TRENDS IN THE EMPLOYMENT STATUS OF SCHEDULED CASTE HOUSEHOLDS IN THE MGNREGS

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In the post-independence era, the Indian government introduced various wage employment and social protection programs, with Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MGNREGS) emerging as the flagship initiative. This program aims to uplift socially vulnerable groups by offering 100 days of employment each year. One of the key beneficiaries is the Scheduled Caste (SC) households, which often face challenges such as limited access to productive assets, education, labor market disparities, and caste-based discrimination. Given the declining employment opportunities in Indian agriculture, households relying on this sector experience unemployment and insufficient livelihoods. Among these, Scheduled Castes (SCs) are notably dependent on agriculture, either as laborers or marginal farmers.

In response to this issue, the government has implemented development programs to promote wage employment, particularly among the economically disadvantaged, with a specific emphasis on the SCs (Manjula and Rajasekhar, 2015). MGNREGS was initially launched in 200 of India's most underdeveloped districts in 2006-07, expanded to 130 districts in 2007-08, and eventually encompassed all districts from April 2008 onward. The primary goal of MGNREGS is to enhance the livelihood security of rural households by guaranteeing a minimum of 100 days of wage employment annually for those willing to undertake unskilled manual labor. Furthermore, applicants are eligible for a daily unemployment allowance if they do not receive employment within 15 days of applying.

Since its establishment in 2005, the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) has played a pivotal role in supporting rural India's unskilled and landless workers. This significant legislation marked the beginning of a normative era where the state, guided by socialist principles, ensures employment and develops sustainable assets to improve the living conditions of rural communities. Over the past 18 years, MGNREGA has undergone diverse interpretations among social science scholars and policymakers. Some, influenced by neoliberal ideologies, view it as a populist policy placing a financial burden on the state. Conversely, others, disheartened by the prevalence of illegalities, corruption, and ineffective asset management, consider MGNREGA a failure in faithfully executing the legislation's intent and content (Geetanjoy Sahu and Aaishwarya Jadhav, 2024).

One of the primary objectives of the MGNREGS is to empower socially marginalized groups, such as women, Scheduled Castes (SCs), and Scheduled Tribes (STs), through legislation based on rights. SCs and STs are recognized as socially disadvantaged communities, and there are specific measures in place to uplift these groups, fostering social and economic equity as well as inclusion. The program places special emphasis on the inclusion of SC and ST households, incorporating awareness-building, planning processes, implementation of works, and monitoring of progress and work quality. Guidelines highlight the need for awareness generation through Information, Education, and Communication (IEC) methods such as TV, radio, films, print media, pamphlets, and brochures. It is stressed that information about the program should be widely disseminated, particularly in localities and hamlets where SC/ST populations reside.

In the planning process, special efforts are mandated to include the priorities of SC/ST households. The program also provides special provisions for SC/ST households that own land or homesteads, allowing them to undertake land development works, irrigation facilities, plantation, horticulture, etc. Furthermore, when constructing roads, priority is given to those providing access to SC/ST habitations. The 2013 MGNREGS guidelines not only expanded the scope of works for the general public but also made them specific to SC/ST households (Manjula and Rajasekhar, 2015).

Review of Literature

Bhattacharjee (2017) revealed that the CAG report highlighted numerous cases of leaks, corruption, inefficiencies, and insufficient internal controls, coupled with inadequate monitoring in the implementation of MGNREGA. A summary of these findings may offer intriguing insights: (i) Possessing a job card did not ensure employment when requested by the beneficiary. CAG identified over 47,687 instances where employment was not provided upon demand, and it's important to note that CAG audits cover only a small sample of the total eligible population. (ii) Even after securing employment, CAG uncovered widespread occurrences of non-payment and delayed payment of wages across 23 states.

