

MGNREGA: A HOPE FOR RURAL INDIA

(A Study on Pranganj Gram Panchayat of South 24 Parganas, West Bengal)

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Abstract: The Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) is regarded as a "Silver Bullet" for eliminating rural unemployment and stimulating the demand for labor-force in Indian villages. It is a flagship program of the GOI that aims to achieve inclusive growth while directly affecting the lives of rural impoverished people. The program aims to strengthen the livelihood security of families living in rural areas and to offer at least 100 days of guaranteed paid employment to each family whose adult members are willing to perform manual labour. In August 2005, the GOI presented the Act. This significant piece of law reinforces India's status as a welfare state. There is now no alternative to this scheme in India, which has improved the standard of living of the rural dwellers in such a remarkable way. With this backdrop in mind, the study aims to investigate how this program has been able to lessen the unemployment issue in the Pranganj Gram Panchayat of the South 24 Parganas district and how it instilled hope by providing livelihood security to villagers during the epidemic.

Keywords: GOI, MGNREGA, Flagship scheme, Employment, Unskilled labour

Introduction

Poverty and unemployment have emerged as the two key issues preventing India's economy from developing since independence. The situation is getting worst daily in rural India as a result of both of these issues. The Indian government is aware of these difficulties and has taken several actions to address them. In this context, several social welfare programs have previously been launched. While some of these programs have had some degree of success in addressing pressing issues like unemployment, massive migration and poverty, while others have been abandoned due to serious implementation difficulties. The Government of India (GOI) implemented a series of well-known national-level rural employment generation programs, including the National Rural Employment Program (NREP), Rural Landless Employment Guarantee Program (RLEGP), Jawahar Rozgar Yojana (JRY), Employment Assurance Scheme (EAS), Jawahar Gram Samridhi Yojana (JGSY), Sampoorna Grameen Rozgar Yojana (SGRY), and National Food for Work Program (NFFW). Another point worth mentioning in this regard is that, in order to ensure a seamless implementation, the last two of the aforementioned programs- SGRY and NFFWP were integrated with NREGA in 2005. In essence, NREGA is also a social welfare program similar to other programs, although it differs significantly from earlier program and offers greater security. The National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA) was the initial name of the program, which was introduced by the Ministry of Rural Development, GOI, in August 2005. The NREGA was introduced in three stages. It was first launched in 2006 in the 200 most underdeveloped districts of the nation and was proposed to be expanded to the remaining districts after monitoring the results of the scheme for

at least five years. However, the program rapidly gained widespread recognition and popularity within three years of its launch. And, at this juncture, the program was renamed after Gandhiji in order to reflect its enormous popularity and to make it more accessible to the general public. In October 2009, on Gandhiji's 140th anniversary, the program was proposed to be renamed as the *Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA)*. Apart from this, the program also demonstrates the commitment of the Government of India to implement Article 41 (Right to work) of the Constitution of India.

Objectives of the study

The present study has been undertaken with the following objectives -

- To explain the concept, aims, significance of MGNREGA
- To discuss about the evolution and salient features of MGNREGA
- To see how successful has MGNREGA been in eradicating unemployment in Pranganj Gram Panchayat.
- To know how successful MGNREGA has been in bringing livelihood security to the Pranganj Gram Panchayat area.

Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act

Since independence, the Indian government has carried out twelve "Five-Year Plans" and each of which included new initiatives to combat unemployment and other pressing problems. Besides this, the Government of India (GOI) implemented a series of well-known national-level rural employment generation programs. Some of these programs have been partially successful in addressing acute problems like unemployment and poverty; while others have been discontinued due to major flaws in their implementation. But, among these programs, NREGA was the first Indian law, enacted 56 years after independence, which guaranteed wage employment on an unprecedented scale. As mentioned earlier, NREGA is basically a social-welfare program that aims to reduce inequality and ensure intensive development through the creation of short-term productive employment for the marginalized. The program was notified on 7 September, 2005 and was first implemented in February 2006 in Anantapur district of Andhra Pradesh. The act aims at enhancing livelihood security of rural households by providing them at least one hundred days of guaranteed wage employment in a financial year to every household whose adult members are willing to do unskilled manual work. In February 2006, when the Act was first launched in the 200 most backward districts of the nation (first phase), it was decided to expand it to include the remaining districts after assessing its popularity. However, the Act was expanded to 130 additional districts in the next year (second phase). And, within a year of its inception, it covered the entire nation, barring fully populated urban districts. In 2010, after seeing the huge success of the program, it was renamed after Gandhiji to make the scheme more familiar and more reachable to the people and thus it became *Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA)*.

