Poverty Trap and Impact of MGNREGA: Study of a Few Key Areas

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The purpose of this paper is to examine the impact of MGNREGA on key areas like Economic and Livelihood Security, Minimum Wages, Distress Migration, Productive Community Assets and Participation of Women. The researcher reviewed official reports and academic papers on the impact of MGNREGA to extract information about the key areas and poverty levels overall. The study found that results are mixed with variations across regions and within states for all key parameters covered. The Paper concludes that the impact of MGNREGA is mixed, though positive overall

Keywords - Poverty Trap, MGNREGA, Economic security, Minimum Wages, Distress Migration, Participation of Women, Productive Community Assets

1. Introduction

In India, one can see the persistence of extreme poverty at various nooks and corners, sometimes cheek and jowl, with shining illustrations of economic progress and development. The persistence of poverty, with concentration in certain parts of the country and the slide of sections of people into deeper poverty in the aftermath of the Covid pandemic (Saxegaard, Coppo, Khalil, Kotera, & Unsal,2023) makes the examination of poverty especially pertinent.

Poverty can be viewed through two distinct schools of thought. One thinks of the poor as similar in their ability and preferences to those who are not poor but function in an adverse environment (Ghatak,2015). The adversities could be in terms of infrastructure, government policies, etc. The logical follow-through of this belief is that if this adversarial environment was "fixed", poverty could be alleviated. The other perspective, which is radically different, is that the poor are subject to different pressures and constraints, which results in their making choices that are different and can reinforce poverty. The concept of poverty can be examined for individuals/households and nations.

Nurkse (1953) conceptualised the idea of "circular constellations of forces" tending to act and react upon each other in such a way as to keep a poor country/person poor, leading to the theory of the "vicious circle of poverty." This theory operates from both the demand and supply sides.

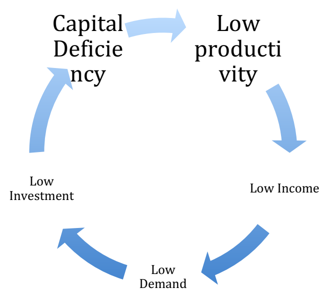

Figure 1 *Vicious Circle of Poverty (Demand Side)*

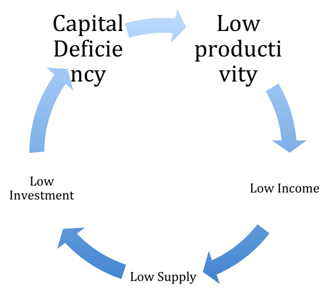

Figure 2 *Vicious Circle of Poverty (Supply Side)*

This vicious circle or persistence of poverty is also referred to as intergenerational poverty since it can exist across generations in a family (Barrett & Carter, 2013). This persistence of poverty, which makes it difficult for individuals to rise above poverty levels, leads to a situation called " Poverty Trap." Suppose we were to simplify the definition of the poverty trap. In that case, it can be agreed to be a situation in which current poverty leads to further poverty in the future, thereby perpetuating poverty. Poverty traps can be tied to an individual's circumstances; such as lack of access to nutritious food or education. From a broader, national perspective, the "Poverty Trap" can be explained as a set of self-reinforcing mechanisms where poor countries remain poor, or current poverty gives rise to poverty in the future (Azariadis and Stachurski 2005). Countries/ Regions with cycles of corrupt government climate changes or scarce resources can affect entire nations, trapping a majority of its people in poverty.

The existence of a poverty trap gives rise to interventions by the state in the form of various policy measures which can take place both on the demand and supply sides. As per the Sustainable Development Goals adopted by the UN Organization, SDG1 calls for eradicating extreme poverty globally by 2030. Extreme poverty is defined using the international poverty line of $2.15 per day, reflecting the typical poverty line of the world's poorest countries. One of the targets of SDG1 states that there has to be " significant mobilisation of resources from a variety of sources, including through enhanced development cooperation, in order to provide adequate and predictable means for developing countries, in particular least developed countries, to implement programmes and policies to end poverty in all its dimensions." Another target seeks to "create sound policy frameworks at the national, regional and international levels, based on pro-poor and gender-sensitive development strategies to support accelerated investment in poverty eradication actions." Given that India is a signatory to the UNSDG, governments need to place greater emphasis on framing and executing policies that could alleviate poverty.