Rangappa and Shripathi Kalluraya (2017) conducted a study in Karnataka's Raichur district, exploring the involvement of Scheduled Caste (SC) and Scheduled Tribe (ST) communities under the MGNREG Act. The research focused on the impact of the MGNREG Act on rural individuals, primarily marginalized farmers from SC and ST backgrounds. The findings revealed that 84% of respondents from SC/ST backgrounds were engaged in MGNREGA activities in the study area, while 16% belonged to other backward categories. The study highlighted a persistent wage gap between traditional occupations and MGNREG Act employment. Despite the central government's plan to raise the MGNREGA wage rate from Rs. 200 to Rs. 250 per day and extend the working days from 100 to 150, the research indicated a significant change in the income levels of respondents. After joining the MGNREG Act, 79% of respondents reported earning a monthly income exceeding Rs. 5000, with 21% earning Rs. 4001-5000. The respondents expressed satisfaction with their current wage rates, recognizing the high cost of living in cities like Bangalore, Hyderabad, and Mumbai. Overall, the MGNREG Act was found to positively impact the standard of living of the sample respondents in Raichur district.

Nitin Dhaktode (2021) contended that the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act has played a significant role in affording individuals the "freedom of choice" in employment and providing dignified work opportunities, along with securing rights and entitlements, particularly for marginalized groups such as Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, women, the landless, and others who rely on traditional caste-based occupations and agricultural landlords for their livelihoods in villages. This has played a crucial role in preserving their self-respect and dignity in the workplace, ultimately helping to curb migration. Nonetheless, the deeply ingrained caste system and political dominance based on caste in villages pose substantial challenges to the effective implementation of MGNREGA. This study explores the caste-based exclusion observed in the execution of MGNREGA, as well as the social audit and subsequent actions undertaken by the vigilance wing.

Chintalacheruvu and Madhu Babu (2022) investigated the influence of the MGNREGS on households belonging to Scheduled Castes. The research indicates that participation in the MGNREGS leads to enhanced household income and increased employment opportunities for Scheduled Caste households. Additionally, the study reveals a reduction in migration rates after joining the MGNREGS. Participation in the program also empowers individuals to negotiate better terms for other labor opportunities. Furthermore, the research highlights an improvement in food security following involvement in the MGNREGS. The majority of respondents in the sample expressed the view that social security is positively affected by their participation in the MGNREGS.

Ravi Kumar and Somasekhar (2022) explored the impact of MGNREGS on the socio-economic conditions of Scheduled Castes participants in the Guntur district of Andhra Pradesh. Utilizing both secondary and primary data, along with a review of existing studies, the authors aimed to comprehend the program's effectiveness. Given that MGNREGS stands as one of the world's largest social protection initiatives, it is crucial to assess its benefits for Scheduled Castes. Despite the built-in provisions targeting the well-being of these vulnerable, wage labor-dependent households, the study found that MGNREGS falls short of achieving its intended objectives in safeguarding employment and economic status for underprivileged rural populations like Scheduled Castes.

Geetanjoy Sahu and Aaishwarya Jadhav (2024) demonstrate the effectiveness of Odisha's initiative to extend the workdays and increase wages, supporting the credibility of strategies and proposals aimed at bringing about significant positive changes at the micro-level in the socioeconomic conditions of rural communities. The on-the-ground realities observed in Podapadar underscore the importance of aligning departmental schemes with MGNREGA, as this fosters incentives for daily-wage workers and ensures the sustainable creation and management of durable assets by local communities. Initial findings from the study area, coupled with information gathered from job card holders and local NGOs, indicate that the decision of the Odisha government serves as a viable model for alleviating poverty, fostering the development of lasting assets, and curbing the migration of unskilled individuals to other regions and states over the past three years. The success of the Odisha experience suggests its potential replicability in other parts of the country grappling with widespread distress migration.

