

Identifying The Scope For Introducing ‘Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme’ As An Academic Specialization: A Field Work Case Study Of Thiruvarur

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Abstract

Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme, 2005 has been a safety net for the distressed poor for more than 15 years. The world is facing multiple challenges from all sides, climate crisis, natural resources degradation, hunger and poverty, in addition to a worldwide health emergency. And a program like MGNREGA which is multi-dimensional allows one to have guaranteed and dignified work within one's locality, allowing one to build rural infrastructure, conserve natural resources and create any durable assets of quality while being socially inclusive. A program such as this can be an answer to variety of problems faced by the nation at once. The purpose of this paper is to identify the scope for devising an exclusive multidisciplinary academic program for MGNREGA thereby putting in trained professionals for the smooth functioning of the program. This idea is aided by the importance and focus given to holistic multidisciplinary education by the new National Education Policy (2020). The paper aims to achieve that by analyzing the structure and performance and finding structural issues with Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employee Guarantee Scheme (2005) by taking the case of Thiruvarur district. The literature review shows some of the relevant themes in the program like social audit, payment deliverance, the impact of covid and their performance nationwide and compares it with the field results. Paper also shows the bottlenecks faced from the field and why the academic specialization, putting more students into the NREGA workforce is necessary.

Keywords: Block development Officer, Delayed and Rejected Payments, Panchayat Raj Institutions, Social Audit, multidisciplinary.

Introduction

MGNREGA, 2005, voted as one of its first and world's largest rights based social protection scheme (Porras and Kaur) has developed beyond giving people a

guaranteed livelihood security for 100 days per year, it has succeeded in creating public assets, rural infrastructure, minimizing the gender gap in wages, bringing bargaining power of the poor, creating a demand in the

economy. MGNREGA has far expanded its initial objectives and have been continuously successful in creating and conserving social and environmental assets. With the arrival of covid-19 and subsequent reverse migration, there is a need to generate more work. To respond effectively to other structural issues and impact of covid-19, more students trained exclusively on MGNREGA should be positioned.

Objective:

To identify the scope in introducing MGNREGA as an interdisciplinary academic specialization and the focus areas.

Methodology:

The paper uses both primary and secondary data. Primary data has been collected through face-to-face interviews with the officials at the Block Development Office under District Rural Development Agency at the District Headquarters, Thiruvarur. Secondary data was taken from MGNREGS MIS database and from various journal articles. Statistical figures from NREGA app and MIS dashboard along with field findings were used for comparison and analysis with past literary evidences.

Review of Literature

MGNREGA was founded on the objective of delivering guaranteed unskilled work on demand for a minimum of 100 days. It brings together administrative bodies across all levels in planning, monitoring, and implementing the work. The program relies on Panchayat Raj Institutions for much of organizing and networking with the laborers (Centre for Wage Employment and Poverty Alleviation, NIRD).

Implementation is majorly carried out by the Block officials, who are the connecting point

between the village local body, which decides on the demand for work and the state body which is the policy maker. According to Natesan and Marathe, Block level officials in Tamil Nadu feels that they are overworked (Natesan and Marathe).

It is important to understand that Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act, 2005 is legislation that promises to guarantee work in return for payments and it is not a subsidy or benefits scheme. Which is why linking of Aadhar seems legally inaccurate (Nandy). There could be a number of reasons for non-timely deliverance of wage payments, viz Delayed payments, Rejected payments and in-active aadhar.

In writing, the act legally supports the workers with guaranteed financial benefits. Section 3 of the MGNREG Act, 2005 guarantees wage within 15 days of closure of the muster rolls (Centre for Wage Employment and Poverty Alleviation, NIRD). But as of December 2021, the Government of India owes the workers a total of 1,281 crore rupees in terms of delayed payments (Shagun). Even though, there is compensation provided for delayed payments (Ministry of Rural Development), the workers aren't aware of it.

Social Audits are widely accepted tools to bring accountability and transparency to the government. They provide the citizens with information and make them 'see through' government policy and implementation. They conduct public hearings where the beneficiaries can present their grievances (Aiyar and Mehta).

