

Review Article

An Analysis of Socio-Economic Impact of the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MNREGA) on Beneficiaries in the State of Haryana

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Abstract: Indian economy is among the fastest-growing economies of the world, but we cannot deny the fact that despite planned development over the decades, poverty and unemployment continue to plague the Indian economy, particularly in the rural sector. According to a recent report by NITI Aayog (2020), while 25.01 % of the population was multidimensionally poor in the country, the poverty ratio was as high as 32.75% in rural regions during that year, while this ratio was 8.81 % in urban areas. This calls for a more inclusive approach as far as the development strategy of the country is concerned. In this direction, one of the major initiatives of the government was the launch of the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MNREGA) in 2005. This study is a modest attempt to analyze the socio-economic impact and analyze factors affecting the income earned by the beneficiaries under the MNREGA program in the state using regression analysis. The present study is based on primary data, but secondary data has also been used as per the requirements of the study.

Keywords: Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MNREGA), Socioeconomic, Beneficiaries, Households, Poverty.

INTRODUCTION

Indian economy is among the fastest growing economies of the world but we cannot deny the fact that despite planned development over the decades, poverty and unemployment continue to plague the Indian economy, particularly in the rural sector. According to a recent report by NITI Aayog (2020), while 25.01 % of the population was multidimensionally poor in the country, the poverty ratio was as high as 32.75% in rural regions during that year, while this ratio was 8.81 % in urban areas. This calls for a more inclusive approach as far as the development strategy of the country is concerned. In this direction, one of the major initiatives of the government is the launch of the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MNREGA) in 2005. It is a demand-driven program that guarantees at least 100 days of wage to the rural households who volunteer for it. The statute is hailed by the government as **“the largest and most ambitious social security and public works program in the world”**. World Bank in its World Development Report 2014 termed it a **“Stellar example of Rural Development.”**

This study is a modest attempt to analyze the socio-economic impact of MNREGA on the beneficiaries in the state of Haryana. An attempt has also been made to analyze factors affecting the income earned by the beneficiaries under the MNREGA program in the state. The present study is based on primary data but secondary data has also been used as per the requirements of the study. Regression analysis has been applied to analyse the factors affecting

the income of beneficiaries.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

A review of existing literature plays an important role in exploring and getting familiar with the phenomenon of interest and getting the benefit from the earlier scholars to examine the gap to make the research fruitful. The present review of the literature is related to the impact of MNREGA on various states of India, which will help the researcher to find the gap in the existing stock of knowledge as well as to set the objectives of the present study.

Mukherjee (2018) conducted his study in West Bengal and concluded that the participation of those women was more whose mobility and social interaction were not restricted by social norms. Participation of females belonging to the Scheduled Caste was more, while it was least in the case of females belonging to the Muslim community. Women's participation in MNREGA has resulted in their stronger bargaining power, improved welfare, and more investments in children.

Mathur & Bhati (2017) studied employment generation for Scheduled Tribes and Scheduled Castes through the MNREGA in Rajasthan. Women's participation was also high in MNREGA in Rajasthan. More than 50 per cent of participation of scheduled tribe women enhanced their earnings and also their status in the family.

Dhawan and Kumar (2017) investigated the impact of MNREGA on various sections of society in the Shimla and Kinnaur districts of Himachal Pradesh. The results revealed that MNREGA was instrumental in the standard of living, cooperation among people, and self-dependence of women in Himachal Pradesh.

Dhawan and Kumar (2017) studied the social audit and financial aspects of MNREGA in Himachal Pradesh. Results concluded that MNREGA provided employment, but many shortcomings require immediate attention.

Hussain (2017) investigated the performance of MNREGA in Jammu and Kashmir and found that women's participation in MNREGA in Jammu and Kashmir was the lowest in comparison to other states of the country and faced some critical issues, such as wage payment delays, corruption, payment through bank account, etc.

Aggarwal (2016) conducted his study in Jharkhand and found that there are a few major problems related to the program, such as inadequate budget, delayed wage payment, lack of accountability, lack of qualified staff, corruption problems, and more use of technology.

Ranaware *et al* (2015) investigated the impact of MNREGA on Maharashtra and found that MNREGA helped in land development, horticulture, waterworks, infrastructure development, and creating long-term assets in Maharashtra.

Singh *et al* (2015) showed that the program resulted in higher women's participation, enhanced income and livelihoods of beneficiaries, and food security.