Objectives of the Study and Methodology

The study aims at examining the employment status of Scheduled Caste households under the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MGNREGS). The study has examined the number of Scheduled Caste households issued job cards under the MGNREGS, the number of Scheduled Caste households provided employment, persondays generated and the number of Scheduled Caste families completed 100 days of employment. The study is based on secondary data. The data is collected for the period from 2014-15 to 2022-23 from the official website of the MGNREGS. Percentages and growth rates are calculated to analyse the data.

Results and discussion

1. Number of Scheduled Caste households issued job cards

Table -1 presents data on Scheduled Caste (SC) households issued job cards under the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MGNREGS) in India from the fiscal year 2014-15 to 2022-23. From 2014-15 to 2022-23, the number of SC households issued job cards exhibited fluctuations. In 2014-15, 277.469 lakh SC households were issued job cards, representing 21.65 per cent of the total households issued job cards. Over the subsequent years, there was a slight increase in the absolute numbers, reaching 318.784 lakh in 2021-22. However, the percentage of SC households in the total declined to 19.50 per cent, indicating a relative decrease.

The growth rate of SC households issued job cards experienced variations during this period. In 2015-16, there was a notable growth of 1.57 per cent, but in the subsequent year (2016-17), there was a decline of -2.52 per cent. The figures continued to fluctuate in the following years, with a positive growth rate of 5.01 per cent in 2019-20 and a negative growth rate of -11.24 per cent in 2022-23. Despite some fluctuations, the overall trend suggests an increase in the absolute number of SC households issued job cards under MGNREGS. However, the declining percentage in recent years may indicate changes in the distribution of job cards.

Table – 1

SCHEDULED CASTE HOUSEHOLDS ISSUED JOB CARDS UNDER THE MGNREGS AT ALL INDIA LEVEL FROM 2014-15 TO 2022-23

(Figure in Lakhs)

Year	Number of Scheduled Caste Households issued Job Cards	Total Number of Households issued Job Cards	% of Scheduled Caste Households issued Job Cards in the total	Growth rate of number of Scheduled Caste Households issued Job Cards
2014-15	277.469	1281.565	21.65	-
2015-16	281.819	1311.679	21.49	1.57
2016-17	274.723	1283.415	21.41	-2.52
2017-18	272.199	1285.617	21.17	-0.92
2018-19	279.44	1336.817	20.90	2.66
2019-20	293.427	1408.771	20.83	5.01
2020-21	312.641	1548.042	20.20	6.55
2021-22	318.784	1634.839	19.50	1.96
2022-23	282.96	1467.71	19.28	-11.24

Source: Official website of the MGNREGS, Ministry of Rural Development, Government of India, i.e., https://nrega.nic.in/

2. Scheduled Caste Households provided employment

Table – 2 provides a comprehensive overview of the employment trends for Scheduled Caste households under the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MGNREGS) in India from the fiscal year 2014-15 to 2022-23. In 2014-15, 94.491 lakh Scheduled Caste households were provided employment out of a total of 412.62 lakh households, constituting 22.90 per cent of the total employment beneficiaries under MGNREGS. Over the subsequent years, there was a consistent increase in the number of Scheduled Caste households provided employment, reaching 110.68 lakh in 2015-16, representing a growth rate of 17.13 per cent. This positive trend continued in the following years, with 113.508 lakh households employed in 2016-17, reflecting a growth rate of 2.56 per cent.

However, the upward trajectory started to decelerate in 2017-18, with a slight decrease in the number of Scheduled Caste households employed to 111.187 lakh. This decline persisted in 2018-19, with 110.395 lakh households, and the percentage of Scheduled Caste households provided employment dropped to 20.97 per cent, indicating a negative growth rate of -0.71 per cent. Despite this setback, there was a rebound in 2019-20, where the number of employed Scheduled Caste households rose to 115.543 lakh, marking a growth rate of 4.66 per cent.