MGNREGA has been running for 16 years, and it is currently active in 734 districts around the nation. MGNREGA's official website reports that the program's overall performance from 2011–12 to 2020–21 was very impressive. 7.55 billion Households have received jobs through it as of December 2021. 15.5 million Job cards were distributed in total. Also, this program has substantially benefited members of Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribes communities. And, it has played a significant role in empowering rural women.

While discussing the performance of MGNREGA or, MGNREGA as a social welfare scheme, it is necessary to have a glance of MGNREGA's contribution in recent past during the Corona epidemic. The enormous economic crisis caused by the post-Covid epidemic and the way millions of people have lost their jobs and become unemployed over the past two years is of great concern to us. India has experienced numerous hardships, many challenges since its independence but it is unlikely that it has ever seen such devastation and despair. On the one hand, this epidemic has cost the lives of millions of people and destroyed their means of subsistence; on the other hand, it has rocked the foundation of the nation's economy. The return of large number of unemployed people from different part of the country; different urban areas of the state to the villages have put an immense pressure on the financial structure of the villages. Under such circumstances, 100 days of guaranteed employment under the MGNREGA scheme has become a life-saving medicine in the lives of rural people in India.

Aims of MGNREGA

The MGNREGA programme is a ground-breaking initiative by the Indian government to end poverty in rural areas and promote inclusive growth through social protection, livelihood security and democratic empowerment. It is currently India's biggest self-targeting initiative. According to the NREGA gazette document from 2005, the main goal of the Act is to give rural households a minimum level of security by giving them the right to work whenever they want, or at least 100 days of guaranteed wage employment in a fiscal year to every household whose adult members volunteer to perform unskilled manual work. According to the MoRD, India, other aims of the Act are:

- a. Providing social protection for the most vulnerable people living in rural India by offering them wage employment opportunities;
- b. Providing livelihood security to the poor by increasing income, creating sustainable wealth, ensuring safe drinking water, soil conservation and ensuring high productivity of land;
- c. Initiatives on drought mitigation and Flood Management in Rural India;
- d. Empowerment of the socially disadvantaged, especially women, Scheduled Castes (SCs) and Scheduled Tribes (STs) through rights-based legislation;
- e. Deepening democracy at the grass-root level by strengthening 'Panchayati Raj Institutions' (PRIs);
- f. Ensuring greater transparency and accountability in governance.

Significance of MGNREGA

MGNREGA's goals are to achieve the objective as enunciated in the Article 41 of the Indian Constitution- 'giving citizens the right to work'. The Act is significant due to the following reasons-

- Although the previous wage employment programs didn't provide any guarantee of employment, this Act is the first ever law internationally, which guarantees wage employment on an unprecedented scale.
- It is a development initiative, chipping in with the essential public investment to create sustainable assets, without which the growth process in the most backward areas of rural India is not possible.
- The main component of MGNREGA is the provision of employment by the state to those people who are unable to find alternative employment, providing a form of social safety net to the rural unemployed.
- In other wage employment schemes, anyone can be engaged as a labourer, but in MGNREGA, only job-card holders can be employed as labourers.
- Other wage employment programs have no time limit, but MGNREGA mandates employment within 15 days of application, and payment of wages also has to be paid within 15 days of employment.
- Other key features of the Act are labour- intensive work, decentralized participatory planning, women empowerment, workplace benefits and above all transparency and accountability through provision of social audit and right to information. The program envisages the use of information technology to bring greater transparency through closer monitoring and faster execution. Payment of wages through bank and post office accounts is another innovative step that can reduce fudging of master rolls by implementing agencies as actual payment is beyond their reach.

Evolution of MGNREGA

The table given below provides the time line of MGNREGA and highlights the changes that have been made in the program from time to time during the course of the scheme

August 2005	February 2006 (1st Phase)	April 2007 (2nd Phase)	April 2008 (3rd Phase)	February 2009	January 2010
NREGA was legalized by a legislation	Came into force and launched in 200 most backward district of the country	130 additional districts were included	The scheme is fully implemented in all rural districts of India	MOU signed with the postal department for wage transaction	NREGA renamed as MGNREGA

Source: Compiled from various Reports on MGNREGA

The table above shows that when the law was first introduced in February 2006 in the 200 most backward districts of the country, at that time, it was decided that the law would be extended to the remaining districts after 5 years. After seeing its popularity, in the very next year the Act was extended to 130 more districts and within a year every district in the country was brought under the scheme and hence the Act became universal.