One of the terms that can be used in the context of poverty is " Assets", broadly defined as stock used to generate income. These can be either public or private goods and can take the form of financial, human, natural and social capital. Included as assets are production and exchange technologies and supporting institutions. Economists have tried to understand how households acquire assets to increase their productivity and earnings, why some households struggle to escape poverty and how adverse shocks can have further negative consequences. Households can differ in their incentives to acquire assets or to adapt to new technologies, the conditions under which some households may struggle to escape poverty, and how adverse shocks (e.g., covid, pandemic) can set back the economic progress made. Escape from poverty is possible if the earnings of the poor increase; this increase can be affected via productivity increase or income transfer.

Nelson (1956) developed a growth model with low saving and investment rates at low-income levels. His study found that certain measures, such as changing social structure, limiting family size, increasing the population's participation in the labour force, and government investment programs, can result in breaking the poverty trap.

Since Independence, there have been several attempts to reduce poverty in India, including direct attempts to eradicate poverty, agricultural reforms, and economic growth. The latest poverty figure for India, as of 2021, is 12.92 percent of its population under the poverty line. (https://pip.worldbank.org/country-profiles/IND). The official figures are subject to a certain amount of debate, with some estimates of people below the poverty line at a much higher number. However, the overall trend across the seven decades shows a downward shift, even if the absolute numbers remain high.

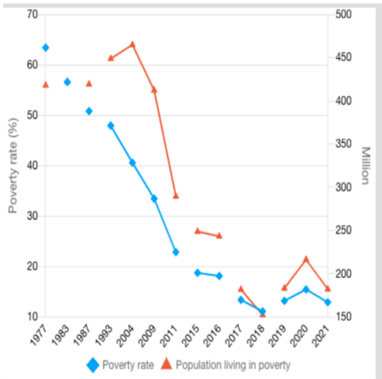

Figure 3 *Poverty Rate in India*
Source: *World Bank*
https://pip.worldbank.org/country-profiles/IND

The MGNREGA (Mahatma Ghandi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act) was a result of the Act of the Indian Parliament 2005, to provide for enhancement of livelihood security in rural areas of the country. The Act is applicable across India (except Jammu & Kashmir). It seeks to provide at least one hundred days of guaranteed wage employment in a financial year to every household whose adult members volunteered for unskilled manual labour. The Act sought to increase the security of livelihood in rural areas, protect the "right to work", and build national assets. The Act stipulates that at least a third of the beneficiaries under the Act must be women, providing non-discriminatory wages for both men and women and day-care facilities at the worksite. The program works on a cost-sharing basis, with the Central Government providing 75 percent of the cost while the state government pitches in with the remaining 25 percent.

The MGNREGA is based on the Keynesian principle of public investment in public works as a remedial measurement for countering involuntary unemployment. The MGNREGA in India has been adapted more as a distribution than an anti-recessionary measure. Bhaduri (2005) has argued that the income transfers and public works created will have a significant multiplier effect. This multiplier effect with the Marginal Propensity to Consume (MPC) would have ripple effects through the economy, increasing wages, spending and investment eventually pulling people out of poverty.

2. Methodology

The purpose of the paper is to examine the literature and summarise the impact of MGNREGA on the following key areas:

- Economic and Livelihood Security
- Minimum Wages
- Distress Migration
- Productive Community Assets
- Participation of Women

These were the main goals laid out by the Act, which would ultimately result in the overarching objective of reducing poverty levels in the country. This research paper aims to examine the program's impact over the years across different states in these areas. The research methodology employed was secondary research. The author felt that understanding the program's impact could be examined only by looking at the data spread across several years. In order to do so, the author undertook an extensive review of the literature, focusing on the studies that looked at the impact of MGNREGA on at least one of the above key areas. In order to have an unbiased view, data from both government and non-government sources were included in the study.

