which was conducted in year 2011.

Given this context, the paper is organized as follows: the next section discusses MGNREGA, which is followed by a section presenting a brief overview of the survey and the areas chosen for the study. Section 4 discusses the findings whereas section 5 reviews these findings and suggests some changes that may result in better implementation of the evaluated programme. The paper finally ends with the concluding remarks.

## 2. Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act: Introduction

The MGNREGA, previously called NREGA (National Rural Employment Guarantee Act) was passed unanimously by the Lok Sabha (lower house of Indian Parliament) on 23<sup>rd</sup> August 2005.<sup>1</sup> Initially it was rolled out in the poorest 200 districts of India in the year 2006-07, followed by 130 more districts in the year 2007-08 and now has been extended to the entire country (Shankar *et al.* 2011). Under this Act, any adult from a household living in a rural area, willing to do

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<sup>1</sup> NREGA (National Rural Employment Guarantee Act) was renamed MGNREGA on 2<sup>nd</sup> October 2009. The implementation of the Act is called Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MGNREGS) which was previously called NREGS. For the sake of convenience, the terms (MGNREGA and MGNREGS) have been used interchangeably.

unskilled manual labour at statutory minimum wage is entitled to be employed for at least 100 days a year in public work. If employment is not provided, an unemployment allowance has to be paid to the individual seeking work under the scheme. While a number of rural employment programmes have been initiated in the past by the government, MGNREGS is unique in the sense that it provides a legal guarantee of employment to the targeted population, which is unlike any other centrally sponsored scheme.<sup>2</sup> It places a judicially enforceable obligation on the state and gives bargaining power to those covered under the Act (Dey *et al.* 2006).

There are numerous potential benefits that MGNREGS offers if implemented properly. One of them is that it can protect rural households from poverty in general and hunger in particular, especially during the lean seasons. With work available at the local level (village), the scheme may also lead to a substantial reduction in rural-urban migration. Further, MGNREGS is a means to create useful assets in the rural areas. For example, water and soil conservation structures have been built through the programme (Centre for Science and Environment, 2008). Through the work that is assigned to the labourers, useful public infrastructures can be developed in the villages leading to fostering of the growth process in the villages.

Moreover, one of the most remarkable features of MGNREGS unlike the other employment guarantee programmes is the complete bar on the use of contractors or the middlemen. Most of the government programmes in the past have been implemented through the agency of local contractors, who have emerged as major sources of exploitation of the rural poor, especially women. These local contractors involve themselves in fudging of “muster rolls” along with inflated employment and wage figures (Dreze 2007). MGNREGS bans the use of such mechanisms and provides legal entitlements to labourers in terms of working hours, rest, drinking water, medical aid and other facilities. Also, the programme lays emphasis on planning of work and mechanisms of social audit. Thus, MGNREGS is a development initiative which places central importance on quality of work and focuses on creation of durable assets through crucial public investments.

However, these well laid guidelines may be marred by low awareness among the villagers about their rights under the Act. This observation becomes important if seen in the light of the study conducted by ISWSD (2006) which reports low awareness among the beneficiaries about important issues related to application of works and eligibility under the Act. A performance audit report on NREGA by CAG (2008) also finds low levels of awareness among the villagers (in the state of Jharkhand) about the programme. However, a study by Menon (2008) reports substantial level of awareness about MGNREGS among the villagers in the state of Rajasthan. It will be worthwhile to note that Rajasthan is one of the Indian states where the scheme has been successfully implemented. Since the opinions and observations about MGNREGS and the awareness about it among the masses are mixed, we decided to conduct a primary survey in the northern parts of the state of West Bengal to get first hand information

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<sup>2</sup> The centrally sponsored schemes include the National Rural Employment Programme (NREP) from 1980-89, Rural Landless Employment Guarantee Programme (RLEGP) from 1983-89, Jawahar Rozgar Yojana (JRY) from 1989-99, Sampoorna Grameen Rozgar Yojana (SGRY) from 2001 and National Food for Work Programme (NFFWP) from 2004 (ISWSD 2006).

about the awareness among the villagers regarding the scheme and its various features. The details of the survey have been presented in the following section.

