

POVERTY ALLEVIATION PROGRAMS IN INDIA: A STUDY OF MGNREGA AND PDS

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Abstract: From 2003 to 2018, India underwent rapid economic growth, fueled by a series of neoliberal reforms. During this time, there were debates about the extent and distribution of these reforms, but they coincided with a decrease in absolute poverty according to official poverty metrics. This research study offers a critical analysis of the factors, structure, and execution of two significant poverty alleviation initiatives in India: the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act 2005 (MGNREGA), which established a national public rural employment guarantee program, and the Public Distribution System (PDS), which provides subsidized food grains to the public. The paper follows this structure: First, we delve into the historical background of the two policies, then provide a concise overview of the political and economic circumstances that led to the inception of these initiatives in India, highlighting the immediate factors driving their formulation and execution. Utilizing secondary data, we proceed to assess the performance of both programs over time and across various regions within the country. We offer insights into the observed trends drawing from existing literature and interviews conducted with key stakeholders from the bureaucracy, political sphere, and civil society. In conclusion, the paper emphasizes the necessity of a more locally sensitive approach to policy design and greater mobilization of intended beneficiaries for rights-based welfare programs to effectively address the social and economic insecurities of the poor. Finally, we synthesize our findings to identify crucial factors influencing poverty reduction policies, their outcomes, and the broader implications for similar interventions in other contexts.

Keywords: MGNREGA, PDS, employment, poverty alleviation

I. INTRODUCTION:

In 2004, with the Congress-led United Progressive Alliance (UPA) coming to power, India initiated a series of legally binding rights aimed at enhancing the economic security and social opportunities of its citizens. The flagship initiative, the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA), was introduced to safeguard the livelihoods of poor agricultural laborers during times of distress. It granted adult members of every rural household the right to demand 100 days of unskilled work at minimum wages from the state, making it the largest work guarantee program globally. The second measure was the National Food Security Act (NFSA), which aimed to improve the existing public distribution system (PDS) by providing subsidized food grains to the poor. After establishing the historical context of MGNREGA and the PDS, this paper briefly examines the politico-economic circumstances that led to the emergence of these initiatives in India. This includes the political and civil society pressures that influenced the design and implementation of the schemes. Drawing on secondary data, the paper then evaluates the performance of both programs over time and across different regions within the country. The paper provides explanations for observed trends and regional variations based on existing literature. MGNREGA has disproportionately benefited these marginalized groups, challenging traditional power dynamics. While it has helped alleviate rural poverty and reduce distress migration, participation in the program fell short of the guaranteed 100 days per year, and completion rates of projects declined due to political interference and bureaucratic obstacles, particularly in poorer states. In contrast, purchases of basic food grains through the PDS by all households increased post-

2004, although leakage issues persist in many regions. Some states have enhanced public subsidies, universalized food entitlements, diversified food offerings, and improved the purchasing and delivery processes through better technology. The study underscores the role of institutions such as electoral democracy, judicial oversight, civil society activism, social audits, and political parties in driving program implementation.

