Chapter III

Need and Importance of the Rural Employment Guarantee Schemes

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Rural Development in India:

The Rural Development in India is one of the most important factors for the growth of the Indian economy. India is primarily an agriculture-based country. Agriculture contributes nearly one-fifth of the gross domestic product in India. In order to increase the growth of agriculture, the Government has planned several programs pertaining to Rural Development in India. The Ministry of Rural Development in India is the apex body for formulating policies, regulations and acts pertaining to the development of the rural sector. Agriculture, handicrafts, fisheries, poultry, and diary are the primary contributors to the rural business and economy.

The introduction of Bharat Nirman, a project set about by the Government of India in collaboration with the State Governments and the Panchayat Raj Institutions is a major step towards the improvement of the rural sector. The National Rural Employment Guarantee Act 2005 was introduced by the Ministry of Rural Development, for improving the living conditions and its sustenance in the rural sector of India. Employment is fundamental pre-requisite to raise per capita income and eradicate household poverty. Poor employment opportunity is one of the key reasons for the endurance of poverty in India. After independence and particularly from the Fifth Five Year Plan onwards, Government of India has initiated several rural development programmes for raising rural employment for the alleviation of rural poverty. National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA) is one amongst them.²

Rural Development Department of Maharashtra:

Rural Development Department is established on 1st May 1960. All Schemes for rural areas were implemented by Rural Development Department. Till 1994-95 various schemes of Rural Development were implemented either by Zilla parishads and Panchayat Samiti or by district
level offices of other State Department. After 73rd constitutional amendment centrally sponsored Schemes are being implemented by DRDA. Now more emphasis is to implement of schemes at Gram Panchayat level. Rural Development Department doesn’t have independent State level Implementation agency. At the Divisional level there are offices of Divisional Commissioners.³

**Employment Generation in Rural Development Programmes:**

The prime goal of rural development is to improve the quality of life of the rural people by alleviating poverty through the instrument of self-employment and wage employment programmes, by providing community infrastructure facilities such as drinking water, electricity, road connectivity, health facilities, rural housing and education and promoting decentralization of powers to strengthen the Panchayat Raj institutions. The Chief Minister's 15 Point Programme is a visionary programme which seeks to make Tamil Nadu the best State in the country by way of creating growth opportunities in rural areas and eradicating rural poverty.

Employment generation has been an integral part of all the rural development programmes reflecting upon the concerns of Jawaharlal Nehru who had said, “*If we are to eradicate poverty, we must first do away with this wide spread unemployment*” and Gandhi had even gone to the extent of maintaining that the unemployment had also been responsible for communal rights.⁴ While generation of adequate employment and substantial reduction in poverty has been the goal of successive plans in India, for quite some time, it was thought that the growth in the overall production would take care of poverty and employment as increased production creates a capacity to deal with the problem of poverty, unemployment as well as underemployment. The Government's policy and programmes have laid emphasis on poverty alleviation, generation of employment and income opportunities and provision of infrastructure and basic facilities to meet the needs of rural
poor. For realizing these objectives, self-employment and wage employment programmes continued to pervade in one form or other.

**Need and Importance of the EGS.:**

Employment guarantee schemes (EGS) might be implemented in cities, but it is rural areas where their potential to reduce poverty reaches its best. In rural economies, where labor markets are rudimentary, an effective employment guarantee scheme can break the monophony rich local employers.\(^5\) By bringing competition to local labor markets, employment guarantee schemes can help the development of markets where this is most needed. The flexibility that the guarantee attribute gives to the program increases the degree of competition in labor markets regardless of the quantity of employment exerted by the program. The simple possibility of getting a job at the program wage rate is enough to render labor markets more competitive. Keeping in place a continuous, long term, guarantee scheme can deliver positive effect, sometimes making available needed jobs, at other times by simply ensuring that markets remain competitive without necessarily replacing market employment. A well designed guarantee scheme that reduces the costs of participating in paid labor activities, which might be high for poor families, also enhances the efficiency of labor markets.

Designing and implementing an employment guarantee scheme adds complexity to the already demanding task of creating and running a public works program. It is, thus, understandable that there are only few of these programs around. The paucity of experiences with employment guarantee programs has been recently mitigated by the ambitious *Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Act* of India. After few years of operation the program provides jobs to a little bit more than 50 million rural households.\(^6\)

If the benefits of an employment guarantee scheme were short term poverty alleviation, one would better look for an alternative, lower cost,
program. A conditional cash transfer program may come handy. If the scheme can reduce long term poverty, then it might be worthwhile consider such higher costs. But the argument we are trying to make here goes beyond that of taking into consideration higher costs because rewards are bigger. What we are proposing is that when EGS such as NREGA incurs in such high costs it is actually investing in development.

**Rural Employment Guarantee Programmes:**

The prevalence of unemployment and poverty viewed as the most serious concern for development. In this regard, the government of India has initiated various rural employment generation programmes—both self-employment and wage-employment programmes since independence. The wage-employment programmes generate employment, infrastructure and social capital. Evaluation of these programmes is another very significant component to achieve the laid down objectives. Further, these wage employment programmes must be need based and cost effective to improve the life of rural people, especially poor families.

The EGS provides employment at a prescribed wage for whoever wants to work. It is the individual who decides whether to participate in EGS after comparing the EGS wage and her reservation wage. However, since the late 1980s, there seems to be some rationing due to rises in wages. If the rationing is occurring in the selection of workers, government officials may show taste discriminations similar to private landlords. The government has provided jobs relating to low wages and long distances for rationing the workers. However, these criteria might not have diluted the self-targeting of the EGS. In other words, these two criteria might not have induced the non-poor to join the scheme.