### 3. Survey

We conducted the survey in the Phansidewa, Khoribari and Naxalbari blocks of Darjeeling district and the Rajganj block of Jalpaiguri district in the northern parts of the state of West Bengal in the month of March in 2011. The main objective of the survey was to get an idea of the awareness level of the villagers regarding their rights in the welfare schemes like MGNREGS. The blocks were chosen in such a manner so as to keep the representation of the major work profiles of the population (of the region) in the sample. The details regarding the choice of blocks and the sampling framework are presented below.

Since the focus of our study was on the northern parts of the state of West Bengal, and Darjeeling being the northernmost district of the state of the West Bengal, we had initially chosen the Siliguri subdivision of the Darjeeling district for the survey. Siliguri subdivision comprises of the blocks of Phansidewa, Khoribari, Naxalbari and Matigara. Out of the above four blocks, we administered our survey in the first three blocks. Since there was some unrest in the Matigara block due to the West Bengal state elections which were due in April 2011, we chose to replace the Matigara block with the Rajganj block of the adjacent district of Jalpaiguri.

We decided to administer the survey in the Siliguri subdivision of the district of Darjeeling because out of the four blocks in the Siliguri subdivision, rice (and vegetables) forms the major crop in two, that is, Phansidewa and Khoribari blocks, tea-plantations dominate in the Naxalbari block whereas Matigara block has a sizeable proportion of migrants who are basically involved in construction and other off-farm activities in the adjoining areas. Since, in the rural areas of the northern parts of West Bengal, population involved in rice (and vegetables) growing, tea-plantations and construction (and other off-farm) activities forms a representative sample of the major work profiles in the region, Siliguri subdivision was an ideal choice for our survey. As we could not conduct the survey in Matigara (due to reasons already explained), we replaced Matigara with the Rajganj block of the adjacent district of Jalpaiguri. This is likely to introduce a very small bias in our analysis because like Matigara block, Rajganj block also has a sizeable proportion of construction (and other off-farm) workers and is very near to Matigara block. Also the social fabric and culture of Rajganj is very similar to Matigara. Finally, from each block we randomly selected one “gram panchayat” for the survey.<sup>3</sup> From every selected gram panchayat (henceforth referred as panchayat), we randomly selected 15 respondents out of the total registered for work under MGNREGS. Of note is the fact that the 15 respondents selected from each panchayat belonged to a particular work profile (the particular work profile itself varies across panchayats).

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<sup>3</sup> Gram panchayat is the governing body at the village (one village or a cluster of villages) level and its officials are elected by the villagers. The MGNREGS is implemented through the panchayats. The average size of the gram panchayats (number of individuals covered) varies widely from state to state.

Further, as informed by the Block Development Office and the panchayat officials, work under MGNREGS is mostly provided in the period of November to March. So, the month of March presented an excellent time for the survey because by this time work under MGNREGS would have been allotted to those seeking work under the scheme. Also, at this time the issues related to MGNREGS would have been fresh in the minds of the respondents. Conducting survey in the later months, for example, May or June would likely to have introduced severe recall bias in the responses.

A brief description of the occupational profile of the panchayats chosen for the survey has been presented in Table 1.

**Table1:**  
Details of the panchayats surveyed

Panchayat	Block	District	Number of Respondents	Major Occupation	Major Crops
Jalash Nizamtara	Phansidewa	Darjeeling	15	Agriculture	Rice and vegetables
Khoribari Panishali	Khoribari	Darjeeling	15	Agriculture	Rice and vegetables
Naxalbari	Naxalbari	Darjeeling	15	Agriculture	Tea
Dabgram II	Rajganj	Jalpaiguri	15	Migrants (Construction workers)	Not Applicable

Source: Survey by authors

It would be worthwhile to mention that, in the surveyed areas, the implementation of MGNREGS has not been uniform. In the Jalash Nizamtara and Khoribari Panishali panchayats, employment is reported to have been provided for 80 to 90 days in the year 2010. However in the Dabgram II panchayat, villagers get only about 20-25 days of work in a year. In the Naxalbari panchayat, where tea plantations form the major crop, MGNREGS has been unsuccessful. Till the year 2010, the programme was not allowed to be implemented; however the year 2011 saw 14 days of employment till the time, the survey was conducted. The following section gives an account of the main findings for each block covered under the survey.