II. MAHATMA GANDHI NATIONAL RURAL EMPLOYMENT GUARANTEE ACT (MGNREGA):

The Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) is a social welfare scheme enacted by the Government of India in 2005. The Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) stands as one of India's most ambitious social welfare initiatives, enacted in 2005 by the Government of India. Its primary objective is to provide economic security to rural households by guaranteeing at least 100 days of wage employment in a financial year to every household willing to engage in unskilled manual labor. This demand-driven scheme ensures that rural households can apply for work, and the government is obligated to provide employment within 15 days of application. MGNREGA focuses on creating durable assets such as water conservation structures, rural roads, ponds, and canals, which benefit the community while providing employment opportunities. Notably, the scheme emphasizes financial inclusion by mandating wage payments directly into the bank accounts of workers, thereby promoting savings and financial literacy in rural areas. Transparency and accountability are core principles of MGNREGA, with social audits playing a crucial role in monitoring implementation and ensuring accountability. Women's empowerment and the inclusion of marginalized groups like Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, and Persons with Disabilities are central to the scheme's design, aiming to increase their participation in the workforce and challenge traditional gender and caste-based inequalities. MGNREGA's success hinges on rigorous monitoring and evaluation at various levels, leveraging technology for efficient tracking of projects and fund utilization. Overall, MGNREGA represents a holistic approach to rural development, addressing economic insecurity while fostering social inclusion and empowerment in India's rural hinterlands. MGNREGA is legally binding, ensuring the right to employment for rural households. If the government fails to provide employment within 15 days of application, it must provide unemployment allowance to the applicant. The scheme aims to create productive assets and infrastructure in rural areas while providing employment opportunities to the rural poor, particularly during the lean agricultural season. Under MGNREGA, various types of work are undertaken, including water conservation, drought-proofing, flood control, rural connectivity, and agricultural activities. Workers employed under MGNREGA are entitled to receive wages as per the prevailing state-wise notified wage rates. Payments are made on a weekly basis directly to the workers' bank accounts or through post offices. MGNREGA emphasizes the inclusion of socially marginalized groups such as women, Scheduled Castes (SCs), Scheduled Tribes (STs), and other disadvantaged sections of society. A minimum of one-third of the beneficiaries must be women. The scheme ensures the participation of local self-government institutions like Gram Panchayats in planning, execution, and monitoring. It also provides for a grievance redressal mechanism to address complaints related to implementation and payment delays. MGNREGA mandates regular monitoring and evaluation at various levels to ensure transparency, accountability, and effectiveness in implementation. Social audits are conducted to enhance transparency and public participation in the scheme's management. The central government allocates funds for MGNREGA annually, and the states are responsible for implementing the program. The allocation of funds is based on the assessed labor demand and the performance of states in utilizing funds and generating employment. Here are some key details regarding MGNREGA:

Asset Creation: Apart from providing wage employment, MGNREGA focuses on creating durable assets that benefit the community. These assets include water conservation structures, rural roads, ponds, canals, irrigation works, land development, and flood control measures. The creation of such assets aims to enhance agricultural productivity, reduce rural migration, and improve overall rural infrastructure.

Seasonality: MGNREGA is designed to address the seasonal nature of rural employment. It ensures that employment opportunities are available to rural households during periods when agricultural activities are limited, such as the pre-sowing and post-harvest seasons. By providing employment during lean periods, the scheme helps in stabilizing rural incomes and reducing rural distress.

Convergence: MGNREGA promotes convergence with other government programs and initiatives aimed at rural development, poverty alleviation, and natural resource management. This includes initiatives related to watershed development, soil conservation, afforestation, housing, and sanitation. By coordinating with other schemes, MGNREGA maximizes its impact and ensures holistic development in rural areas.

Skill Development: While MGNREGA primarily offers unskilled manual work, it also provides opportunities for skill development and capacity building among rural workers. Training programs may be conducted to enhance the efficiency and productivity of workers engaged in various tasks under the scheme. Skill development initiatives aim to empower rural individuals with marketable skills that can improve their livelihood prospects beyond MGNREGA employment.

Environmental Sustainability: MGNREGA emphasizes the importance of environmental sustainability in the implementation of asset creation works. Projects are expected to adhere to environmental norms and promote eco-friendly practices. Measures such as soil and water conservation, afforestation, and sustainable land use are integrated into the design and execution of MGNREGA projects to ensure long-term environmental benefits for rural communities.

ICT Integration: The scheme has increasingly leveraged Information and Communication Technology (ICT) for efficient planning, monitoring, and management. Online portals and mobile applications are used for job registration, wage payment tracking, project monitoring, and grievance redressal. ICT tools enhance transparency, accountability, and accessibility, enabling better coordination between stakeholders involved in MGNREGA implementation.

Overall, MGNREGA represents a comprehensive approach to rural development and poverty alleviation, integrating employment generation, asset creation, skill development, environmental sustainability, and social inclusion. By providing guaranteed wage employment and creating productive assets, the scheme aims to improve the socio-economic well-being of rural households and contribute to sustainable rural development in India.