A few important wage employment programmes launched by the Government of India are-
• Food for Work Programme (FWP);
• National Rural Employment Programme (NREP);
• Rural Landless Employment Guarantee Programme (RLEGP);
• Jawahar Rojgar Yojana (JRY),
• Sampurna Gramin Rojgar Yojana (SGRY) and
• National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme. (NREGS)

The government of India launched the Food for Work Programme in 1977. The programme aimed at providing gainful employment to the rural poor to improve their income and nutritional level. Side by side it also aimed at creation of durable community assets and strengthening rural infrastructure for higher production and ensuring better standard of living to the rural poor. In October 1980, the FWP was replaced with National Rural Employment Programme (NREP). The NREP sought to generate additional employment, create durable assets and raise the quality of living of the rural poor. The NREP was a centrally sponsored programme with 50:50 sharing basis between the central and the state government. One of the important features of the NREP that it was implemented through Panchayati Raj Institutions. The RLEGP was launched in 1983, aimed at providing employment to the landless families in rural areas, who are hard pressed with poverty and hunger particularly during the lean season. It was a 100 percent centrally sponsored scheme funded by the Government of India. The Jawahar Rojgar Yojana (JRY) Programme launched in 1989-90 in place of NREP.

Allocation of central assistance entirely on the basis of incidence of poverty; 80 percent of the share borne by the Central Government and 20 percent by the State Government; allotment of untied money to the village panchayats; and freedom to the gram panchayats to select, plan and implement local development works based on the felt-needs of the local community. The SGRY was launched in 2001. The two important
objectives of the programme are providing additional wage employment and food security and to improve nutritional levels. The second objective was to create durable community, social and economic assets and infrastructural development. It was a centrally sponsored scheme with cost sharing on a 75:25 basis between the Centre and the state.

**Wage Employment Programmes:**

Wage employment programmes, an important component of the anti-poverty strategy, have sought to achieve multiple objectives. They not only provide employment opportunities during lean agricultural seasons but also in times of floods, droughts and other natural calamities. They create rural infrastructure which supports further economic activity. These programmes also put an upward pressure on market wage rates by attracting people to public works programmes, thereby reducing labour supply and pushing up demand for labour. While public works programmes to provide employment in times of distress have a long history, major thrust to wage employment programmes in the country was provided only after the attainment of self-sufficiency in food grains in the 1970s. The National Rural Employment Programme (NREP) and Rural Landless Employment Guarantee Programmes (RLEGP) were started in the Sixth and Seventh Plans.\(^{10}\)

**Jawahar Rozgar Yojana/Jawahar Gram Samridhi Yojana:**

The NREP and RLEGP were merged in April 1989 under the Jawahar Rozgar Yojana (JRY). The JRY was meant to generate meaningful employment opportunities for the unemployed and underemployed in rural areas through the creation of economic infrastructure and community and social assets. Initially, the JRY also included the Indira Awas Yojana (IAY) and the MWS. Both these schemes were made into independent schemes in 1996. Under JRY, 73,764.83 lakh man days of employment were generated till 1998-99 Employment generation progressively declined over the years,
partly due to lower central allocations in the Ninth Plan and partly due to the increasing cost of creating employment.\textsuperscript{11}

A major proportion of JRY funds was spent on roads and buildings. Over 47 per cent of the employment generated benefited SC/STs. The share of landless labourers among the beneficiaries was 36 per cent. The village community found the assets created under the programme useful. However, against 40 per cent of population in a village panchayat who sought work, only 15 per cent were actually employed. The JRY was revamped from 1 April 1999 as the Jawahar Gram Samridhi Yojana (JGSY). It now became a programme for the creation of rural economic infrastructure with employment generation as a secondary objective. The 60:40 wage labour/material ratios in the JRY was relaxed. The programme is implemented by the village panchayats and provides for specific benefits to SC/STs, the disabled and the maintenance of community assets created in the past. Since inception it has generated 27 crore man days of employment each year, a substantial drop from the 103 crore man days generated under JRY in the year 1993-94.

The works taken up under JGSY have not been comprehensively evaluated for their quality and employment potential. Initial reports from the states; however, indicates that since every village panchayat has to be covered by the scheme, many panchayats get less than Rs. 10,000 per annum. Except for states like Kerala, West Bengal and Orissa, where village panchayats cover large areas and get substantial funds under the scheme, in other states most panchayats get less than Rs. 50,000 per annum. Benefits to the SC/STs and the disabled have to be earmarked. In addition, the administrative expenses of the panchayat and expenditure on assets already created are to be met from JGSY funds. In effect, panchayats are left with very little money to take up meaningful infrastructure projects. The
following Table No. 3.01 shows the financial and physical progress of JRY and JGSY.

Table No. 3.01

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sr.</th>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Total Allocation (Center+ State)</th>
<th>Total Expenditure</th>
<th>Lakh Employment Man-days</th>
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<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>1992-93</td>
<td>3169.05</td>
<td>2709.59</td>
<td>7821.02</td>
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<td>2</td>
<td>1993-94</td>
<td>4059.42</td>
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<td>3</td>
<td>1994-95</td>
<td>4376.92</td>
<td>4268.33</td>
<td>9517.07</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>1995-96</td>
<td>4848.70</td>
<td>4466.91</td>
<td>8958.25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>1996-97</td>
<td>2238.79</td>
<td>2163.98</td>
<td>4006.32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>1997-98</td>
<td>2499.21</td>
<td>2439.38</td>
<td>3955.89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>1998-99</td>
<td>2597.03</td>
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<td>3766.41</td>
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<td>8</td>
<td>1999-00</td>
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<td>2032.45</td>
<td>2683.08</td>
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<td>9</td>
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<td>1929.23</td>
<td>2983.17</td>
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<td>10</td>
<td>2001-02</td>
<td>2493.01</td>
<td>699.07</td>
<td>860.79</td>
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</table>

Source: Ministry of Rural Development.