Exceptions were those districts which had 100% urban population. And after that the scheme was renamed, in order to make the law more acceptable and familiar to the public. The scheme was named as Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) after Gandhiji in 2009.

Salient features of MGNREGA

1. Adult members of a rural households, willing to do unskilled manual work, can apply for registration in writing or orally to the local Grampanchayat.
2. The Gram Panchayat will issue a job card after due verification. The job card will contain photographs of all adult family members who are willing to work under MGNREGA and is free of cost.
3. Job card should be issued within 15 days of application.
4. A job card holder may submit a written application for employment to the Gram Panchayat, mentioning the period for which the job is sought. Minimum days of employment shall be fifteen.
5. The Gram Panchayat shall issue a dated receipt of the written application for employment, against which the guarantee of providing employment shall be effective within 15 days.
6. Employment shall be provided within 15 days of application for work; otherwise daily unemployment allowance shall be paid as per law. The state is bound for providing unemployment allowance.
7. Generally work should be provided within 5km radius of village. If the worksite is more than 5km away from home then an additional 10% of wages shall be paid to cover additional transportation and living expenses.
8. Wages shall be paid in accordance with the Minimum Wages Act 1948 for agricultural labourers in the State, unless the Centre declares a rate of wages which shall not be less than Rupees 60/per day. And, Equal wages will be paid to both men and women.
9. Wages to be paid as per piece rate or daily rate. Wages are to be disbursed on a weekly basis and in no case more than a fortnight.
10. Panchayat Raj Institutions (PRIs) have a major role in planning and implementation.
11. At least one-third of the beneficiaries will be women who have registered and applied for work under the scheme.

Scope of the Study

This study focuses on rural unemployment and migration issue in Pranganj Gram Panchayat area of South 24 Parganas district, West Bengal (in this perspective, an attempt has been made to understand the situation during the pandemic). The universe of study is the Bhangore I Block of Baruipur Sub-division under South 24 Parganas district. And the unit of study is the Pranganj Gram Panchayat of Bhangore I Block. In this study, the investigator has decided to survey 100 households from Pranganj Gram Panchayat of Bhangore I Block. And, this surveyed information will be used as primary data.

Research Methodology

The study region is the Pranganj Gram Panchayats in West Bengal's South 24 Parganas District. It is a "Quantitative Research Study" that used a semi-structured questionnaire to collect data. Additionally, it used the descriptive approach of research design to look at how MGNREGA has changed the lives of rural residents. The researcher also used both primary and secondary data collecting methods for data collection. Field interviews are used to gather primary information. Additionally, a field interview was carried out using a structured questionnaire. The researcher prioritized gathering secondary data from a variety of sources, including journals, the MGNREGA website, the Census Report, and the official records of the Pranganj Gram Panchayat. And the "Convenience Random Sampling" approach is used to construct the study's statistical analysis.

Review of Literature

‘All India Report on Evaluation of NREGA: A Survey of Twenty Districts’ by ‘Institute of Applied Manpower Research’, Delhi, 2009- This survey is based on the assessment of NREGS which assessed its impact on 20 beneficiaries from North, West, South and North East regions of India and 300 beneficiaries from each district. The survey revealed that in many districts, it is not wrong to put pictures on job cards and in some places beneficiaries have paid to get it. The job cards are not designed to have enough space for all entries in detail. Many families did not get work or unemployment benefits within the stipulated 15 days. With the maximum number of days of work utility, only a small part of the family can use more than 35 days of work, the rest are still lagging behind. The reason for non- utilization of maximum 100 days of work is that the scheme starts late. In most workplaces, other than crèche, other facilities such as sheds, drinking water were provided. Due to the increase in income through this project, the number of beneficiaries at the lower income level has come down by households spending more on food and non- food items has increased.

Dreeze and Lal (2007) described in their study on NREGS in Rajasthan in terms of employment generation per rural household. They revealed that in 2006-07 the average rural households in six ‘NREGA districts’ of Rajasthan got work for 77 days. They also said that the main beneficiaries of the program belong to the under-privileged sections of the society. They found that women’s share of NREGA employment in Rajasthan is estimated at about two-third.