Sugapriyan and Prakasham (2015) evaluated the performance of MNREGA in the Kanchipuram district using a data mining technique and concluded that MNREGA significantly contributed to the rural economy in getting out of poverty.

Chakraborty (2014) showed that structural flaws and procedural hold-ups hinder the employment creation ability of MNREGA to produce the intended outcomes in West Bengal. Major challenges were inadequate childcare facilities, contaminated drinking water, and the absence of SHG members to oversee work at the site. Although women's participation was noteworthy, much more work needs to be done to meet its objectives.

Sharma and Didwania (2013) revealed that the awareness level of people about socio-economic schemes was very high in the Jind district of Haryana.

Esteves *et al* (2013) conducted their study in Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka, Madhya Pradesh, and Rajasthan by comparing pre- (2006-07) and post- (2011-12) MNREGA data. The program helped improve water conservation, irrigation facilities, development of land, drought-proofing by planting trees and afforestation, enhancement of soil fertility, crop productivity, and reduced soil erosion.

Tiwari, *et al* (2011) observed the implications of MNREGA activities on environmental services in the Chitradurga district of Karnataka. The results indicated that this program has improved the availability of resources and their conservation.

The effects of MNREGA on Haryana's agriculturally advanced and backward areas were noted by **Ahuja and Tyagi (2011)**. The findings showed that MNREGA gives employment to poor individuals in rural areas as a secure means of subsistence. It was also found that in agriculture-backwards regions, MNREGA participation was higher, but MNREGA could not prevent the migration of labour to agriculture-developed areas.

Harish *et al* (2011) worked on the impacts and implications of MNREGA on Karnataka's labour supply and income generation for agriculture. The study concluded that due to the MNREGA program, the problem of labour scarcity was also observed. To mitigate this, it has been suggested that MNREGA activities should be confined to off-season time when there is no demand for labour for agricultural activities such as sowing and harvesting.

Kumar, Bassi, *et al* (2011) conducted a study in the Chitradurga district of Karnataka and stated that MNREGA helped in irrigation, increased agricultural production, rainwater harvesting, groundwater recharge, and plantation of trees. The main constraint for building high-quality assets was the lack of planning and supervision of MNREGA work.

Pankaj and Tankha (2010) examined the effects of the MNREGA program on women empowerment in Bihar, Jharkhand, Rajasthan, and Himachal Pradesh. The study revealed that MNREGA empowered women in a few areas by increasing their income and enabled women to spend more money on consumption, health and education of children, social ceremonies, etc. To enhance women's empowerment few improvements in the program are required such as more employment opportunities, equal wages, timely payment of wages, crèche facility for children, flexible working hours, and representation of women in NREGA functionaries.

Liu and Deininger (2010) examined the impact of NREGS on some major welfare indicators by taking a sample of 2,500 poor households in Andhra Pradesh. It was found that casual labourers, SC candidates, literate, and families headed by male members participated more in NREGA activities as compared to illiterate and women-headed families. Also, the increased income leads to increased consumption expenditure, intake of energy and protein, more savings and investment, and asset generation.

Banerjee and Saha (2010) analyzed the working of programs in Maoist states and their impact on the development of those states and revealed Maoist states were underdeveloped from a socio-economic point of view. After the implementation of this program, there has been an increase in purchasing power, employment, and cultivation of paddy, and migration has declined.

Khera and Nayak (2009) examined the perception of women workers in 6 states to evaluate the socio-economic impacts of NREGA on women workers and barriers to their participation. Results concluded that the participation of women in NREGA varies in different states. The study suggested transparency in mechanisms and gender equality to enhance women's participation.

Jacob (2008) analyzed that the program reduced the rural-urban gap, developed infrastructure, enhanced productivity, and provided 100% employment between agricultural seasons in rural Tamil Nadu.

Mathur (2007) analyzed the working of NREGA during 2007-08 in 27 states of the country and concluded that backward states were better than several progressive states in terms of implementation of the scheme. The objective of 100 days of employment was not achieved in any state, and on average, 45 days of employment were provided by the scheme in a year.

Aiyar and Samji (2006) examined that the minimum wage rate, sufficient resource availability, transfer of resources to the Gram Panchayat, technical support for administration and plan construction, financial management, and a dispute settlement mechanism were basic requirements of the efficiency and effectiveness of the scheme.