**Employment Assurance Scheme:**

The Employment Assurance Scheme (EAS) was launched on 2 October 1993 covering 1,778 drought-prone, desert, tribal and hill area
blocks. It was later extended to all the blocks in 1997-98.\textsuperscript{12} The EAS was designed to provide employment in the form of manual work in the lean agricultural season. The works taken up under the programme were expected to lead to the creation of durable economic and social infrastructure and address the felt-needs of the people. The scheme prohibited construction of buildings for religious purposes, monuments, memorials, welcome gates, panchayat buildings, government office buildings and buildings for higher secondary schools and colleges. It also provided for maintenance of assets created in the past under the scheme. Initially, the scheme was demand-driven but from 1999, resources were allocated to states based on the incidence of poverty.

The EAS is a centrally-sponsored scheme, with the Centre providing 75 per cent of the funds and the state’s 25 per cent. The zilla parishads and panchayat samitis were the implementing agencies. While 10,719.59 lakh mandays of employment were generated during the Eighth Plan, 4,717.74 lakh man days of employment were generated in the first year of the Ninth Plan. Employment generation went down in subsequent years. The allocations between 1999-2000 and 2001-02 were also lower than the first two years of the Ninth Plan because watershed projects taken up for implementation under the EAS before April 1999 were transferred to Integrated Wasteland Development Programme (IWDP).

Though the creation of community assets has important spin offs for rural poverty and development, the impact of these programmes on employment and income has been limited. The universalisation of the scheme severely eroded its basic objective of providing assured employment in areas of extreme poverty and chronic unemployment. Allocations were based on a fixed criterion that did not specifically provide for regionally differentiated needs. This led to a very thin spread of resources across the country. As a result, even in the poorer regions, employment was provided
for only 31 days. In many states, the works taken up were not labour-intensive. The efficacy of the programme was also affected by faulty project selection and the absence of a coherent plan which integrated EAS projects in a long-term development strategy. The following Table No. 3.02 shows the Financial and Physical Progress Under Employment Assurance Scheme

Table No. 3.02

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Sr.</th>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Total Allocation (Center+ State)</th>
<th>Total Expenditure</th>
<th>Lakh Employment Man-days</th>
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<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>2000-01</td>
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<td>1661.11</td>
<td>2183.92</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>2001-02</td>
<td>1730.92</td>
<td>530.92</td>
<td>666.27</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Ministry of Rural Development.
Food for Work Programme:

The Food for Work programme was started in 2000-01 as a component of the EAS in eight notified drought-affected states of Chattisgarh, Gujarat, Himachal Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Orissa, Rajasthan, Maharashtra and Uttaranchal. The programme aims at augmenting food security through wage employment.

Food grains are supplied to states free of cost. However, lifting of food grains for the scheme from Food Corporation of India (FCI) godowns has been slow. Against an allocation of 35.31 lakh tonnes of food grains, only 21.26 lakh tonnes were lifted by the target states up to January 2002.13

Sampoorna Gramin Rozgar Yojana (SGRY)

Given the complementary of the JGSY, EAS and Food for Work Programme, all of which aim at the creation of employment opportunities in the rural areas, they were revamped and merged under the new Sampoorna Gramin Rozgar Yojana (SGRY) scheme from September 2001.

The basic aim of the scheme continues to be generation of wage employment, creation of durable economic infrastructure in rural areas and provision of food and nutrition security to the poor. The amalgamation of the earlier schemes has led to an augmentation of resources for this programme.

The works taken up under the programme are labour-intensive and the workers are paid the minimum wages notified by the states. Payment of wages is done partly in cash and partly in kind – 5 kg of food grains and the balance in cash. The Centre and the states share the cost of the cash component of the scheme in the ratio of 75:25. An allocation of Rs. 3750 crore was made for the programme in 2001-02.14
Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA):

The development of rural India is an imperative for inclusive and equitable growth and to unlock the huge potential of the population that is presently trapped in poverty with its associated deprivations. MNR-EGA is a flagship programme of Government of India which forms for development of rural areas. Workfare programmes have been important programme interventions in India and elsewhere in developing countries since long. These programmes typically provide unskilled workers with short-term employment on public works. They provide income transfers to poor households during periods when they suffer on account of absence of opportunities of employment. In areas with high unemployment rates and under employment, transfer benefits from workfare programmes can prevent poverty from worsening, especially during lean periods. Durable assets that these programmes create have the potential to generate employment benefits as requisite infrastructure is developed. Based on the experience of these programmes the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA) was enacted in 2005 to reinforce the commitment towards livelihood security in rural areas.15

The Act was notified on September 7, 2005. The significance of NREGA lies in the fact that it creates a right based framework for wage employment programmes and makes the government legally bound to provide employment to those who seek it. In this way the legislation goes beyond providing a social safety net, and towards guaranteeing the right to employment. The experience with NREGA so far suggests that it is one of the main planks of rapid poverty reduction in the Eleventh Five Year Plan. Starting with 200 districts across the country during 2006-07, NREGA was extended to additional 130 districts during 2007-08. From 1 April 2008, onwards the Act covers the whole of rural India. As a district is notified
under the Act, Sampoorna Grameen Rozgar Yojna (SGRY) is automatically merged in the NREGA and therefore, ceases to exist with effect from April 1, 2008. Government of India renamed NREGA as Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Programme in 2009-10 acknowledging the importance of Ghandhiji’s dream of a developed rural India that cared the deprived class in more coherent manner.