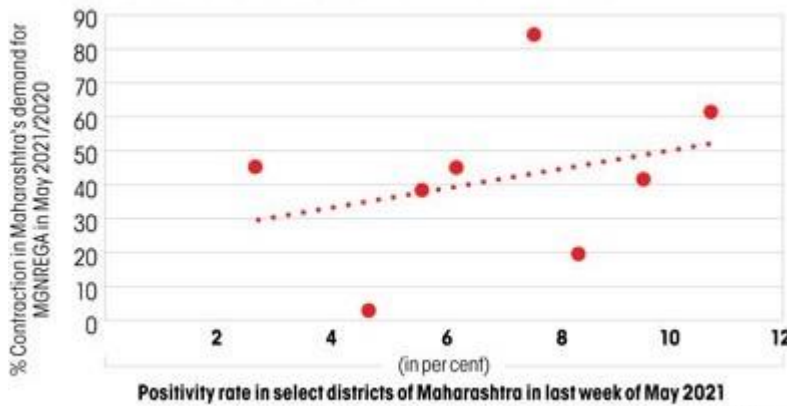
Globally, covid-19 has pushed 400-500 million more people into Poverty (McCloskey). "We are in this together" is a myth, the reality is different for poor

vulnerable people. Rural India remained least disrupted during the first wave of covid-19. There was an increase in demand for work, as there were less opportunities of labor from other private landowners. But during the start of second-wave, it took a hit, as the pandemic started disrupting deep into

the rural lives and the local administration could not prioritize the program (Mohapatra and Hussain). After May 2021, two types of patterns for demand were found among the states, i, pull factor, where the workers show hesitancy because of rising cases

AT PLACES, PULL FACTOR DAMPENED DEMAND

In Maharashtra, fear of infection reduced MGNREGA demand



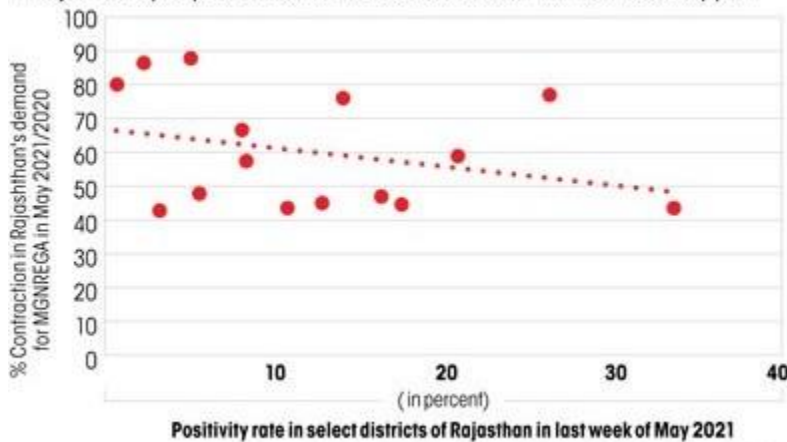
Sources: Ministry of Rural Development; Ministry of Health and Family Welfare
 Note: Districts selected on the basis of high demand for MGNREGA works

Figure 1: Pull factor in demand

ii, push factor, where the workers demand and sign up for job for sustenance even when there is rise in covid cases,

AT OTHERS, PUSH FACTOR NULLIFIED PULL FACTOR

In Rajasthan, people risked life to secure subsistence livelihood support



Sources: Ministry of Rural Development; Ministry of Health and Family Welfare
 Note: Districts selected on the basis of high demand for MGNREGA works

Figure 2: Push factor in demand

Source: Ministry of Rural Development

India's third national education policy, which was drafted in 2020 pays high regard to the development of multidisciplinary higher education in India. The policy focuses on removing rigid boundaries between disciplines and aims to establish multidisciplinary higher institutions instead of standalone universities. It focuses on having a course with public purpose and ethics, with community engagement and service (Ministry of Human Resource Development)

Implementation bottlenecks from the field :

Thiruvarur district was taken as the field for study. The district has ten blocks. Each block has two Block development officers and there are also six of them stationed at the district headquarters, of which one of them is dedicated to the MGNREGS program. The MGNREGS scheme comes under District Rural Development Agency. The BDO working with the MGNREGS is also provided with the four IT employees, since

the program highly rely on Information and Communication Technology.

The district has a totally of 5 lakhs laborers registered for work under MGNREGA, out of which 2,76,15 laborers are currently working as per demand. Only 67 percent of the total workers have their aadhar connected to their Bank account, which is higher than the national average of 50 percent. Each block has one project officer. It is important that we need to note that according to Natesan and Marathe (2017), Tamil Nadu has a shortage of Project officers and instead the Block Development Officers are overworked.

The whole district is divided into 765 clusters, for easy governance. The district maintains a fair record when it comes to having a payment delivery. On an average, workers are paid their dues within a week. This was possible only because of employing CLF, or Cluster Level Facilitators into the system.