3. Results and Discussion

Economic and Livelihood Security: Perhaps one of the biggest successes of the program is that the programme has instilled a sense of security and increased transparency and accountability in governance(Aiyar,2007). Reddy (2017) undertook a comparative study across districts in Karnataka, which had fully and partially implemented the program, and found that the districts with fully implemented programs had more significant income, savings, and employment. Korra (2015) found that while the program offered employment benefits to the Telangana state unemployed, they could provide employment only for 60-70 days out of the 100 days promised. Out of the households surveyed, 89 per cent agreed they had additional livelihood security from the scheme. Of the non-migrant households, 64 per cent felt that the program gave them added security, while the figure was 36 per cent for the migrant households.

The program's 100 days of employment have helped rural households earn better wages, which are being spent on daily food consumption needs, children's education, healthcare, and purchasing durable goods (Khera et al., 2009). The scheme has also enhanced the livelihood security of the rural poor and, in turn, reduced poverty levels and hunger for a few months, if not throughout the year (Dreze,2009). The program was a strategy for several workers to avoid migration and deal with illness and hunger. There was also a feeling of dignity to work in a government program with assured minimum wages (Reddy & Upendranadh,2010). A study carried out in disaster-affected Rudraprayag found that their social and economic well-being improved in a significant manner due to MGNREGA (Rahul, Pandey, & Soodan, 2016)

A report by the Government of India (Ministry of Rural Development, 2015) revealed that the average per day of employment generated / household was only 49 days, which is against the guarantee of 100 days. During the pandemic period, when a more significant percentage of the population depended on MGNREGA, the average days of employment provided per household were 52 days in 2020-21 and 50 days in 2021-22. The average employment days declined to 42 in the year 2022-23, as of January 20, 2023. (Hindu)

A study in the rainfall deficit region in India revealed that compared to the non-participants, participants of MGNREGA in their villages had a sharp decline in their debt burden (Bhattarai et al., 2014). One of the program's key objectives was to provide employment to the most vulnerable sections of Indian society. The NCEAR (2015) study shows that MGNREGA reduced poverty by up to 32%, and its impact was most significant in less developed areas and among socially vulnerable groups. The same study also reported that agricultural daily wage labourers, Adivasi and Dalits, and landless and marginal farmers were the groups that had heavy participation in the MGNREGA program. However, Ananda(2020) found that participation of Scheduled Tribes in Karnataka in the MGNREGA is negligible due to structural and functional reasons like lack of awareness, lesser payment, lack of bureaucratic will, corruption and delays in wage payment.

In their study in the Kalahandi district of Orissa, Yasmin and Srinivas (2020) found that MGNREA helped in food security and improved purchasing power. It added to the financial condition of households, lowering poverty to some extent. While they believed that the program had a good start in the district, any noticeable impact on the people's lives could only be assessed over a more extended period.

Minimum Wages: Sharma (2009) noted that the nominal wage rate in rural areas has increased as the scheme has unfolded, but real wage rates have not. A study by Reddy, Reddy, and Bantilan (2014) observed that wage increases were reported in states like Punjab, Haryana, Gujarat and West Bengal. His study also distinguished between the money wage rate, which rose over the years, and real wage rates, which remained stagnant. They also found that in Andhra Pradesh, the minimum wages increased due to the MGNREGA program and had multiple impacts: e.g. the agricultural wages went up, the average wages increased and remained over the minimum wages, while the wage disparity between the genders declined.

Dwivedi (2016) studied the satisfaction level of beneficiaries in the Rewa district concerning the income guarantee and found that nearly all of them were either satisfied or highly satisfied. The program enabled them to reduce their reliance on money lenders and get better nutrition, but they could not enrol their children in school. As a result, dissatisfaction with the untimely payment was high. Regarding wage rate, 63% of the respondents were satisfied though they expressed dissatisfaction with the price increase. Reddy (2014) reviewed data across states and found an increase in agricultural wages between 2006-7 and 2011-12; the wages for female agricultural workers rose sharply while the wage gap between male and female workers decreased for the same period.