III. PERFORMANCE OF MGNREGA:

The demand for MGNREGA has demonstrated fluctuations, with demand falling by nearly 27% between 2012–13 and 2015–16, followed by a revival in 2016–17 (Table 1). The most reason cited to explain this decrease are delayed payments, as workers work within a tight expenditure schedule and cannot afford to wait long periods for payments. Another factor has been the bureaucratic repression of demand. Work plans are approved and sanctioned only at the last moment, the timing of fund flow from the central to the state to the local governments is critical. Another source of delay is the new requirement to transfer cash through bank accounts, which poses considerable hurdles in poorer states with weak banking infrastructures. Even though the share of women workers increased during this period, the shares of SCs and STs have declined. Nevertheless, it must be emphasized that SCs, STs and women are over-represented in MGNREGA

employment in relation to their respective shares in the population, suggesting that the programme does positively impact on extremely vulnerable households. The average number of employment days generated have not gone beyond 50, and in fact declined by nearly 14% between 2009–10 and 2013–14

Table 1 Presenting the physical achievements under MGNREGA in India from 2008–09 to 2013–14

Year	2008–09	2009–10	2010–11	2011–12	2012–13	2013–14
Total job cards issued (in Crore)	10.01	11.25	11.98	12.50	12.79	13.13
Employment provided to households (in Crore)	4.51	5.26	5.49	5.06	4.98	4.76
Person days (in Crore)	216	284	257	219	230	220
Scheduled Castes (SCs) (Percentage of total)	63.36 [29%]	86.45 [30%]	78.76 [31%]	48.47 [22%]	50.96 [22%]	49.26 [23%]
Scheduled Tribes (STs) (Percentage of total)	55.02 [25%]	58.74 [21%]	53.62 [21%]	40.92 [19%]	40.75 [18%]	37.22 [17%]
Women (Percentage of total)	103.57 [48%]	136.40 [48%]	122.74 [48%]	105.27 [48%]	117.93 [51%]	115.15 [53%]
Person days per household	48 days	54 days	47 days	43 days	46 days	46 days

Table 2 Detailing the expenditure trends on MGNREGA in India from 2006–07 to 2013–14.

Fiscal Year	FY 06–07	FY 07–08	FY 08–09	FY 09–10	FY 10–11	FY 11–12	FY 12–13	FY 13–14
Budget outlay (In Crore)	11300	12000	30000	39100	40100	31000	30287	33000
Central release (In Crore)	8640	12610	29939	33506	35768	29189	30009	32743
Total available funds (In Crore)	12073	19305	37397	49579	54172	48805	45051	42265
Expenditure (In Crore) [% against available funds]	8823 [73%]	15856 [82%]	27250 [73%]	37905 [76%]	39377 [73%]	37072 [76%]	39657 [88%]	37468 [89%]
Expenditure on wages (In Crore)	5842 [68%]	10738 [70%]	18200 [69%]	25579 [70%]	25686 [68%]	24306 [70%]	27128 [72%]	26096 [74%]
Expenditure on materials (In Crore)	2758 [32%]	4617 [30%]	8100 [31%]	11084 [30%]	11891 [32%]	10650 [30%]	10403 [28%]	9159 [26%]

These figures highlight the trends in job card issuance, employment provided to households, person days of work, and demographic distributions, showcasing the implementation and impact of MGNREGA over the specified period.

This table provides insights into the budget outlay, central release, total available funds, and expenditure on both wages and materials for each fiscal year, along with the respective percentages against available funds. These figures illustrate the expenditure patterns and utilization of funds for MGNREGA over the specified period.