The most notable surge occurred in 2020-21, with 155.168 lakh Scheduled Caste households employed, showcasing a substantial growth rate of 34.29 per cent. This peak, however, was followed by a sharp decline in 2021-22, as the number of employed households dropped to 144.014 lakh, resulting in a negative growth rate of -7.19 per cent. This trend continued into 2022-23, with a further decrease to 122.355 lakh households, and the percentage of Scheduled Caste households provided employment fell to 19.80 per cent, indicating a significant negative growth rate of -15.04 per cent.

In summary, the analysis reveals fluctuations in the employment of Scheduled Caste households under MGNREGS, with periods of growth and decline.

Table – 2

NUMBER OF SCHEDULED CASTE HOUSEHOLDS PROVIDED EMPLOYMENT UNDER THE MGNREGS AT ALL INDIA LEVEL FROM 2014-15 TO 2022-23

(Figure in Lakhs)

Year	Number of Scheduled Caste Households provided employment	Total Number of Households provided employment	% of Scheduled Caste Households provided employment in the total	Growth rate of number of Scheduled Caste Households provided employment
2014-15	94.491	412.62	22.90	-
2015-16	110.68	481.133	23.00	17.13
2016-17	113.508	511.508	22.19	2.56
2017-18	111.187	511.357	21.74	-2.04
2018-19	110.395	526.36	20.97	-0.71
2019-20	115.543	547.951	21.09	4.66
2020-21	155.168	754.496	20.57	34.29
2021-22	144.014	725.256	19.86	-7.19
2022-23	122.355	618.086	19.80	-15.04

Source: Official website of the MGNREGS, Ministry of Rural Development, Government of India, i.e., https://nrega.nic.in/

3. Persondays generated

Table -3 presents data on the persondays of Scheduled Caste (SC) households under the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MGNREGS) at the all-India level for the years 2014-15 to 2022-23. In 2014-15, SC households contributed 3,748.598 lakh persondays, constituting 22.63 per cent of the total persondays generated (16,563.672 lakh). The subsequent year, 2015-16, witnessed a significant increase to 5,303.435 lakh persondays, reflecting a growth rate of 41.48 per cent, while maintaining a similar percentage (22.57 per cent) of the total persondays.

However, from 2016-17 to 2018-19, there was a fluctuating trend. In 2016-17, the persondays for SC households decreased to 5,071.896 lakh, with a reduced percentage (21.56 per cent) of the total persondays. The subsequent year, 2017-18, saw a slight decrease to 5,069.311 lakh persondays, but the percentage remained relatively stable at 21.70 per cent. In 2018-19, there was a notable rise to 5,585.624 lakh persondays, accounting for 20.86 per cent of the total persondays, indicating a growth rate of 10.19 per cent.

The years 2019-20 to 2022-23 displayed a contrasting pattern. In 2019-20, persondays for SC households decreased to 5,409.141 lakh, with a reduced percentage (20.40 per cent) of the total persondays, reflecting a negative growth rate of -3.16 per cent. The subsequent year, 2020-21, witnessed a substantial increase to 7,725.716 lakh persondays, constituting 19.87 per cent of the total persondays, and indicating a notable growth rate of 42.83 per cent. However, this positive trend was reversed in 2021-22, with persondays decreasing to 6,960.311 lakh and the percentage dropping to 19.17 per cent, resulting in a negative growth rate of -9.91 per cent. The latest data for 2022-23 indicates a further decline to 5,777.761 lakh persondays, constituting 19.54 per cent of the total persondays and reflecting a substantial negative growth rate of -16.99 per cent.