#### 4. Findings

It will become clear from the ensuing discussion that the intended beneficiaries were not aware of their rights in terms of number of days of work they are entitled to, per day wages, and other related issues. They were also not aware about the agency which has launched MGNREGS and the agency which is actually providing for the wages they are receiving for the work completed under the MGNREGS. The block-wise main findings are as follows:

*Phansidewa Block:* MGNREGS has been relatively well implemented in the area. All the respondents covered under this block reported that they were happy with the programme which provides them work for 80 to 90 days in a year. Important is to note that women were participating in huge numbers which gives them financial security and independence in financial matters. Though the respondents were generally aware of the basic guidelines of the programme, the following evidence proves that they were not fully aware of the intricacies of the guidelines:

- (i) A registration charge of Rs. 50 was paid by every household for getting a job card. However, guidelines clearly mandate that no registration charges need to be paid for getting a job card.<sup>4</sup>
- (ii) Wage rate has been hiked from Rs. 100/day to Rs. 130/day with effect from 1<sup>st</sup> January 2011. However workers were receiving Rs. 100 and they reported that they were not aware of such increase.

*Khoribari Block:* MGNREGS has been well implemented here also with the number of person days going up to 80 days per year. Moreover, the workers were receiving their quota of Rs. 130 per day for the work under MGNREGS during the time of this survey. Hence employment and income were generated through the scheme. However, during the discussions with respondents, it became clear that the villagers were unaware about the rural asset creation through the taken up work, which is one of the primary objectives of MGNREGS and which aims for development of local agriculture and the village economy as a whole. For example, villagers reported that there was a need to develop infrastructure which can prevent water logging during the monsoon season. Despite the need of this infrastructure, which may be created through the scheme, the work had not been taken up till date. Since the villagers were unaware of the fact that such initiatives may be taken up by the panchayat and feel that creating flood control infrastructure is not under the ambit of panchayat, they did not complain against it.<sup>5</sup>

*Naxalbari Block:* Though this area is rural and falls under the ambit of MGNREGS, the scheme was initiated for the first time in the year 2011. Only 14 person days of work was reported to have been generated in 2011 till the time of this survey. During an interview with the Block Development Officer (BDO) of the area, the official reported that the tea plantation owners did not allow the programme to be implemented in the past years, as it would have lead to substantial hike in the wages of the workers.<sup>6</sup> However serious persuasion and pressure from the block development office resulted in the implementation of the scheme in 2011. Nevertheless, the villagers were unaware of the basic guidelines that are mandated under the scheme.

*Rajganj Block:* This is again a block where the implementation of MGNREGS has been poor. The average person days generated was around 25 days a year even though the villagers reported that they were willing to work for more number of days. The respondents lacked the

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<sup>4</sup> Rs. stands for Indian Rupees.

<sup>5</sup> Flood control infrastructure has been created in parts of Rajsamand district of Rajasthan. Please refer to Mazdoor Kisaan Shakti Sangathan (2010) for details.

<sup>6</sup> The wage (of tea plantation workers) was reported to be Rs.60 per day whereas MGNREGS now provides a wage of Rs.130 per day.

general awareness that they were entitled for 100 days of employment through the scheme. Also, they were unaware of the fact that important assets can be created through the programme. Assets like wells and other infrastructures which could have improved agriculture in the local economy were not initiated by the panchayat. In the absence of such infrastructure, the land in the block in general remains to be infertile.

Of note is the fact that none of the work sites in the villages surveyed had drinking water and crèche facilities. Khera and Nayak (2009) have stressed upon the importance of these facilities to increase women participation. Though, the MGNREGA mandates the existence of such facilities, when interviewed, none of the respondents were aware of these mandatory guidelines. Additional discussion on the above issues has been carried out in the next section which also reviews the main findings of our study.

## 5. Review

From the above findings it is clear that villagers were generally unaware of the guidelines of MGNREGA, even in the areas where the programme has been relatively successful in creating a substantial number of person days. In some areas people were not aware of the wages, and in almost all the areas, they were not aware of the fact that they were legally entitled to at least 100 days of employment. If employment is not provided, they are entitled to unemployment allowance but none of the villagers who were interviewed received any unemployment allowance for the days they were not provided work (even though they had applied for it). In all the areas covered under the survey, villagers were unaware that rural assets may be created through the work under MGNREGS which may benefit them in the short and long run.

Another striking point is that villagers do not know that MGNREGS is a demand based programme, effectively implying that the applicants should get work within 15 days of applying for the work. Respondents said that the panchayats inform them about when the work under the scheme can be allotted and accordingly whoever has a job card and wants to work is provided work. This is a deviation from the main essence of this programme which is designed to ensure financial security during the lean occupational season. Many of the respondents reported that they leave their daily work as an agricultural labourer to work under the scheme. However, there are times during the lean season when they could neither work as an agricultural labourer and nor in MGNREGS as the panchayats report unavailability of work (which is against the guidelines of the scheme). As a result they migrate to the adjacent cities to find employment.