Table 2 provides a summary of the expenditure trends from 2006–07 to 2013–14. Despite a marginal increase in spending compared to the budget outlay, there is no corresponding rise in the employment generated. Changes in political commitments to the program, particularly with the transition from the UPA II to the NDA government in 2014, have resulted in delays. The lack of initial enthusiasm from the new government may have exacerbated this decline in program uptake. Reports suggest that the NDA government delayed transferring funds to the states, contributing to the slowdown (Interview with Ashok Pankaj, CSD, March 2016). However, electoral setbacks at the sub-national level, such as in Bihar, for the ruling political party, are believed to have prompted a shift in attitude within the new government. Since then, there has been an effort to maintain the program's popularity, albeit with a focus on asset creation. Additionally, lobbying efforts by influential business associations like the Federation of Indian Chambers of Commerce and Industry (FICCI) to address rural demand stagnation have spurred renewed interest in MGNREGA implementation (Interview with government official, New Delhi, March 2016).

There are some issues in the implementation of the scheme which are as follows:

a) Shortfall in Access to Employment: According to a survey conducted by the NSSO on employment and unemployment in the country, despite the MGNREGA being a rights-based scheme with work allocation based on self-selection, approximately 18.8% of those registered under the program seeking work were denied employment, highlighting issues of access (NSSO 2014).

b) Regional Variations: In the fiscal year 2009–10, the rationing rates in economically disadvantaged states such as Bihar and Uttar Pradesh were notably high, reaching 78.5% and 53.6%, respectively, whereas they were less than 25% only in states like Rajasthan, Tamil Nadu, and Himachal Pradesh (Dutta et al 2012). By 2011–12, unmet demand exceeded 20% in states such as West Bengal, Jharkhand, Odisha, and Rajasthan, while being comparatively lower in economically deprived states like Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, and Uttar Pradesh (NSSO 2014). Interestingly, states with lower poverty ratios, such as Punjab and Rajasthan, also faced considerable unmet demand. Conversely, despite lower poverty levels in Tamil Nadu, unmet demand was less than 10%, indicating higher state-level efficiency in meeting demands (NSSO 2014). The varying levels of demand and state responses underscore the significance of mediating institutions. Notably, there exist discrepancies among states concerning expenditure on materials, wage rates, promptness of payment, as well as the representation of women and SC/ST communities in the generated employment (Table 3).

Table 3: Region-wise data of Average Employment days per household, Average wage rate, Notified wage rate, % of payments generated, material, work completion rate & % of person days worked by women

Region	State	Avg. Employment Days per Household	Avg. Wage Rate	Notified Wage Rates	% of Payments Generated within 15 Days	Material (%)	Work Completion Rate	Percentage of Person-Days Worked by Women
North	Haryana	28.73	253.32	251	31.79	22.55	31.43	45.13
	Himachal Pradesh	41.93	161.21	168.83	28.93	23.37	54.01	63.15
	Jammu & Kashmir	48.45	163.89	164	13.02	52.24	33.84	25.28
	Punjab	30.45	205.76	210	14.13	20.21	44.6	57.99
	Rajasthan	55.47	116.41	173	46.48	18.26	17.06	69.02
	Uttarakhand	41.13	160.97	161	23.64	32.14	38.75	51.73
Central	Chhattisgarh	46.64	152.8	159	7.81	28.67	31.98	49.02
	Madhya Pradesh	45.8	149.84	159	28.08	35.53	55.77	43.15
	Uttar Pradesh	33.53	160.88	169.59	19.9	18.61	35.41	29.52
East	Bihar	45.11	176.8	162	15.52	32.75	12.36	40.85
	Jharkhand	52.01	161.97	162	71.49	30.6	50.42	32.74
	Odisha	44.78	188.02	174	37.09	20.53	37.05	38.02
	West Bengal	46.88	169.91	174	16.38	22.11	20.87	46.28
North East	Arunachal Pradesh	27.84	167.14	167	6.52	36.11	23.44	31.64
	Assam	32.38	178.94	177.68	18.58	35.44	4.91	33.58
	Manipur	15.9	189.96	177.68	83.14	33.11	88.71	37.26