Ghosh (2008) found that MGNREGA is a highly cost-effective means of directly or indirectly generating employment that plays an important role in revitalizing the rural economy, providing stability of basic necessities to the rural poor and improving the bargaining power of rural workers.

Dutta (2009) conducted a study of MGNREGA in Dangs (Gujarat) and Jalpaigudi (West Bengal) districts and stated that community mobilization and interaction due to MGNREGA has enhanced rural connectivity functions. It has checked migration as now rural laborers are given employment in their native villages.

Prasad (2012), in a research work titled “Performance of Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA): An Overview” attempted to review the performance of MGNREGA as the main objective of the functioning of the scheme and explained the objectives, features, permissible works under the Act and funding pattern of MGNREGA. The study also stated that the MGNREGA was the first ever law, internationally, that guaranteed wage employment at an unprecedented scale, augmenting wage employment

and its auxiliary objective to strengthen natural resource management through works that address causes of chronic poverty due to drought, deforestation and soil erosion and so encourage sustainable development. The process of outcomes includes strengthening grass-root processes of democracy and infusing transparency and accountability in governance.

Performance of MGNREGA in Pranganj Gram Panchayat: Findings and Interpretation

In this discussible part, an attempt has been made to analyse and interpret the exact findings based on the data obtained by conducting direct fieldwork on employment and livelihood security at the Pranganj Gram Panchayat of Bhangore Block in South 24 Parganas. The collected data has been analysed by coding and tabulating. Simple percentage test applied to analyse the data regarding the changes brought by MGNREGA in the lives of rural poor of the Pranganj gram panchayat in South 24 Parganas district with the intention to reach a logical conclusion.

Pranganj region is a GP located in Bhangore- I Block of South 24 Parganas District. This GP area consists of ten villages, namely- Ranigachhi, Saihati, Saitgachhi, Nahnudi, Malancho, Serpur, Barali, Maricha, Kalikapur and Raghunathpur. According to the GPDP, Pranganj, about 33, 414 people live in this GP; among them there are 17108 males and 16306 females. Again, about 4105 people of the Scheduled Caste community and 16 people of the Scheduled Tribes community live in the said region. It is surrounded by Bhangore- II Block in the north, Manakhan Block in the east, Canning- II Block in the south and Haroa Block in the north. This place is in the border of the south 24 Parganas District and North 24 Parganas District. And, NH12 passes through this region.

Distribution of the workers/Respondents as per age-gender status

Our unit of the study is the Pranganj gram panchayats of Bhangore Block. A total of 100 respondents were interviewed from the above mentioned gram panchayat. And, out of 100 workers as well as respondents in Pranganj Gram Panchayat area 65 were male and 35 were female.

Table-1: Distribution of the workers in Pranganj Gram Panchayat as per age-Group status

DISTRIBUTION OF THE WORKERS/RESPONDENTS						
(According to Age-Gender status)						
PRANGANJ GRAM PANCHAYAT						
Variables	Sub-group	Male	%	Female	%	Total
Age	21-30	6	9.2	7	20.0	13
	31-40	11	16.9	14	40.0	25
	41-50	20	30.8	11	31.4	31
	51-60	23	35.4	2	5.7	25
	61-70	5	7.7	1	2.9	6
	Total	65	100.0	35	100.0	100