Ram Jeet (2015) found that under the MGNREGA program, the average wages went up to 320 rupees from 80 rupees per day and an increase of 48 work days per annum in Western Uttar Pradesh. The participants felt that the quality of their lives had improved. They also felt that the program had given them increased bargaining power and gave their community productive assets, which led to more income and consumption. Nagaraja(2019) found that 91 per cent of the participants felt an increase in income, while 61 per cent of the participants felt that the market wages went up due to the scheme.

Nagaraj, Bantilan, Pandey and Roy (2016) surveyed six villages in Maharashtra and Telangana for two periods of 2003-5 and 2009-11. They found that the real wages increased at a slower pace during the period 2000-04 and at a much more significant rate during the program implementation period. During the same period, there was a greater reduction in the gender wage disparity in Telangana than Maharashtra. Pandi (2019) found that due to the wages paid to MGNREGA participants, there was a corresponding increase in agricultural wages and a reduction in the gender wage disparity. This scheme has given the labour class choices of employment; they can choose whether to work at lower wage rates or not in the open labour market (Pankaj, 2010).

Ghosh, B., Banik, N., & Roy Choudhury, R. (2020) found disparities across the states, with Assam and Tamil Nadu having the lowest average wage rates. The study found that the non-MGNREGA wages are higher in Assam, Kerala, Haryana, J & K and Himachal Pradesh. At the same time, it is lower in Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka and Tamil Nadu. The study inferred that a single Pan-India development policy would not have uniform success in a country as diverse as India, which has variations not just across the different states but also across districts within the state.

Distress Migration: The results vary from state to state (Reddy, Reddy & Bantilan (2014); studies from Uttarakhand, Orissa, Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka and Tamil Nadu show a decline in distress migration. However, studies in villages of Orissa, Chattisgarh and Jharkhand show an outmigration to advanced states of Haryana and Punjab. With MGNREGA, marginal farmers could invest in farming and get better yields. This did not stop outmigration but did reduce the incidences of seasonal outmigration. In Orissa, MGNREGA resulted in a decline in the percentage of distress migration by 72 per cent amongst Men and 45 per cent among women; the average period of migration declined as well to 23 days from 69 days per worker. This finding is similar to the findings of Parida (2005), whose survey in the districts of Odisha found that the MGNREGA lowered distress seasonal migration and increased economic and financial autonomy for socially vulnerable groups like scheduled caste and landless labour.

On the other hand, Pahari (2017) argued that the correlation between MGNREGA and migration is weak at the macro level analysis. Since migration is complex and a play of several complex factors, the program temporarily reduces migration but is ineffective over the long term. His study in the Bankura district in West Bengal found no impact of the MGNREGA program on immigration. The respondents were dissatisfied with the MGNREGA wages and the delay in payment and felt that the number of days offered for work could have been higher. All of which were contributory factors to the continued migration. In some districts of West Bengal, however, Majumdar (2016) found that MGNREGA did contribute significantly to reducing the percentage of immigration, falling from 71% to 62.5% in one village and from 46% to 32.5% in another village during the period 2001-2011.

The study by Jandu (2008) found that migration was a significant source of income for some families; with MGNREGA, the number of days of migration came down, as did the number of people in the household who were migrating. These were similar to the findings of Pandi (2019) in Tamil Nadu, who reported the number of people migrating, the distance travelled for work, and the time when migration takes place. Days spent outside the native place were all impacted positively (reduced) to some extent by the MGNREGA. Similar findings were found in a study by Singh, Modi, Maurya and Baral, 2024 who surveyed selected tribal districts in Madhya Pradesh and found that with the implementation of MGNREGA, the number of household members who migrated reduced as did the number of days of migration.