Region	State	Avg. Employment Days per Household	Avg. Wage Rate	Notified Wage Rates	% of Payments Generated within 15 Days	Material (%)	Work Completion Rate	Percentage of Person-Days Worked by Women
	Meghalaya	54.21	162.87	163	0.76	27.5	71.04	42.92
	Mizoram	68.95	183	177.68	73.22	13.63	97.75	37.68
	Nagaland	50.81	166.98	167	4.89	30.13	92.4	31.28
	Sikkim	66.98	168.73	167	42.14	37.94	14.07	47.57
	Tripura	94.46	159.15	167	57.68	30.02	80.87	50.11
West	Goa	18.16	203	208	31.2	23.95	58.74	76.9
	Gujarat	40.49	158.49	178	34.48	23.31	52.42	46.21
	Maharashtra	59.87	175.43	181	35.15	25.32	27.69	44.52
South	Andhra Pradesh	55.2	129.5	180	79.23	39.42	61.67	57.78
	Telangana	55.28	127.09	-	66.32	14.1	38.51	60.76
	Karnataka	48.44	203.7	204	29.83	35.23	38.7	47.12
	Kerala	49.26	231.82	229	18.5	2.3	81.69	91.27
	Tamil Nadu	60.9	133.45	177.68	32.05			

IV. PDS PERFORMANCE:

The expenditure on food and public distribution has witnessed an increase in absolute terms between 2004–05 and 2013–14 and has also marginally risen as a percentage of the GDP. However, there was a decline observed from 2005–06 which picked up from 2008–09 onwards, coinciding with the years of global financial crises and food price inflation (Table 4).

Table 4 illustrates the trends in expenditure on food and public distribution as a percentage of GDP in India from 2004–05 to 2014–15:

Years	2004-05	2005-06	2006-07	2007-08	2008-09	2009-10	2010-11	2011-12	2012-13	2013-14
Expenditure as percentage of GDP	0.88	0.69	0.62	0.69	0.84	0.97	0.98	0.88	0.92	0.89

(Note: GDP is at current prices.) (Source: Union Expenditure Budget, various years.)

The data indicates a rising trend in the incidence of purchases of rice, wheat, and sugar from the PDS among all households between 2004-05 and 2011-12, in both rural and urban areas. This underscores the significant role that the PDS has played in safeguarding the real incomes of households during periods of food inflation (NSSO 2015). Drèze and Khera (2013), utilizing the National Sample Survey data from 2009–10 and the Tendulkar poverty line, estimate that the PDS has made considerable strides in reducing rural poverty, contributing to a 17.6% reduction in the poverty gap index.

Regional variations in PDS:

Several states implemented significant reforms in the Public Distribution System (PDS), including eliminating the distinction between Below Poverty Line (BPL) and Above Poverty Line (APL) entitlements, expanding coverage at the state's expense, reducing issue prices, introducing subsidized pulses and edible oils, de-privatizing ration shops, implementing doorstep deliveries, and computerizing PDS transactions (Khera, 2011). For instance, in 2006, Tamil Nadu universalized the PDS, removing the BPL/APL distinctions and providing 20 kg of rice at Re 1/kg. By 2011, Tamil Nadu further improved its PDS by offering 20 kg of rice free-of-cost to participating households. Additionally, states like Chhattisgarh, Odisha, and Rajasthan expanded the PDS by increasing the number of BPL cards per fair price shop (FPS). Measures such as raising the commission paid to FPS dealers in Rajasthan and Andhra Pradesh helped mitigate corruption incentives. Moreover, Tamil Nadu's adoption of end-to-end computerization enhanced monitoring of the PDS (Khera, 2011). Regional disparities in the effectiveness of the PDS are evident, with states that primarily consume rice, especially in South India, showing better performance historically. Notably, despite lower poverty levels, Tamil Nadu exhibited a stronger commitment to food security compared to economically poorer states, while Rajasthan's PDS performance was subpar.