Source: Field Survey

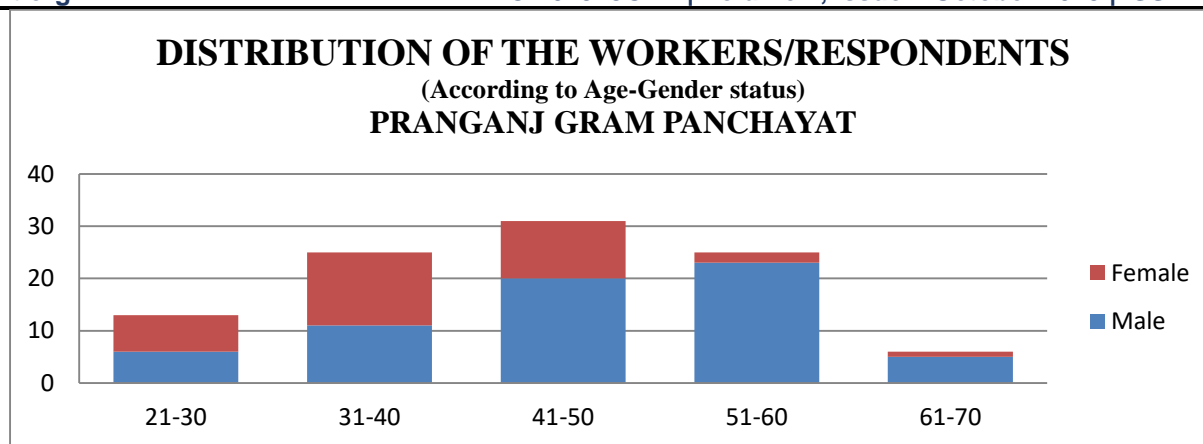


Table no. 1 shows the ‘Distribution of Workers’ in Pranganj Gram Panchayat area as per its Age-Group Status. Analysing the table given above, it has been found that overall participation of people in the 41-50 years-age-group is highest in MGNREGA works, while the participation of people in the 61-70 years-age-group is the lowest. Again, judging from the male participants’ side, it has been noticed that 51-60 age-group men are more involved in this program. On the other hand, the majority of female participants are in the 41-50 years-age-group. Therefore, it can be said that the number of elderly male participants is more than the elderly female participants. In other words, it can be said that with upper-age group, women or female workers are participating less in MGNREGA-works but the opposite picture is seen in case of men or male workers.

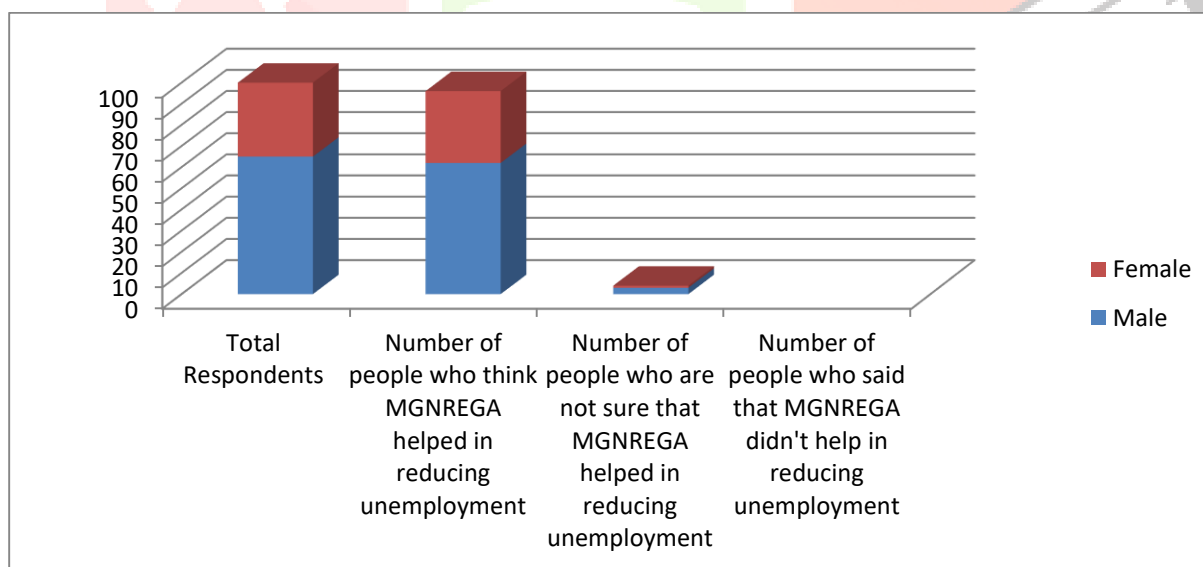
Distribution of the workers/respondents in terms of views on the role of MGNREGA in eradicating unemployment

Unemployment is a major problem. The whole world is grappling with this problem. Unemployment is a phenomenon that occurs when a person actively searching for employment is unable to find work. Unemployment represents the number of people in the work force who want to work but don’t have a job. It is generally stated as a percentage and calculated by dividing the number of people who are unemployed by the total workforce. The workforce made up of those people who want to work. It excludes people who are retired, disabled, and those who have ability to do any work but currently not looking for a position. Unemployment affects not just the person himself but also his family and in the long run the society where he or she lives. It brings with it despair, unhappiness and anguish. It forces people to live their lives in a way that they don’t wish at any means. Now, what we will analyse is how effective MGNREGA has been in reducing unemployment in Pranganj Gram Panchayat area, located under district of South 24 Parganas. So, let us try to understand the matter clearly by presenting the data obtained from the field survey and the diagram based on it given below.