The quintessence of this phenomenal legislation lies in fulfilling the twin mandatory objectives of this historic Act—providing a right based 100-day unskilled employment in a year to strengthen the subsistence livelihood support, enhancing the rural households’ purchasing power and capacity to alleviate hunger and directing the colossus amount of wages towards creating productive and durable assets of irrigation, drought-proofing, land and water conservation, horticulture and connectivity to generate a prosperous livelihood support system.16

Objectives of MGNREGA;

MGNREGA, an ambitious mass employment guarantee scheme implemented since Feb. 2006 intends to sustain income and consumption in Indian rural outback. A large programme, backed by budgetary allocation promises 100 days of manual work to households who register and apply. Failure to provide employment through the gram sabhas creates cash entitlements as a matter of law. The future of NREGA is strongly linked to the cherished national goal to strengthen and broad base decentralization of local governance. MNREGA has the potential to address both sustenance of income and enhance the social welfare of households in rural areas.

India’s Mahatma Gandhi Rural Employment Guarantee Act or Scheme is being implemented throughout the country with the multiple objectives of sustaining income and consumption through wage works, creating durable assets and empowering rural communities through the
backing of law.\textsuperscript{17} The rural mass public works programmes (PWPs) are programmatic efforts to generate non-farm employment so as to sustain incomes and consumption, especially during conditions of distress such as those caused by drought, natural disasters, market failure in distribution of food items, and so on.

Employment is dependent upon the worker exercising the choice to apply for registration, obtain a job card, and then to seek employment through a written application for the time and duration chosen by the worker. The legal guarantee has to be fulfilled within the time limit prescribed and this mandate is underpinned by the provision of unemployment allowance.

The Act is thus designed to offer an incentive structure to the States for providing employment as 90 per cent of the cost for employment provided is borne by the Centre, and there is a concomitant disincentive for not providing employment, if demanded, as the States then bear the double indemnity of unemployment and the cost of unemployment allowance.\textsuperscript{18} Earlier wage employment programmes were allocation based. A unique feature of MNREGA is its demand driven approach; earlier employment and income generation programmes were supply driven. Resource transfer under MNREGA is based on the demand for employment and this provides another critical incentive to States to leverage the Act to meet the employment needs of the poor.

The Mahatma Gandhi Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme has received priority policy attention in India’s Eleventh Five Year Plan, aiming for the resurgence of rural India. The civil society and activists working for the welfare of the poor provided the much needed persistence, which is normally needed to influence a policy. MNREGS, India’s public works programme is unique, being large in size, and intended to cover long periods, disburse huge funds and be dynamically responsive to climatic and
rainfall conditions, and above all open to anyone intending to work at wage rates that are often lower than the prevailing causal wages in local areas. Since the programme is designed to self-target the needy, besides chronic poverty manifested, for example, in food inadequacy, it also intends to address idiosyncratic risks and shocks faced by other households.

*The MNREGA is radical as:

(i) It guarantees 100 days of wage work on demand, failing which the claimants can legally demand cash compensation;

(ii) the Act promotes the seeking of paid employment on the volition of at least one member from any household in manual rural works;

(iii) the scope for self-selection of those who indeed require imminent income support for livelihood is an innovation, which should result in a high degree of automatically targeting the most deprived—thus reflecting its potential for poverty reduction;

(iv) this scheme can attract the attention of the otherwise unemployed or under-employed workforce because of immediate income transfer opportunities, which is an inbuilt short-term relief objective;

(v) the Act also aims at the generation of productive assets, protecting the environment, empowering rural women, reducing rural urban migration and fostering social equity, among others;

(vi) MNREGA, if implemented with due earnest, has the potential of not only reducing vulnerability and relieving chronic income deprivation and improving rural livelihood security but also of the construction of durable assets and markets in rural areas;
(vii) The Act envisages free entry and exit into the MNREGA, but has made it mandatory to follow a two-step procedure. The first step is that all households intending to work on NREGA have to register and show an expression of interest with the Gram Sabha, followed by the second step of making a written application for actual work.

**Funding:**

The Central Government bears the costs on the following items:

- The entire cost of wages of unskilled manual workers.
- 75 per cent of the cost of material, wages of skilled and semi-skilled workers.
- Administrative expenses as may be determined by the Central Government, which will include, *inter alia*, the salary and the allowances of the Programme Officer and his supporting staff and work site facilities.
- Expenses of the National Employment Guarantee Council.

**The State Government bears the costs on the following items:**

- 25 per cent of the cost of material, wages of skilled and semi-skilled workers.
- Unemployment allowance payable in case the State Government cannot provide wage employment on time.
- Administrative expenses of the State Employment Guarantee Council.

**Budget Allocation:**

The Current budget (2010-11) has earmarked Rs. 40,100 crores while the Budget of 2009-10 has allocated Rs. 39,000 crores or about 0·66 per cent of the GDP for MNREGA, but the entire allocated amount may not be spent, as has been the case during the previous three years. MNREGA is a
‘Centrally Sponsored Scheme’, administratively managed by the Ministry of Rural Development, its implementation is exclusively done by the respective state governments.

The states are expected to systematically make a claim over the allocated resources by planning MNREGA work activities and turning them into projects. Often, the states are unable to execute the programme efficiently due to the shortage of administrative and implementing personnel at the grassroots and sometimes due to inter-party political differentials, if the party in power in the concerned state is different from the one ruling the Central Government. At the national level, MNREGA allocations and expenditures hover between 2-3 percent of the Central outlays for the past three years. Any further expansion of MNREGA in terms of a deepening of the programme need not be a cause for concern with respect to its adverse impact on the national level fiscal deficits, even if no additional tax or levy in the name of MNREGA is imposed.