Table 5: Percentage of households reporting consumption from the Public Distribution Systems during 30 Days in India, State-wise, 2011–12

States	Rice	Wheat	Sugar	Kerosene
North				
Haryana	0.8	0.1	19.3	8.9
Himachal Pradesh	86.6	36.3	81.0	38.4
Jammu & Kashmir	74.8	60.7	56.9	41.6
Punjab	0.2	0.2	22.8	7.0
Rajasthan	0.8	0.8	28.7	16.9
Uttarakhand	61.9	26.5	66.4	36.4
Central				
Chhattisgarh	67.0	41.5	25.2	24.7
Madhya Pradesh	30.5	17.6	36.2	23.4
Uttar Pradesh	24.8	7.2	25.7	16.6
East				
Bihar	45.0	19.0	44.6	18.9
Jharkhand	33.3	5.1	0.8	0.5
Odisha	54.4	17.9	10.6	12.2
West Bengal	35.2	11.4	43.5	19.2
Northeast				
Arunachal Pradesh	73.5	54.3	3.9	5.8
Assam	52.7	26.5	6.8	1.4
Manipur	5.5	3.8	0	0.1
Meghalaya	68.5	31.7	1.7	2.1
Mizoram	97.2	85.7	6.7	12.5

States	Rice	Wheat	Sugar	Kerosene
Nagaland	14.7	8.3	0.1	1.2
Sikkim	56.1	3.4	3.0	0
Tripura	86.5	55.8	14.7	15.3
West				
Goa	71.9	45.5	38.2	23.5
Gujarat	34.9	5.0	31.6	5.7
Maharashtra	43.3	9.6	40.4	10.0
South				
Andhra Pradesh	86.6	45.2	10.5	6.9
Karnataka	75.2	32.7	71.5	30.3
Kerala	78.2	60.5	54.3	43.2
Tamil Nadu	89.1	66.6	61.8	49.0
All-India				
India	45.9	23.3	33.9	19.0

Note: R stands for rural and U for urban Source: Public Distribution System and other sources of Household Consumption, 2011-12 (NSSO 2015)

Regional political imperatives:

Mooij (1998) suggested that electoral considerations were significant drivers of food policies in the southern states, although she acknowledged the role of collective action in the context of Kerala. She noted that in other South Indian states, food policy was often utilized as a tool of political clientelism. Aiyar and Walton (2014) emphasized a blend of regional political economy and judicial activism as factors explaining enhancements in PDS delivery in Chhattisgarh, a state that performed poorly on various other fronts. They highlighted that state-level reforms had been initiated before the Supreme Court's intervention (Aiyar and Walton 2014).

Maiorano (2014) demonstrated this dynamic through the example of the Andhra Pradesh chief minister, who aimed to leverage the MGNREGA for political advantage, despite facing allegations of corruption and rent-seeking. Despite the state's previous poor performance with other public employment schemes, there was a noticeable shift, primarily attributed to the leadership's ability to recognize its political potential. The observation that the scheme was more effectively implemented in constituencies controlled by ruling party MLAs further supports this argument. From this perspective, agency is seen to lie more with regional political elites than with the impoverished population.

Chopra (2015) proposed a political framework that empowers regional political elites by prioritizing the "motivations" and "interests" of those responsible for implementation. She underscored the agency and drive of influential political figures within a region as key factors in explaining regional disparities in implementation. Using the example of MGNREGA, she linked variations in implementation levels across four states to the political motivations of state-level elites. While bureaucratic intent was evident in the establishment of implementation protocols, it was crucial for these practices to be upheld by political elites and party members.

V. CONCLUSION:

This paper examines the development and outcomes of two significant poverty reduction initiatives in India, namely the MGNREGA and the PDS, with a particular emphasis on the factors influencing them across different regions and over time. The study underscores the role of certain institutions in driving the implementation of these programs. One such institution is the electoral democracy, where competitive politics prompts parties to appeal to voters by promising new welfare programs, especially those aimed at poverty reduction. However, it is important to note that despite these incentives, there may not be significant structural reforms, such as land reforms. Instead, due to the inherent bias towards the elite within political parties, these incentives often manifest in specific poverty alleviation programs that may not adequately address the underlying structures of poverty. The post-reform era in India has witnessed a rise in income inequality alongside an expansion in the scope and variety of poverty alleviation measures, indicating the trajectory of the social welfare regime. It is notable that one of the major programs discussed, employment generation, was introduced during a period characterized by a decline in job creation per unit of output compared to previous periods.

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