Table-2: Distribution of the respondents in terms of views on the role of MGNREGA in eradicating unemployment

DISTRIBUTION OF THE RESPONDENTS					
(In terms of views on the role of MGNREGA in eradicating unemployment)					
PRANGANJ GRAM PANCHAYAT					
Parameters	Male	% of total male	Female	% of total female	Total
Number of people who think MGNREGA helped in reducing unemployment	62	95.38	34	97.14	96
Number of people who are not sure that MGNREGA helped in reducing unemployment	3	4.62	1	2.86	4
Number of people who said that MGNREGA didn't help in reducing unemployment	-		-		
Total Respondents	65	100.0	35	100.0	100

Source: Field survey



The field survey data given in Table no. 2 and the graphs constructed on the basis of that data show that 96 respondents out of 100 respondents of Pranganj Gram Panchayat think that MGNREGA has helped in reducing unemployment in their Gram Panchayat. Again, 4 out of 100 respondents were not sure whether MGNREGA has helped to reduce unemployment in their Gram Panchayat. Most importantly, none of the 100 respondents as well as workers in the PranganjGram Panchayat feels that MGNREGA has not helped in reducing unemployment. In terms of percentage, it appears that 97.14 percent of total female respondents are confident

about the success of MGNREGA in reducing unemployment, whereas, 95.38 percent of total male respondents are confident about the success of MGNREGA in their area. Besides this, 4.62 percent males are somewhat skeptical or unsure, and for female respondents, only 2.86 percent are not sure about the success of the program. Therefore, it is clearly understood that the majority (96%) of the respondents think that MGNREGA has been very successful in reducing unemployment in Pranganj Gram Panchayat area.

Table- 3: Distribution of the respondents of Pranganj Gram Panchayat based on the total number of working days received by a Job-card holder in a financial year

Variables	Sub-Group	Frequency	Percentage
Number of working days received in the last five financial year	Above 80 days	9	9%
	Above 90 days	86	86%
	Full 100 Days	5	5%
Total		100	100.0

Source: Survey data

The field survey data given in Table no. 3 shows us that in the last five years, 86 % of MGNREGA workers in the region have been employed for above 90 days in a financial year and 5% of MGNREGA workers have completed 100 days of work in a financial year- this statistic proves that MGNREGA has been quite successful in terms of providing employment in Pranganj Gram Panchayat area.

Table- 4: Performance of MGNREGA in terms of employment creation in Pranganj Gram Panchayat (As per data in 2020-21)

Sl. No.	Variables	Figures
1.	Total number of villages	10
2.	Total number of Job-card issued	7113
3.	Total number of workers	11304
4.	Total number of active Job-card	2865
5.	Total number of active workers	8645
6.	SC workers against active Job-card	318
7.	Total number of active SC workers	318
8.	ST workers against active Job-card	2

9.	Total number of active ST workers		2
10.	Women workers against active Job-card		2659
11.	Total number of active women workers		2579
12.	Years	Employment Generated	Growth of Employment Generation(%)
	2016-17	55405	-23.30
	2017-18	107258	93.58
	2018-19	98600	-8.07
	2019-20	82775	-16.04
	2020-21	170750	106.28

Source: As per data provided by GPDP, Pranganj

Table no. 4 shows the performance of MGNREGA in terms of employment generation in Pranganj Gram Panchayat area. From the table we get a clear picture of how MGNREGA has provided hope for survival among the jobless people in Pranganj Gram Panchayat area during the lockdown in 2020-21 financial years. According to the given table no.4, there are a total 11304 MGNREGA workers in the study area, out of which 8645 MGNREGA workers were actively participated in MGNREGA works during the financial year 2020-21. Among these active workers, there were 318 active SC workers, 2 active ST workers and 2579 active women workers. And, column 12 of table 4 contains the estimate of employment growth, it can be noted that Pranganj Gram Panchayat area had the highest employment growth in the financial years 2020-21-106.24 percent; during the lockdown.