**State Level Performance of MGNREGA:**

The national level Ministry and associated State Departments of Rural Development are responsible for implementing MNREGS across the entire country. This Ministry updates the progress of implementation of MNREGS on its website twice a year on the basis of data provided by the States. According to the national bulletin of MNREGA, the scheme has so far provided 3.34 crore households with employment throughout the country. This also states that around 133.32 crore person days are created and 7.08 lakh assets are built, out of 25.98 lakh taken up under the programme. Of the total man days created, 51.02 per cent are the person days by the women laborers. Similarly, 40.19 per cent are created by SC members and 21.83 per cent by persons from the ST community. Two conclusions follow from this analysis. First, the promise of 100-day employment to one member of every household that seeks employment is largely unfulfilled.
Second, there are several in-built biases in the execution of MNREGP. The poor are inadequately represented in those selected for participation. The duration of employment is systematically lower for poor households. At the same time, the non-poor are disproportionately represented, indicating some capture. Third, whereas few participants admit to paying bribes, several reported that personal acquaintance was necessary to secure employment under MNREGP. Notwithstanding the unfulfilled employment promise of the MNREGA, many participants indicated that they wanted to continue to work on MNREGP. This is less of an indicator of the efficacy of the MNREGP than of the fragility of their livelihoods.

**Days of Employment:**

Given the large variation in the size of the states, it is useful to discuss MNREGA coverage in terms of the proportion of households enrolled in the schemes. The states that claim to have covered more than 50 per cent of the households are Chhattisgarh and Madhya Pradesh, with both of them having poverty rates that are much higher than the national average; followed by Bihar and Jharkhand, with over 30 per cent coverage but very high levels of poverty.

On the other hand, states achieving meager *MNREGA* coverage are not only Punjab and Haryana, with very low levels of rural poverty, but also Gujarat, Kerala and Maharashtra, with less than 5 per cent coverage, and Karnataka with 8 per cent, but with moderate levels of poverty pre-valence. Uttar Pradesh, with fairly high levels of poverty, has extended MNREGS to only about 20 per cent of its rural households. When it comes to providing the maximum number of days of employment, Rajasthan stands out with an average of 77 days, followed by 63 in Madhya Pradesh and 58 in Chhattisgarh. As per MNREGA, households can claim a maximum of 100 days of employment per year.19 Thus, these three states can be considered as success stories of MNREGS in India, in spite of their large
uncovered targets in terms of coverage and man-days of work provisioning. All the other states doing poorly in coverage are also faring badly in terms of maximizing the netting of the number of days of employment.

**Wage Rates in MNREGA:**

The MNREGA wages should not be too high or too low, but such that the poor, when they intend to do so, can seek such employment that is available on demand. Labourers are entitled to the statutory minimum wage applicable to agricultural workers in the state, unless the Central Government over-rides this by notifying a different wage rate. One, however, finds wide variations across states with respect to the actual prevailing casual wages, which appear to be based on the demand and supply factors of regulating labour in the micro-regions such as a district or block. Many states fixed their own MNREGA wages, which were considerably higher than the Rs. 70 fixed as the minimum wage.

**Infrastructure Focus:**

Practically all of them relate to water-based tasks such as water conservation and harvesting, drought proofing / afforestation, ‘micro and minor irrigation works’; ‘renovation of traditional war bodies also know as de-silting and ‘flood control’. Rural connectivity is a land-based activity and in addition, a residual that ‘any other work that may be notified by the Central Government in consultation with the State Government’. All such tasks are labour-intensive; therefore, there is a 60: 40 ratio of labour to material inputs, which is strictly enforced or as to ensure larger wage transfers through MNREGA works.

In order to facilitate a reasonable assessment of the quality of assets created and associated benefits to the people, a programme needs to be functioning for a reasonable time span. Further, most of the states are unable to provide data on asset formulations during the last three phases of
MNREGS. It is argued that operational dilemmas due to programmatic interventions in water and land, make cost-benefit analysis somewhat difficult. Further, an assessment also needs to be made in the natural resources framework, especially factoring shadow prices as well as alternative investment strategies in assessment. Under such circumstances, synergy with other rural development tasks and strategies to protect natural resources can be factored into the programme.

Low employment intensity in works, leakages due to mismanagement by labour contractors and over-use of machinery are some of the problems leading to non-existent or low quality assets.\(^\text{20}\) The MNREGA strict rule of a 60 : 40 ratio can also lead to assets that are normally of low durability and could lead to a situation where in the same asset is created over and over again due to poor quality work. Although the strict ratio rule is understandable for creating works that generate large wage employment, durable asset creation can be achieved by creating synergies with other developmental programmes and their associated allocation. The need to establish durable asset formations could be within the framework of the ‘water-shed development’ programme, for example, or even the minor road construction activities through departmental synergies in works and projects.

Another factor that carries a substantial weight in assessing the benefits through the assets, the question of who benefits from MNREGA works, and whose land and properties are developed or protected. Whether the assets gene-rated produce substantial public good or lead to discrete private gain is a substantial issue that needs to be documented as a matter of routine in MNREGA. The Act none-the-less allows that the employment scheme can undertake land improvement activities on holdings owned by the SCs and STs, but it is difficult to assess if such a programme focus is actually put in place. There is also a proposal to do away with the limit of
100 days of employment per house-holds in district that are dominated by the SCs and STs, which can help these communities access a higher number of employment days.

**The Road Ahead:**

- **Empowering Workers:** MNREGA is a right-based statute and its effectiveness lies eventually in the extent to which wage seekers can exercise their choice and assert their rights to claim entitlements under the Act. The issues involved in empowering workers are in the range of enhancement of knowledge levels, development of literacy skills, organizing workers, and enhancing social security levels of workers. Opening savings accounts of workers’ in banks and post offices that has been initiated needs to be supported on a larger scale so that thrift and small savings can be encouraged among workers. The inclusion of MNREGA workers under the cover of various life and health insurance schemes will also raise their security thresholds.