Figure 3, shows Block-wise details of delayed payments for the financial year of 2021-22

S.No	Block	Payment Between 0-8 Days		Payment Between 9-15 Days		Total Payment delayed beyond 16 Days		Total Payment For Financial Year 2021-2022	
		Total Transactions	Amount Involved	Total Transactions	Amount Involved	Total Transactions	Amount Involved	Total Transactions	Amount Involved
1	VALANGAIMAN		1309.2	3	0.05	0	0	146889	1309.25
2	NANNILAM	98057	991.52	0	0	0	0	98057	991.52
3	KUDAVAASAL	102243	1102.62	0	0	0	0	102243	1102.62
4	THIRUVARUR	119642	1279.12	2	0.03	0	0	119644	1279.15
5	KORADACHERI	93933	912.16	0	0	0	0	93933	912.16
6	MANNARGUDI	132489	1368.34	0	0	0	0	132489	1368.34
7	NEEDAMANGALAM	86173	878.97	0	0	2	0.03	86175	879
8	KOTTUR	199471	2129.49	0	0	0	0	199471	2129.49
9	THIRUTHURAIPOONDI	101809	1113.18	0	0	0	0	101809	1113.18
10	MUTHUPETTAI	142935	1530.66	45	0.42	0	0	142980	1531.08
	Total	1223638	12615.26	50	0.5	2	0.03	1223690	12615.79

Source: MGNREGA MIS DASHBOARD

Cluster Level Facilitators are 'street level' workers who are responsible for making sure the workers get their payments hassle free. These facilitators are chosen among laborers by the by the cluster level officers. Workers who are good at operating

android phones, who understands basic online documentation are chosen for this work. And these measures seem to be working too, as out of the 12,26,476 total transactions made during the financial year of

2021-22, only 2 transactions were delayed beyond the 15 days window.

They conduct public hearings where the beneficiaries can present their grievances. The audit for 2020-2021 which was postponed due to covid-19 has been rescheduled and is currently being conducted. The collected grievances are heard during special gram Sabha meetings. The Block Resource Person is responsible for video documenting it.

Covid-19 has increased the demand for work. During 2018-19, the number of active workers in the system was 2.16 Lakhs which increased to 2,76,15 Lakhs after the pandemic. Similarly, the persons' days of work has increased from 47 lakhs in 2018-19 to 90 lakhs in 2020-2021. This shows that the district has experienced push factor. As for the works being done under the program, 2,700 km of channel cleaning was done so far. Also, 5,50,000 lakhs of hybrid palm seeds have been planted by the workers in their free time. And this was considered unpaid and 'out of interest'.

The elected local body representatives play an important role in deciding what kind of work is in demand. These local body seats have been vacant in Tamil Nadu for over 10 years, which creates a huge gap in communicating the demand for work between the laborers and the implementing officials. The local demand for certain kind of jobs is not reaching the officials.

Discussion and Conclusion:

In terms of payment deliverance, the district is doing a very good job as only 2 transactions have gone beyond the 15 days' time period. For the year 2020-2021, it was 4. Even after introducing Payment

gentrification, which prioritizes certain underprivileged sections over the others, haven't made much difference in payment deliverance. These are contradictory to the nationwide evidence (Libtech India). A huge chunk of work (which rightfully comes under ecosystem services) gets filed under 'unpaid work'/'out of interest'. Every day of work put in by the laborer should be accounted for. The steep increase in the demand and the number of workers employed in MGNREGA in the district pre and during covid is more significant, especially considering Thiruvavur is a delta district, meaning there is a shift from labor at privately owned agricultural land to guaranteed unskilled labor provided by the government, but that is beyond the scope of the paper. The demand for work is only going up and it is high time the government makes changes to the implementation organogram, as both the literary evidence and field findings points us that, Tamil Nadu is understaffed and the block level officials feel overworked, this also have contributed by how the elected local body was nonexistent for over a decade in Tamil Nadu. Even though, field findings shows that social audit has been happening every year, Internal audit report from 2014-15 reveal that no audit has been done in 88 percent of the villages in Tamil Nadu (Department of Rural Development). There needs to be more professionals put into the working ecosystem to ease the gap on service delivery, better networking.

More students learning about and working with MGNREGA also means more young people working closely with Panchayat Raj institutions. National education policy calls for a holistic education that is also beneficial to the local community. MGNREGA is an example on how multifaceted program with strong backing of the law can penetrate deep into the rural areas breaking economic,

logistical administrative barriers. NEP has shown us a way where students from multiple backgrounds can come together through multidisciplinary courses and work for the better, and it is our social responsibility to devise a professional course targeted at students from multiple backgrounds who can come together and play their part in reducing the gap in what the program aims to deliver and the rural reality.

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