Shah (2004) stated that NREGA increased the income of people by offering jobs, it was a blessing for the impoverished in rural areas. From a social and economic perspective, women's participation, unemployment allowances, good drinking water, and on-site childcare

facilities were also advantageous to the development of rural communities.

RESEARCH GAP

As evidenced by the review of the literature, there is no dearth of studies available on MNREGA. Most studies have been conducted concerning the role of MNREGA on employment, environmental protection, empowerment of women, reducing income inequalities, migration from rural areas to urban areas, and women's participation in the context of other states, but there are very few studies available in the context of Haryana state. This study is an attempt to bridge this gap.

Objectives of the Study

1. To study the socio-economic profile of the beneficiaries of MNREGA in the state of Haryana.
2. To analyze the socio-economic impact on the beneficiaries of MNREGA in the state of Haryana.
3. To examine the major factors affecting the income earned through MNREGA by beneficiaries.
4. Based on the findings of the study, suggest a few measures to make this program more effective.

MAIN HYPOTHESES

1. Women's participation in MNREGA is more than that of males.
2. MNREGA has enhanced women's empowerment in the state of Haryana.
3. II. Income earned through MNREGA is significantly affected by the level of literacy, size of holdings, number of days of work, age, and family size.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Research Design: The present study is descriptive and exploratory.

Sampling Plan: The sampling plan has been discussed below:

Sampling Area: Sample data has been collected from rural areas of selected districts of Haryana state. There are 22 districts in Haryana, out of which 5 districts have been selected purposely where the participation in MNREGA has been highest (more than 0.8 Lacs) in 2021. These states are mentioned below

S.No	Districts	Total Workers	Active
1	FATEHABAD	97266	
2	HISAR	92914	
3	KARNAL	81789	
4	MEWAT	102147	
5	SIRSA	84853	

A judgment cum multi-stage sampling strategy was used. In the first stage, five districts were selected as they reported the highest MNREGA employment in the year 2021. In the second stage, two talukas from each district have been selected. Selection of Gram Panchayats was done in the third stage, and households were selected in the fourth stage. Based on discussions with the Block Development Officer of each taluka, Gram Panchayats with the highest number of days of participation in MNREGA were selected from each taluka. In total, 200 beneficiaries were interviewed in person from selected gram panchayats.

Sample Size: A sample size of 200 beneficiaries has been used for collecting the responses through a structured questionnaire. The sample of the study consists of households that have been working under the MGNREGA scheme.

Data Collection: Primary data has been collected from 100 respondents using a structured questionnaire through in-depth

fieldwork. The reference year is 2021. Secondary data has been collected from the official website of MNREGA, online sources, and other published sources of information available in the public domain from 2017-18 to 2022-23.

Statistical Tools and Techniques: Data will be analyzed by using Microsoft Excel and SPSS. Descriptive statistics and inferential statistics, like t-tests, regression, and trend analysis, have been applied.

Performance of MNREGA in Haryana- An Overview

Table 1: Performance of MNREGA in Haryana with respect to Employment Generation

Employment Generation	FY 2022-2023	FY 2021-2022	FY 2020-2021	FY 2019-20	FY 2018-19	FY 2017-18
Approved Labour Budget [In Lakhs]	125	141	185	100	100	100
Person days Generated so far [In Lakhs]	96.5	146.39	179.62	91.19	77.9	90.37
% of Total LB	77.21	103.83	97.09	91.19	77.9	90.37
% as per Proportionate LB						
SC person days % as of total person days	52.61	42.67	36.54	42.14	45.58	47.66
ST person days % as of total person days	0	0	0	0	0.01	0.01
Women Person days out of Total (%)	59.48	52.67	48.8	50.59	50.05	48.64
Average days of employment provided per Household	31.33	36.26	39.31	35.37	33.73	33.12
Average Wage rate per day per person(Rs.)	327.07	312.75	308.29	286.37	281.27	277.85
Total No of HHs completed 100 Days of Wage Employment	3,455	11,041	14,077	4,831	3,789	3,924
Total Households Worked [In Lakhs]	3.08	4.04	4.57	2.58	2.31	2.73
Total Individuals Worked [In Lakhs]	4.41	5.7	6.51	3.64	3.27	3.96
Differently, abled people worked	571	587	724	514	464	638