However, a study by Taufique, Hoque,& Hasmi (2023) found that states with the highest level of poverty, like Jharkhand, Bihar, Chattisgarh, Odisha, Madhya Pradesh, and West Bengal, continued to have high migration levels even after MGNREGA. In his study, Patro (2022) looked at factors responsible for people choosing to migrate v/s participating in MGNREGA. His study concluded that the main determinants of the participants' willingness to join MGNREGA are the value of agricultural assets, caste, additional source of income, and gender. A higher level of education, greater valuation of agricultural assets or economic status and being female were not interested in either migration or MGNREGA. The value of household property and family size did not significantly contribute to either decision. On the other hand, caste did influence participation in the MGNREGA program, with lesser participation from upper castes.

Productive Community Assets: A Study in Uttar Pradesh by Sharma and Ashvine (2013) found that MGNREGA helped develop social and economic infrastructure in the rural areas surveyed. Similarly, studies found that the infrastructure works reduced the vulnerability of agricultural production and livelihoods against soil erosion, uncertain rainfall and water scarcity (Kumar (2011) and helped increase output and productivity. The most important construction activities were water conservation and water harvesting structures; 180 districts had more than 1000 works in this category. Over 60 per cent of the works focussed on water conservation in the Chitradurga district in Eastern Karnataka. These included both that would provide benefits in the short term as well as in the long run. The linkages between the works built and rural ecosystems are complex, with the actual impact likely to be visible only in the long term. In the short term, three of the six villages showed an increase in groundwater level (Tiwari et al., 2011). In their study in Andhra Pradesh - in Anantapur district, Kareemulla, Reddy, Rao, Kumar, & Venkateswarlu (2009) found that water conservation accounted for the majority of work, nearly 56 per cent, followed by land development at 29 per cent.

Most of the work developed under MGNREGA in Uttarakhand was in rural connectivity and some in drought proofing. (Singh,2015). Water conservation, irrigation canals, and rural connectivity were the top three works prioritised in the Karnataka districts, as surveyed by Nagaraja (2019). However, an overwhelming number of people (91%) felt the assets needed to be more durable. Ranaware, Das, Kulkarni and Narayanan (2015) surveyed the assets created and found that 87 per cent were in use, out of which 43 per cent were mainly public and 57 per cent private. These works, by and large, were meant to support agrarian work, out of which water conservation work was predominant. The choice of work was likely a result of the villagers' choices, official directives, and agro-climatic conditions. Nearly 91% of the respondents had positive feelings about the works created, while only 9% disagreed.

Verma and Shah (2018) found that, on average, each work created 2000 person days of employment. It was concluded that 117 works -mostly in water conservation and related activities- for which detailed data was collected generated gross annual value that matched their cost. The authors recommended that renovation or revival of existing water bodies would provide the best returns on investment. They also suggested that enhancing the non-wage benefits of MGNREGA would boost the agrarian economy and induce better-off farmers to have a stake in its effective implementation.

Datta, Singh, Raja and Dixit (2021) in their study found that the synergy with MGNREGA, along with Swachh Bharat Mission and user groups, helped establish roles and responsibilities towards maintenance of Decentralised wastewater treatment and helped the local community to become self-sufficient. Rayappa & Bavaiah (2021) in their study observed that the MGNREGA's aim to establish and restore rural works was a departure from the conventional government welfare schemes. It helped to establish a basic rural infrastructure primarily to support the agrarian ecosystem through water conservation and management, irrigation works, afforestation and renovation of traditional water bodies. The results though are patchy, with some works turning out to be non-durable mainly due to lack of planning and maintenance.

Participation of Women: A study by Sudarshan (2010b) found that there was little consistency in work days for women across states, as well as within states. In 2006-07, for example, the share of women in total work days was above 33% in 15 out of 26 states, while 6 had a share of 25 % or less. However, in 2009-10, the number of states for over 33% and less than 25% was 20 and 6, respectively. Sharma (2009) also remarked upon this variation in states and found that women's participation in the Northern region remained low. This is also collaborated by a study done by Farooqi and Saleem (2015), who found that the awareness level about the program, its provision of minimum wages and the participation of women was low amongst women. In a couple of blocks where the women's registration for jobs was 33%, the actual work was carried out by men in the family. This study was done in Uttar Pradesh, where the percentage of women participating was limited to 20 % in the years 2010-11 and 2011-12.