- **Linkages with Other Development Programmes:** Empowerment of workers and creation of durable assets depend to a great extent on the linkages between MNREGA and other development programmes. In that way, programmes like Indira Awas Yojna, Swarnjayanti Gram Swarojgar Yojna, Total Sanitation Campaign etc. should be linked to MNREGA.

- **Exploring the Possibility of Other Works:** The allocation for the Eleventh Plan (at current price) is tentatively provided at Rs. 1,00,000 crore. However, since MNREGA is a demand driven programme and the government is legally bound to provide employment mandated under the act, this figure is only indicative.

The MGNREGS is still in its formative stage of implementation; therefore, a comprehensive assessment has not been attempted so far. While
the local level functionaries and the panchayat need to work in tandem to successfully implement MNREGA, often the overriding influence and interference occurs from the local contractor, who is often a politician or has political patronage. While the local civil society institutions are generally non-existent, even if they do exist, they have been unable to penetrate the collusion between the bureaucracy and con-tractors.

It is important to emphasize that the future of MNREGS, which is now even a legal entitlement for the deprived people living in rural areas, is securely tied with the functioning of the PRIs in India. For some, this scheme symbolizes a consolidation of the democratic process and seems to be revolutionary in both intent and content! But the test of the success of such a large effort lies in its ability to carry the vulnerable and the poor on board and to keep them there for period of time.

While strategies to improve programme efficiency must be undertaken jointly and concurrently by strengthening local self-governance with clear distinctions between political, administrative and fiscal decentralization; reforms in MNREGS are also needed to ensure that special efforts are made to provide the requisite passage to the excluded, to enable them to enter the folds of the scheme.

While the MNREGS payment is pegged to the state minimum wages prevalent in the state concerned, what is not well known is its impact on regular manual agricultural wages during the peak and slack agriculture season. This has a relevance to the food output and the larger food security issues of the region, and subsequently of the country as a whole. There are demands to incorporate amendments in the Act so as to facilitate extended coverage of the programme, especially after aligning it with the agricultural season.
The scheme itself is helping the democratic process to evolve. Community participation, information sharing and the formulation of an opinion by rural residents about a scheme and last but not least the provision of social audit are some of the dominating factors that enhance the maximization of gains from MNREGA. These mechanisms empower communities, strengthen the democratic process and contribute towards making the programme inclusionary. MNREGS has thus facilitated women’s empowerment by providing them opportunities for enhanced participation and cash earnings, which seem to be complementing another revolutionary programme for offering micro-credit across India. This synergy is expected to create an unprecedented range of positive outcomes in terms of empowering women in the rural areas. A highly desirable intra-household dynamics favouring children, women, the differently able, and the old and infirm can therefore become functional.

In a continental country with vast variations in the availability of natural resources and agro climatic conditions there is a need to understand the local, regional and state level dynamics, and the social and economic relevance of the MNREGA amongst the rural households. It must be stated that MNREGS has immense potential to provide social security to the masses only if its implementation is efficient and its synergies are optimally exploited. India should not miss another opportunity to demonstrate that the world’s largest democracy also cares for its people, especially the deprived and the vulnerable, and that it is truly marching ahead in its quest to become a welfare state.

**Evaluation of Employment Programme:**

The SGRY would be the single wage employment programme. Allocations to the programme would be stepped up. The programme would seek to provide productive employment opportunities in employment-intensive sectors. The Government would endeavour to generate a shelf of
projects for execution under SGRY that fits into the overall development plan of an area. The SGRY would have three streams. One to address the need for rural infrastructure in all states; the other to provide focused attention to areas facing endemic poverty while the third would respond to natural calamities. The general stream universalized across states would be for the creation of local infrastructure. Water tanks, anganwadis, primary school buildings, sanitation facilities, primary health centres, multi-purpose community halls and other projects that are required in the village would be taken up under the universal stream. In agriculturally developed areas, it may be necessary to allow upward adjustments in wages to attract unskilled labour. Village communities could augment the resources under the universal stream by mobilizing contributions from within the community.

The second stream would seek to provide an employment guarantee of at least 100 days for areas facing chronic unemployment and poverty. The districts and blocks would be selected on the basis of an objective criterion and efforts would be made to create at least minimum infrastructure in these areas by ensuring convergence of other government programmes.

Thus, the second stream would, in essence, correspond to the EAS, which was started with the objective of providing employment for 100 days in drought-prone, desert prone, hilly and flood-prone blocks of the country. Such an assurance would ensure a minimum level of employment and stability to the incomes of the poor and give them an opportunity to develop their collective strength. It would improve their economic position, reduce vulnerability and discourage migration to facilitate their continued access to health, education and welfare facilities available in the village. The allocation under this second stream would be enhanced to meet the target of 100 days of employment for every able-bodied person willing and seeking work.
The third stream would be an enabling mechanism for the Government to respond to natural calamities such as floods, droughts, earthquakes and other contingencies that require quick response to mitigate the hardships faced by people.

The wage employment programmes provide only short-term relief to the poor. Long-term sustainable poverty reduction in the underdeveloped regions can come about only if other sectors of the economy grow rapidly. It is imperative, therefore, to ensure that the growth process is inclusive and pro-poor. Agricultural growth still holds the key to poverty alleviation in the Indian context. There is considerable scope for increasing agricultural productivity through expansion of irrigation, better land and water management practices and infrastructure support. The planning of works under the SGRY would be undertaken keeping this in mind.

A large number of rural facilities have been built under various programmes over successive Plan periods. However, they have degenerated either due to their initial faulty design and construction, or lack of maintenance. Therefore, a specific proportion of allocations under SGRY would be used for the maintenance of assets. PRIs would play a major role in the planning, implementation and monitoring of wage employment programmes and allocations under the SGRY would be routed through them.