Source: mnregaweb5.nic.in

It is evident from the above table that the amount of approved labour budget has gradually increased during the period of study. Though this amount has been constant at Rs 100 lakh from 2017-18 to 2019-20 but has drastically increased during covid pandemic, 85 % higher in 2022-21 and 45% higher in 2021-22 in comparison to 2019-20. This significant increase in the amount of budget during the pandemic is a reflection of the government's intention to use this program as an instrument to protect the livelihood of the rural poor during the pandemic. Besides, the average daily wage rate has also increased from Rs 286 per person in the pre-pandemic year to Rs 308 in the pandemic year, showing approximately a 7.7 % increase in a single year, this is the maximum annual increase during the period of the study. The total number of households who completed 100 days of wage employment in 2020-21 was 14,077 while this number was just 4831 in the pre-pandemic year, A 27% increase during covid year has been a great hope for all those workers who had lost their regular employment due to covid. The total number of households who worked in MNREGA in 2020-21 was 4.57 lakh while this number was only 2.58 lakh in 2019-20, showing an approximately 77% increase in one year. All these facts are clear indications that MNREGA has provided a safety net to the rural poor in Haryana, particularly during the COVID-19 crisis.

Socio-economic profile of sample households

The socioeconomic profile plays an important role in characterizing the social and economic life and behaviour of the sample area and sample households. Socio-economic differentials are of particular concern for the population and employment policies of the Government that seek to provide employment to all population groups including minorities and vulnerable groups. The characteristics of sample households have been profiled in the following table :

Table -2. Main Characteristics of MNREGA Beneficiaries

Gender	Percentage of Respondents
Male	37
Female	63
Caste	Percentage of Respondents
SC	60
ST	4
OBC	32
General	4
Main Occupation	Percentage of Respondents
Farming	3

Self - business	1
Salaried/pensioner	1
Wage Earners	94
Involved in migration	1
Average Age in Year	Percentage of Respondents
Below 30	11
30-40	30
40-50	33
50-60	18
Above 60	8
Education status	Percentage of respondents
Illiterate	36
Up to Primary	29
Up to Middle	21
Up to Secondary	13
Up to graduate	1
Above graduate	0
Family Type	Percentage of Respondents
Joint	64
Nuclear	12
Expanded	24
Type of Houses	Percentage of Respondents
Pucca House	70
Semi- Pucca House	20
Kaccha House	10
Monthly Average Income	Percentage of Respondents
Below 5000	1
5000-10000	5
10000-15000	70
15000& above	24
Size of Land	Percentage of Respondents
Landless	50
Less than 1 Acre	32
1-2 acres	16
more than 2 acres	2

Source: Compiled from Primary Data.

Gender-wise distribution: The table shows that the overall percentage of females in the beneficiary households is higher than the male beneficiaries. This has some vital implications for the society at large. Though with this information, we cannot conclude that MNREGA has impacted the gender ratio rather it would be more appropriate to infer that more the females in the households the more their participation in MNREGA. In the long run, if more participation of women is ensured, it may be an instrument to reduce gender inequality as well as it may also impact the male-female ratio. Women have been actively participating in the program, which has led to increased economic independence and empowerment of women as well as gender equality.

Caste-wise distribution of the beneficiaries: Caste-wise data reveals that most of the beneficiaries of the MNREGA program belong to the Scheduled Caste (SC) category. The proportion of SC is 60% among all beneficiaries followed by other backward castes which is equal to 32 percent. It is also noteworthy that a very negligible ratio goes to the Scheduled Tribes (ST) class which is equal to 4%. It is

natural because the overall percentage of the ST population in the total population of Haryana is very low. This analysis indicates that the program has been instrumental in raising the income of socially backward and deprived sections of society. Hence it is proved that the program has played a very crucial role in protecting the employment of vulnerable groups of society during the current pandemic.

Occupation-wise distribution of the beneficiaries: Occupation-wise analysis provides some insights as far as the profile of sample households is concerned. It can be seen that 96% of beneficiaries under the MNREGA program are wage earners. Other beneficiaries have either self – self-businesses such as running a small shop or vending daily food items like vegetables, milk, etc, or belong to the salaried class in semi-government cooperative bodies local bodies, dispensaries, schools, post offices, etc, and in some cases they might be migrating too. It is also an important fact that MNREGA gives additional employment to these categories of people which results in more income and employment for these households.