Pankaj and Tankha (2010) surveyed women in Bihar, Jharkhand, Rajasthan, and Himachal Pradesh and found that not only did the women benefit economically because of the employment opportunities under MGNREGA, but they also reaped social benefits in the form of greater empowerment, greater choice and capability. Das(2012) studied the MGNREGA program in Northeast states and found that its impact on women was largely positive both individually and as a community. They were able to earn independently and contribute to family expenditures. Their presence in gram sabha increased, as did their interactions and speaking out in meetings.

Arora, Kulshreshtha and Upadhyay (2013) carried out their research in Rohtak, Haryana and found that out of the 250 women surveyed, - 95% per cent believed it enhanced their creditworthiness, while 78% believed that the program helped them to start saving their money. Arya, Meghana and Ambily (2017) found that women could make decisions regarding the income earned due to the employment chances offered under the scheme. Kelkar (2011), in his study, found that MGNREGA led to an increase in women's economic participation and, in turn, increased assets ownership. Desai(2018) found that women, compared to men, had a higher degree of participation in the rural areas under the MGNRERA program. Ahmad (2017) found that in Mewat, Haryana, the program contributed significantly to rural women's entrepreneurship.

The state government's active involvement in the management and delivery of the program can significantly increase the benefits, especially for women (Poonia,2012). This was similar to what women in Assam reported: greater benefits included an increase in income, social empowerment, having a say in the household and the creation of public assets (Borah & Bordoloi,2014). Xavier & Mari (2014) reported that the program increased household income and expenditure compared to pre-MGNREGA levels and economic and social benefits for vulnerable sections, especially women. Reddy (2014) reviewed data across states and found increased agricultural wages. Saha's study in West Bengal found that while the income generation went up for female workers along with other benefits like mainstreaming female workers, there were regional variations. Kakati and Behera (2014) highlighted these regional variations, whose survey revealed female participation at 19% in Uttar Pradesh, 32% in Jharkhand and 94% in Kerala for 2012-13. Chatterjee (2014) found that the program offered women benefits by adding to their income and, indirectly, their social status. However, the lack of childcare facilities and the presence of contractors were not in keeping with the desired program implementation.

A study by Khem Chand, Choudhary, Kumaand, and Tewari (2020) in Jodhpur showed that a majority of women were able to retain their earnings, thereby broadening their choices and increasing their bargaining power. The earnings were spent on better food, easing debt, and education for the children, while at the same time, it also resulted in greater participation by other members of the household in housework that was previously done by women.

4. Limitations and Future Direction

The major limitation of the study is that it relies on secondary sources. A primary study based on collecting data from the field would have added to the value and made the research more compelling. Going forward, primary research could focus on how the investment from MGNREGA influences the multiplier effect over a period of time.

5. Conclusion

The Multidimensional Poverty Indicator (MPI) shows a considerable reduction in poverty in India. As per some estimates,

some 275 million people moved out of multidimensional poverty in 2005-06 to 2015-16, and in the period between 2015-16 to 2019-21, another 140 million people. Studies have demonstrated the positive impact of MGNREGA on poverty alleviation, especially in districts with high initial poverty levels. However, improving the program's administrative efficiency, especially by addressing delayed payment, would go a long way in meeting the program's objectives. Better monitoring and evaluation mechanisms and regular social audits can help make the program more effective. The uneven performance of the program across districts and states needs to be addressed, as is the decrease in financial outlay for the program over the last few years.
Programmes like MGNREGA rely on inter-sector linkages and multipliers, as well as the benefits from wage payments and employment guarantees. Some of the benefits that need greater attention are the provisions for creating assets and developing infrastructure in rural areas. The MGNREGA works could be made more effective if it could be converged with other rural development activities. This would result in the permanent creation of certain assets that would, in turn, provide further economic activities like fisheries and horticulture.

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