A rational criterion would have to be evolved for distribution of funds between the three tiers of the PRIs to ensure balanced development of villages, blocks and districts. The following Table No. 3.02 shows the financial and physical progress of IRDP and SGSY.
Table No. 3.03

Financial and Physical Progress Under IRDP & SGSY

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sr.</th>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Total Allocation (Center+ State)</th>
<th>Total Expenditure</th>
<th>Lakh Families Swarozgaries</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>1992-93</td>
<td>662.22</td>
<td>693.38</td>
<td>20.69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>1993-94</td>
<td>1093.43</td>
<td>956.65</td>
<td>25.39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>1994-95</td>
<td>1096.22</td>
<td>1008.31</td>
<td>22.15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>1995-96</td>
<td>1097.21</td>
<td>1077.16</td>
<td>20.89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>1996-97</td>
<td>1097.21</td>
<td>1131.68</td>
<td>19.24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>1997-98</td>
<td>1133.51</td>
<td>1109.54</td>
<td>17.07</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>1998-99</td>
<td>1456.28</td>
<td>1162.28</td>
<td>16.77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>1999-00</td>
<td>1472.34</td>
<td>959.86</td>
<td>9.34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>2000-01</td>
<td>1332.50</td>
<td>1116.27</td>
<td>10.30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>2001-02</td>
<td>774.50</td>
<td>555.15</td>
<td>6.25</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Ministry of Rural Development.

In spite of their many shortcomings, wage employment schemes have proved beneficial in some respects. They created much needed rural infrastructure. The programmes are self-targeting in nature since only the poor come to work at minimum wage rates. The various works undertaken created demand for unskilled labour and exerted upward pressure on wage rates. The programmes have played a major role in protecting consumption patterns of the rural poor during natural calamities. A study conducted in four drought-affected districts of Rajasthan found that the consumption of
food grains was higher in the drought years compared to normal years due to the wage employment programmes. Since PRIs were associated with the implementation of JRY /JGSY and EAS, government financing of panchayats strengthened these institutions and promoted better coordination between the village community and government departments.

A review of various wage employment programmes during the Ninth Plan shows that there has been a considerable reduction in terms of allocation as well as in employment generation. This was largely due to changes in allocation for rural development schemes during the Plan period. The allocation by both the Centre and the states under JRY went down from Rs. 18,691 crore in the Eighth Plan to Rs. 11,688 crore in the Ninth Plan. As the EAS was launched only in 1993-94 and was initially a demand driven scheme, it would be difficult to compare EAS allocations in the Eighth and Ninth Plan periods. However, even here it is seen that the allocations have fallen in the latter half of the Ninth Plan period. The allocation for wage employment programmes, at current prices, in the Ninth Plan was only 88 per cent of what they were in the Eighth Plan. In real terms, the allocations were much lower.\(^{22}\)

A decline in allocation coupled with the increased cost of providing employment meant that as against 513 crore mandays of employment generated under JRY and EAS in the Eighth Plan, only 286 crore mandays of employment were generated under JRY / JGSY and EAS in the Ninth Plan. The reduction in allocation for wage employment was compensated by increased allocation for some programmes and initiation of new schemes. For example, there was a substantial increase in allocation for IAY. Many other programmes taken up during the Plan period have generated employment in the rural areas. The construction of houses under IAY, programmes of rural connectivity and watershed development have fairly high employment elasticity. However, it is difficult to estimate whether
these programmes were able to offset the reduction in employment generated through specific wage employment programmes.

**Direct Initiatives for Employment:**

Though greater productive employment is generated in the process of economic growth itself, direct state intervention is often required to provide supplementary employment to those, who are bypassed in the process of growth because of certain reasons. Government has initiated several employment generating programmes on limited scale during the earlier decades of planned development; the sixth plan beginning in 1980-81 has taken some strong initiatives for generation of employment. Subsequently, employment- generating programme have become part of our planned development. The employment generating programmes largely fall under two broad categories; self-employment generating and wage based employment- generating programmes. The first set of employment generating programme attempts to remove chronic unemployment by providing economic asset to the beneficiary while the second group of programmes provide supplementary employment to the target group of persons to stave-off seasonal unemployment.

**Labour force growth and employment requirements**

To provide employment for additional labour force which is estimated to grow at the rate of 2.51 per cent per annum during the Tenth Plan period, besides reducing the backlog of unemployment accumulated from the past, is a daunting challenge for India. Despite an expected reduction in the growth rate of population to 1.63 per cent per annum by 2002 - 2007, the labour force growth reached 2.51 % per annum. This is attributed to change in the age structure of the population and an increase in the population in the most active working age group of 15-59. Growth or decline in the labour force participation rates (LFPRs) depends on certain factors. With the increasing thrust on education, LFPRs in the age group 15-19 years will
decline. On the other hand, with improved health and longevity, LFPRs in the older age groups, particularly 50+ years, will increase by 7.9 – 8.9 per cent during the Eleventh Plan period. The labour force projected to increase by 40.02 million in special group and 55.82 million in working age group (15+) during the period of 2007-12 implies the need for an increase in the pace of creation of additional work opportunities commensurate with the growth of labour force. The following Table No. 3.04 shows the age structure of population of India.

Table No.3.04

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age group</th>
<th>2001</th>
<th>2006</th>
<th>2011</th>
<th>2016</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>0-14</td>
<td>35.6</td>
<td>32.5</td>
<td>29.7</td>
<td>27.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15-59</td>
<td>58.2</td>
<td>60.4</td>
<td>62.5</td>
<td>64.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>60+</td>
<td>6.3</td>
<td>7.0</td>
<td>7.9</td>
<td>8.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All age groups</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Population</td>
<td>1,027.0</td>
<td>1,113.7</td>
<td>1,194.4</td>
<td>1,267.5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Planning Commission, Govt. of India.