Age-wise distribution of beneficiaries: Age-wise analysis

of beneficiaries also indicates many noteworthy facts. It has been observed that 63% of beneficiaries fall in the age group of 30-50 years, which can be considered an optimum age as it is desirable too. People falling in this group constitute the major chunk of the working population looking for employment opportunities. Less than 30 years old beneficiaries are 11 %. Though this figure is also comparatively high, by improving the economic condition and creating more and more educational facilities this ratio can be reduced in the long run. It is also noteworthy that only 8% of beneficiaries are more than 60 years old. It is a very positive fact because physical work is not suitable for people who are very old and fall in the age group of more than 60 years.

Status of Education The profile of the beneficiaries of MNREGA can be understood by analyzing their level of education. It is a noteworthy fact that as the level of education is increasing, fewer and fewer people like to work under this program. It may indicate that higher educational qualifications may provide an alternative source of employment to people where the wage rate is comparatively high. It is clear from the data that a total of 34% of beneficiaries are illiterate, while only 1% of beneficiaries fall in the category who are graduates. It can be interpreted from this data that the program is the basic source of employment for the people who are less educated and thereby don't have any alternative source of employment.

Types of the family of respondents: Collected data revealed that 60 % of respondents belong to a joint family structure, while nuclear and expanded family share is 16% and 24% respectively, which indicates that a large family requires more economic resources to run the expenditure through more participation in MNREGA.

Type of house of the beneficiaries: It is clear that 68 per cent of beneficiaries have pucca houses, while 22 per cent have semi-pucca houses. Only 10 per cent of respondents have a Kaccha house. This pattern is a reflection of the fact that per capita income is relatively high in the state and thereby most of the respondents have pucca houses.

Income-wise distribution of the households: It is clear that 69 per cent of households have a monthly income of 10000-15000 per month, while the number of respondents having an income less than Rs 5000 is negligible. Likewise, 24 per cent of respondents have a monthly income of Rs 15000 and above. During the survey, it was found that income earned from MNREGA supplements their income from their main source of earning.

Availability of agricultural land to respondents: Most of the MNREGA beneficiaries are landless labourers who are dependent only on wage earnings. Also, respondents who have a very small size of land are more inclined to earn income through MNREGA as their income from agriculture is not sufficient enough to live a normal life.

RESULTS DISCUSSION

Impact of MNREGA on expenditure and savings: The MNREGA program has altered the expenditure and savings patterns of beneficiary households. Nearly 90 per cent of respondents opined that MGNREGS has improved their living standards. 80.1 per cent of respondents shared that they have spent their wage income earned through MNREGA on food items, particularly fruits and dairy products. On one hand, it has increased demand for these items and on the other hand, MNREGA has helped in sustaining the level of consumption of households by providing income even in the lean period when no alternative employment is available. Poverty and indebtedness are very highly correlated; data shows that 26.3 per cent of households have used wages earned through MNREGA in repayment of debt. Also, earnings through MNREGA have been spent on savings, education, and health care. All these facts indicate that MNREGA has been instrumental for improvement in improving their living standard and overall well-being. Notably, respondents' annual expenditures increased marginally by 10.5% after working under the MNREGA program, with the majority of the increase going towards consumption goods. Also, respondents' average yearly savings before participating in the MNREGA program was Rs 15,000; however, after working for the program, that amount rose to Rs 26,000. These results are consistent with Krishnan Kumar's findings that the MNREGA program has raised workers' income and expenses while also somewhat reducing their debt burden. It demonstrated that increases in savings and expenditures were not proportionate to increases in income.

The accompanying figure makes it clear that the average yearly spending of households was Rs 85,000 before enrolling in MNREGA and climbed to Rs 94,000 post-implementation. Following their employment under the MNREGA program, their overall income rose, with the MNREGA portion accounting for 12% of their entire income. However, in comparison to the percentage of income from both agricultural and non-agricultural activities, this percentage was quite low. This was because, on average, households worked under the MNREGA program for just an average of 56 days, as the first preference of the households was not MNREGA but agriculture or any other alternative employment. The reasons for this were that agriculture provides them food security, also the wage rate in MNREGA was lower than the market rate. Therefore, it can be deduced that employees would only choose to work for the entire 100 days allowed under the act if they are unable to locate other employment options. As a result, the success of the largest employment program in the world was limited to a small number of locations.