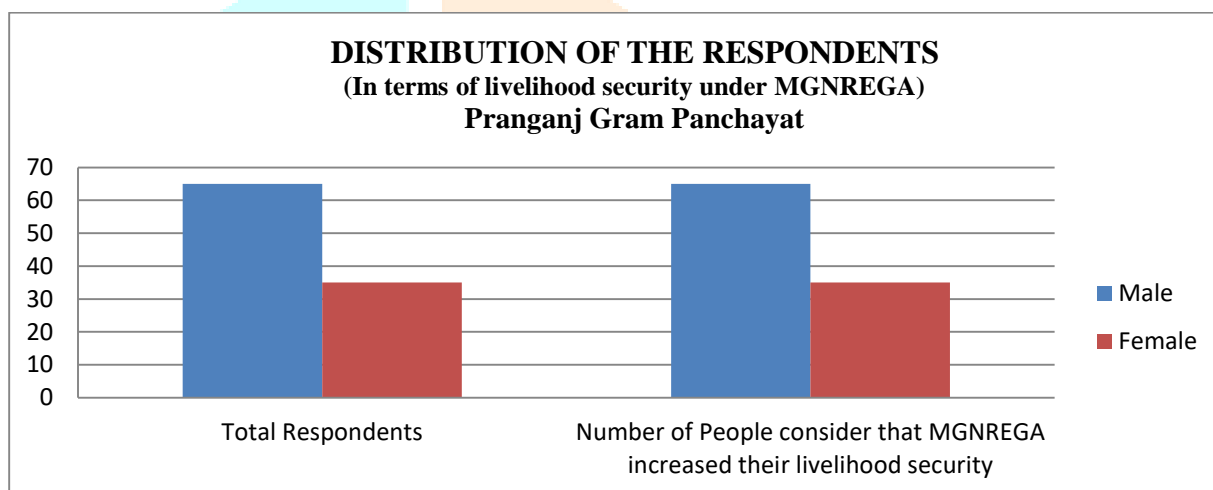
Distribution of the respondents in terms of livelihood security of people after working under MGNREGA

Livelihood security is a very vital issue. People need security of livelihood for a tension-free life. People are much more tension-free if they have a source of livelihood throughout the year. And, schemes like MGNREGA have been introduced to increase the livelihood security of people in rural areas and to ensure an improved quality of life. And, in this context, distribution of the respondents in terms of livelihood security after working under MGNREGA is important to understand.

Table 5: Distribution of the respondents in terms of livelihood security of people after working under MGNREGA

DISTRIBUTION OF THE RESPONDENTS		
(In terms of livelihood security of people under MGNREGA)		
Pranganj Gram Panchayat		
	Male	Female
Total Respondents	65	35
	100	
Number of people consider that MGNREGA increased their livelihood security	65	35

Source: Field Survey



The field survey data given in Table no. 5 and the graphs constructed on the basis of that data show that all persons interviewed in the study area acknowledged that MGNREGA has ensured them livelihood security. Most of the population in India is rural and most of them are agriculturists. These agricultural people are used to be unemployed for three consecutive months every year. In such a situation, the rural people are left with no work, and therefore the 100 days guaranteed wage employment in MGNREGA has helped them financially.

Conclusion

MGNREGA is India's largest rural employment generation program since independence. The program not only secures 100 days of employment but also provides a minimum income for each adult member of each household in the village at the same time. It also deals with some other aspects like environmental protection, social security, development of rural infrastructure, empowerment of women, promotion of gender equality, wealth creation and mitigation of migration. In this way, the act serves as an important tool not only for employment generation but also for all forms of rural development in India. From the above discussion, it is

clear that the objective of reducing unemployment in the study area by providing at least 100 days of employment in a financial year has been well met. 96 percent of total respondents feel that MGNREGA has helped in reducing unemployment in the study areas. Whereas, all respondents in the study area felt that MGNREGA truly helped the villagers in increasing their livelihood security. However, MGNREGA has faced many challenges. There is no doubt that employment has been created through this program but the number of working days, as promised in the Act, has not been found satisfactory. Only 4% workers got a full 100 days of work. The reason behind this is that there is a huge gap in the ratio of card-holders and total job allocations on record. Besides this, non-receipt of wages as per market rates and delay in wage payment has created reluctance among the MGNREGA workers (especially in male workers) towards this work. But it would be wrong to deny that MGNREGA plays an important role in the development of rural economy. Despite some flaws in the implementation of the MGNREGA Act, it has served as a panacea for the long-suffering rural development. In addition, Pranganj Gram Panchayat area recorded the highest employment growth during the lockdown, 106.28 percent. Most of the people in the village had no work in their hands, and those who had lost their jobs in the city and returned home were completely dependent on MGNREGA works. It was this scheme that secured the livelihood of the villagers during the lockdown.

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