The projected population was 1129.97 million in 2007 which would increase to 1210.32 million by 2012 and further to 1284.89 million by 2017. These projections by sex and the growth rates are given in Table 5.1. The aggregate population growth rate between 2002 and 2007 is projected to be 1.54 percent. This is expected to decline to 1.38 percent during 2007-12 and further to 1.20 percent during 2012-17. However, the benefits of this decreasing population growth in terms of working age population will be felt only after 15 years from the initial period.
Table No. 3.05

Projected Population & Growth Rates in Different Years by Sex

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Projected Population (million)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Males</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2002</td>
<td>541.68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2007</td>
<td>584.78 (1.54)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2012</td>
<td>626.63 (1.39)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2017</td>
<td>665.48 (1.21)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Figures in brackets are annual growth rates

In the year 2002, the younger age groups had a large percentage share in the male and female populations except that the percentage share of the lowest age group 0-4 was marginally lower than that of the age group 5-9. There will be progressive reduction in the share of this age group in the total population as we can see from the ‘population pyramids’ shown for 2007, 2012 and 2017 (Fig. 5.1- 5.3.). Thus, the age composition of the population will change. While in 2007, the highest population share was in the age group 10-14, it is projected to go to the age group 15-19 by 2012 and then to the age group 20-24 by 2017. In other words, the share of population in the working age group is likely to increase with time.
### Table No. 3.06

**Comparative Growth Rates of Population & Labour Force between 2007 & 2012 (Percent/Annum)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Population Segment</th>
<th>Projected Population</th>
<th>Projected Labour Force</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Planning Commission</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rural Males</td>
<td>1.05</td>
<td>1.77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rural Females</td>
<td>1.05</td>
<td>1.23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rural Persons</td>
<td>1.05</td>
<td>1.58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Urban Males</td>
<td>2.20</td>
<td>2.89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Urban Females</td>
<td>2.18</td>
<td>2.64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Urban Persons</td>
<td>2.19</td>
<td>2.84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total Males</td>
<td>1.39</td>
<td>2.12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total Females</td>
<td>1.37</td>
<td>1.50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total Persons</td>
<td>1.38</td>
<td>1.92</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Computed by research student

The growth rates of population and labour force projections during the period 2012 and 2017 are given in Table 3.06. In the aggregate, the projected population growth rate between 2007 and 2012 is 1.38 percent per annum. However, the growth rates of the projected labour force are 1.92 percent as per Planning Commission’s projection and 1.91 percent as per NCEUS’ projection. A significant difference between the two sets of projections is that the NCEUS’ figures for the growth rate of female labour
force between 2012 and 2017 is marginally higher than that given by Planning Commission while just the reverse holds good for their projection of the male labour force. For the same period NCEUS projection for the aggregate labour force growth rate was slightly higher than that of Planning Commission.

**Employability and Skill Development:**

Skills and knowledge are the driving forces of economic growth and social development of any country. Countries with higher and better levels of skills adjust more effectively to the challenges and opportunities of world of work. Potentially the target group for skill development comprises all those in labour force including those entering the labour market for the first time, those employed in the organized sector and those working in the unorganized sector. A skilled and educated worker provides higher level of productivity leading to higher employability, higher levels of earnings and income and hence impacting poverty reduction in the country. Accordingly, skill development of youth has immense implications for labour market in general and inclusive growth in particular. In India, the present demographic dividend can best be harnessed by significantly enhancing levels of skills among workers. It is with this perspective that India has set an overall target of creating 500 million skilled workers by 2022.

Presently, skills base of the Indian economy is quite low as compared to other developed economies of the world. It is estimated based on NSSO data for 2004-05 that only 2% persons in the age group of 15-29 years have received formal vocational training and around 8% are reported to have received non-formal vocational training, indicating thereby that higher proportion of youth population actually enter the world of work without formal vocational training. Many of the developed economies have 60 to 80% of skilled workers. Korea has as high as 96% skilled work force.
It is, therefore, necessary to enhance the skill development infrastructure in a manner that all those who enter the labour force acquire relevant skills beforehand.25

**Major Issues In Labour Reforms:**

Legal regulations of the conditions of work and labour relations of the vast and varied working population in India pose a major challenge for employment policy. The guiding principle of legal regulations is enshrined in the Indian Constitution which envisages the attainment of humane and decent employment as an important goal of State policy. These include, securing to the citizens an adequate means of livelihood; equal pay for equal work for both women and men; ensuring that the health and safety of workers is protected and a living wage for all workers. In pursuit of these goals as well as in keeping with changing economic environment, the Government has from time to time enacted and amended several labour legislations. Some of these legislations are applicable across sectors while other legislations are intended for specific sectors, industries and occupations. The various labour legislations in India can be grouped into four broad areas: (a) Employment security and industrial relations; (b) Income security i.e., wages and other remunerations; (c) Work security i.e., working conditions, safety and occupational health; and (d) Social security and labour welfare.

There are four major issues that have been at the heart of the debate over reforms of labour laws in India in recent times. Legal regulations have to consistently balance the welfare needs and protection of rights of workers and enabling economic growth and increasing the level of employment. This has led some to argue that legal regulations lead to excessively rigid labour market which has adversely affected employment levels (*rigidity*). Further, legal regulations have to contend with the persistent dualism in the labour market i.e. the division between organised
sector, on the one hand, and the vast unorganized sector on the other (dualism). Labour being in the Concurrent list, there are Central as well as State legislations and State amendments to Central legislations. In addition, there are legislations with varying sectoral, regional and enterprise size coverage, with different definitions of industry, workmen and enterprise (multiplicity). Finally, there are issues relating to the enforcement and compliance of labour laws (enforcement). Employers organizations and workers organizations often hold diametrically opposite views in each of these issues while there are also some common areas of interest.

References:

3. http://maharashtra.gov.in