Effect on the labour market and wages: According to the survey results, 57% of participants had previously worked in some fields other than MNREGA. Some have moved toward MNREGA since there aren't many jobs available in their particular vocational field or agriculture throughout the whole year. Since they worked in MNREGA along with their regular employment, this does not precisely qualify as a "substitution" as perceived by many experts. More than

50 percent of respondents stated that they have become members of the MNREGA program but they are also engaged in other alternative jobs along with MNREGA. Therefore, it did not usually lead to a labour shortage; instead, the scheme provided workers with a backup plan in the event that work was not available in their regular sector. As a result, the program has no significant impact on the labour market. This has also been observed that in many areas of rural Haryana, the wages of women working in agriculture have increased after the implementation of this program. However, the high pay associated with alternative employment serves as a deterrent to switching to MNREGA. In many regions, the wages of women working as agricultural labourers have increased; previously, their pay was only slightly better than that of MNREGA workers. It has also been explored during the present research that there are many activities in agriculture where farm owners prefer women workers, but they are paid wages that are higher than MNREGA. In these cases, women prefer to work in MNREGA, as with less manual labour they can gain a wage that is more or less equal to the market rate. In this situation, farm owners were forced to increase the wage rate of women workers to attract them to work on their land. Due to this implication, it is suggested that MNREGA jobs should be provided at a time when agricultural activities are not in full swing. But as was previously mentioned, wage increases cannot be applied universally to all jobs. It is mostly dependent upon the type of work and how frequently it is offered. If we examine the national implications of MNREGA, we might find similar outcomes. The detrimental impact of high labour costs on Haryana's agriculture has been somewhat offset by MNREGA. By permitting agricultural operations on private land as long as the owners are also MNREGA members, MNREGA work has provided a reprieve from the increased labour costs. The respondents stated that a large number of people have expressed interest in farming and vegetable growing, even leasing land.

There is a general perception that the program has not been able to employ for 100 days as promised but to the surprise of the researcher during the study, only 15 percent of respondents stated that they did not get employment for 100 days as promised in the program rather the program has provided on an average of 56 days employment. 85 per cent of respondents shared that they don't prefer to work for 100 days under the program if other alternative employment is available where the wage rate is also higher than MNREGA. In such a case, the figure of average 56-day employment is justified.

For new workers, on the other hand, who had previously not been employed anywhere for any reason, the circumstances are different. In the past, a large number of women, even those with modest incomes, refused to work as labourers because there were no suitable jobs available or because manual labour was socially stigmatized. However, MNREGA was successful in eliminating this social stigma through its use of group labour and government labelling. Additionally, the directives to find employment within five kilometres of their home encouraged women to apply. Just ten respondents said that

MNREGA assisted them in acquiring new abilities to be eligible for alternate employment.

Empowerment of Women: MNREGA has empowered women in a variety of ways by bringing them to the forefront of decision-making both within the family and in social circles. While discussing the secondary data on women, it has been found that more than 50 per cent of the beneficiaries of the program have been women in the state of Haryana. Also, primary data collected a\ confirms more participation of women workers in the program, which is equal to 63 per cent, while the participation of males is 37 per cent.

Though women bear the major burden in discharging both farm and household duties and responsibilities, the decision-making power related to social as well as economic aspects, in most of cases, lies in the hands of the male members of the households, and opinions of women members are rarely sought. In MNREGA, there is a provision to reserve 33.33 per cent of the employment generated for women with wage rates equal to the wage rate of male workers. Most of the women respondents replied that after participating in the MNREGA program, they have some say in the decision-making process in the family, thus feeling empowered up to some extent. Roy (2009) in his study conducted in Tripura, found that MNREGA enabled women workers to buy LIC policies and Recurring Deposit accounts, thereby empowering them. Economic empowerment of women through MNREGA was also reported by Sudha Narayan (2008) in Tamil Nadu and Naganagoud and Uliveppa (2010) in their study at the national level. The results of the present study conform to those results.

Through equal pay and employment opportunities, participation in Gram Sabhas to determine the projects to be undertaken in the village under MNREGA, financial inclusion through bank account opening, SHG participation, and involvement in the scheme of social auditing, MNREGA has empowered women. Therefore, the hypothesis is accepted that women workers' engagement in MNREGA has improved their economic empowerment and increased their involvement in social and economic group activities and family decision-making, based on the data and discussions offered in the preceding paragraphs.