This raises an important question, that is, whether the panchayats want the people to be aware of the programme? In all the panchayats surveyed, there exist a board which enlists the rules and guidelines of the programme. However the languages are Hindi, English or Bengali. The villagers most of whom are illiterate reported their inability in understanding the writings. In the state of Rajasthan where MGNREGS is relatively successful, its implementation was backed by awareness campaigns (Menon, 2008). However, interviews with the respondents covered under our survey confirmed that the campaigns of such sorts have never been carried out in their respective areas.

It may be argued that the panchayats take advantage of the lack of the awareness among the villagers and “work under the veil of pro people governance”. It is evident from the findings and the interviews with the respondents that there have been no efforts on the part of the panchayats to make the villagers aware of MGNREGS. Undoubtedly, the structure under which the panchayats act has an immense potential for the development of the villages and the villagers. However, it is found that panchayats prefer maintaining an information gap so that they can use this gap to their advantage on one hand and maintain a good governance image within the villages and the villagers on the other.

There also seems to be a lack of motivation on the part of the local authorities to work for the villagers. Evidence from other states, for example, Andhra Pradesh suggests that the state has covered enormous grounds for the mobilization of masses to form groups and work towards mutual benefit under the Society for Elimination of Rural Poverty (SERP) programme.<sup>7</sup> However, mobilization of such sort is absent in these northern parts of the West Bengal.

In this kind of scenario there is a need for the higher levels of governance (state government) to intervene and issue directions to the panchayats. For example, awareness campaigns about the guidelines through posters, documentaries and deliberations in local language may be made mandatory for every panchayat to follow. These campaigns should include intricacies like wage and other entitlements and importance of the work that would be allotted under the scheme. The demand based nature of the scheme should also be highlighted through these campaigns. Moreover, these campaigns should be subjected to social audit and there should be provision of disciplinary action against the panchayat authorities if the guidelines of the programme are not followed.

## 6. Conclusion

Mobilization and awareness are among the key components for successful implementation of any welfare intervention especially in rural areas, where literacy and exposure to media is often less as compared to the urban areas. Well laid guidelines should always be backed up by continuous mobilization and creating awareness among the local masses. In this study, we have tried to bring out some of the facts regarding awareness about the details of MGNREGS among its intended beneficiaries. The study is based on the northern parts of the Indian state of West Bengal which is a state plagued with high incidence of rural poverty. It has been found that people were often not aware of the basic guidelines regarding wage structures and other legal entitlements. Even in the parts where the programme has been relatively well implemented in terms of number of person days generated per year, it has been found that people often end up paying registration fees for getting work in the scheme, which is clearly a violation of the guidelines of the scheme. Further, they were ignorant about the increase in wages even after three months from the time the increase was in effect. In addition, the villagers were not aware

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<sup>7</sup> SERP is an autonomous society of the Department of Rural Development, Government of Andhra Pradesh. The society works for community driven rural poverty reduction to enable the poor to improve their livelihoods and quality of life through their own organizations. It aims to cover all the rural poor households in the state with a special focus on the poorest of the poor households. For more details, see SERP (2011).



with regard to the types of work which can be undertaken in the scheme and which can develop important rural assets and might be instrumental in the development of villages and the villagers as well as the local economy as a whole. Moreover, panchayats use the low awareness among the villagers about the welfare schemes to their advantage and project themselves as pro people bodies.

As a concluding remark it can be mentioned that MGNREGS is a potential tool of empowerment of the rural households in general and the labourers in particular. Guaranteed employment can protect them from financial insecurity and can enhance their bargaining power, capabilities as well as freedom. Evidences from our field survey signify that villagers in northern parts of West Bengal have not been able to get the full benefits of the scheme. However, in other states, for example, Rajasthan, it has been seen that these challenges can be effectively tackled through proper implementation and awareness generation. An eminent economist and social activist, Jean Dreze has said, “legislation alone will not guarantee employment, continuous mobilization is required” (Ministry of Rural Development, 2006-07). Through such mobilization, awareness among the rural households can be generated which may ensure successful implementation of the MGNREGS.

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