Reduction in Poverty: It is a well-proven theory that employment generation is one of the key factors for the alleviation of poverty. MNREGA's effects on poverty are seen both directly, by offering jobs during the off-season, and indirectly, by improving one's health and quality of life, thereby increasing productivity. Many respondents expressed their opinions regarding their improved health after enrolling in the program. Furthermore, MNREGA has raised household income by bringing in women who had not previously entered the workforce. Conversations with the leaders of the villages and the villagers themselves indicated that MNREGA has contributed to the decline in poverty. The program offers employment opportunities to those who are able and willing to work, creating a stream

of income. It is worth mentioning that the prevalence of lifestyle disorders linked to a sedentary lifestyle has decreased. Both panchayat officials and villagers have noted the improvement in overall cleanliness. However, the present study does not focus on this aspect; a more thorough investigation of health issues is necessary to corroborate this on a larger scale.

Major Challenges

During the study, researchers have identified many challenges in the implementation of the program that need attention to make the program more effective. One main challenge is the lower wage rate in the state under the MNREGA program. The MNREGA wage rate in Haryana, which was just Rs 141 in 2009-10, has been increased to Rs 347 in 2022-23. Currently, Haryana ranks top among all the Indian states as far as the wage rate is concerned. Despite these facts, some respondents felt that it is still comparatively lower than the market rate. This wage differential was a major reason responsible for the low demand for the jobs offered under MNREGA. Respondents have also complained about the delay in payment of the wages, which causes a lot of inconvenience to the workers. MNREGA officials shared that this was due to bank cheque clearance delays and delays in writing the MB book (Measurement Book) by the concerned Engineers from the Taluka offices. In a few communities, the labourers had not yet received their Bank/Post Office passbooks. Besides, many respondents complained about the poor working conditions, such as lack of a first aid box, non-availability of drinking water, lack of child care facility on the site, and lack of shed in the workplaces, which were also responsible for low demand for employment under MNREGA. It was observed that the sense of belongingness was weak among the workers while undertaking community work, which affected the quality of the work. Besides, asset quality created under MNREGA was also poor due to a lack of technical support, restrictions on material costs, and low-quality labour. Moreover, due to the poor quality of the work produced under the scheme, supervisory staff had the only option to reduce workers' wages. However, the workers insisted on receiving their full compensation. Tension was arising in the work environment between administrators and employees as a result of these altercations. In Many Gram Panchayats, assets developed under the MNREGA were in very poor condition as a result of inadequate maintenance. Though MNREGA is a demand-driven program it has also been observed that in certain cases, the Gram Panchayath authorities accepted the request of the workers to provide employment not at the time when there was a need for employment by the workers but when the officials of Panchayaths were under the pressure to achieve the targets related to MNREGA. Also, workers were not submitting their requests in writing; in this case, the officials were more at ease to disregard their pleas for jobs.

Some of the officials complained that they were overburdened with multiple tasks, and there was a need for more staff to perform their assigned duties. They also shared that all computers intended for Gram Panchayaths were placed in Taluka Offices due to frequent power

outages and poor internet access, which increased the workload for Panchayath staff who had to travel frequently to the Taluka Office to enter MNREGA-related data into the computers. As a result, in the majority of the Talukas, Gram Panchayaths could not access the Management Information System (MIS). However, in several instances, middlemen acting as contractors brought the list of workers to the Gram Panchayats requesting employment for carrying out their tasks. The researcher discovered a few cases where MNREGA operations were carried out using mechanical tools like JCBs and tractors, which left less room for the respondents to perform manual labour.

CONCLUSION:

The present study indicates that the program has proved very beneficial to the people living in the rural areas of Haryana, particularly for aged people and women. No doubt that this program has played a very significant role in uplifting the living standards of the rural poor, empowering women, and creating assets in the rural parts of Haryana; still many concerning issues make the program less effective in achieving its objectives. Though MNREGA is a demand-driven program, ignorance among the workers regarding the provisions and procedures of the Act has led to deprivation and exploitation. There is a need to spread awareness about the objectives of the program and sensitize people regarding their respective duties and responsibilities. A collective effort from all stakeholders, such as MNREGA officials, the government, financial institutions, and MNREGA workers, is the need of the hour, which will ensure the success of the biggest employment guarantee program in the world.

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