Table – 3
PERSONDAYS OF THE SCHEDULED CASTE HOUSEHOLDS UNDER THE MGNREGS AT ALL INDIA LEVEL FROM 2014-15 TO 2022-23

(Figure in Lakhs)

Year	Number of Persondays of the Scheduled Caste Households	Total Number of Persondays generated	% persondays of the Scheduled Caste Households in the total	Growth rate of persondays of Scheduled Caste Households
2014-15	3748.598	16563.672	22.63	-
2015-16	5303.435	23494.438	22.57	41.48
2016-17	5071.896	23519.323	21.56	-4.37
2017-18	5069.311	23364.311	21.70	-0.05
2018-19	5585.624	26776.666	20.86	10.19
2019-20	5409.141	26520.717	20.40	-3.16
2020-21	7725.716	38878.948	19.87	42.83
2021-22	6960.311	36313.074	19.17	-9.91
2022-23	5777.761	29565.068	19.54	-16.99

Source: Official website of the MGNREGS, Ministry of Rural Development, Government of India, i.e., https://nrega.nic.in/

4. Families completed 100 days of employment

Table -4 provides a detailed overview of the participation of Scheduled Caste families in completing 100 days of employment under the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MGNREGS) at the all-India level from the fiscal year 2014-15 to 2022-23. Over this period, the total number of Scheduled Caste families completing 100 days of employment exhibited fluctuating trends, indicating variability in their engagement with the program. In the initial year, 2014-15, the data shows that 5.3 lakh Scheduled Caste families completed 100 days of employment. Subsequently, there was a significant surge in participation during the fiscal year 2015-16, with a remarkable 98.72 per cent increase, reaching 10.532 lakh families. However, this upward trajectory was not sustained, as the following year, 2016-17, witnessed a notable decline of 20.22 per cent, bringing the number down to 8.402 lakh families. This pattern continued with further reductions in 2017-18 and 2019-20, indicating a fluctuating trend in participation.

The fiscal year 2018-19 stands out as it recorded a substantial increase of 80.30 per cent, with 10.89 lakh Scheduled Caste families completing 100 days of employment. The subsequent year, 2019-20, saw another decline of 33.69 per cent, reaching 7.221 lakh families. The highest recorded participation occurred in 2020-21, with 14.118 lakh families completing 100 days of employment, representing a growth rate of 95.51 per cent. However, this peak was not sustained, and the following years, 2021-22 and 2022-23, experienced declines of 22.86 per cent and 37.97 per cent, respectively. The percentage analysis indicates the proportion of Scheduled Caste families completing 100 days of employment in the total, with percentages ranging from 17.79 per cent in 2019-20 to 21.76 per cent in 2015-16. The lack of a clear upward or downward trend in these percentages suggests fluctuations in the level of participation by Scheduled Caste families in MGNREGS.

Furthermore, the growth rate analysis reveals the dynamic nature of participation, with growth rates fluctuating significantly over the years. Notably, negative growth rates in 2016-17, 2017-18, 2019-20, 2021-22, and 2022-23 indicate a decline in the number of Scheduled Caste families completing 100 days of employment during those specific years.

Table – 4
SCHEDULED CASTE FAMILIES COMPLETED 100 DAYS OF EMPLOYMENT UNDER THE MGNREGS AT ALL INDIA LEVEL FROM 2014-15 TO 2022-23

(Figure in Lakhs)

Year	Number of Scheduled Caste families completed 100 days of employment	Total Number of families completed 100 days of employment	% of Scheduled Caste families completed 100 days of employment in the total	Growth rate of Scheduled Caste families completed 100 days of employment
2014-15	5.3	24.744	21.42	-
2015-16	10.532	48.407	21.76	98.72
2016-17	8.402	39.815	21.10	-20.22
2017-18	6.04	29.542	20.45	-28.11
2018-19	10.89	52.512	20.74	80.30
2019-20	7.221	40.595	17.79	-33.69
2020-21	14.118	71.953	19.62	95.51
2021-22	10.89	59.146	18.41	-22.86
2022-23	6.755	35.975	18.78	-37.97

Source: Official website of the MGNREGS, Ministry of Rural Development, Government of India, i.e., https://nrega.nic.in/

Conclusion

In conclusion, the analysis of data pertaining to Scheduled Caste households' engagement with the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MGNREGS) from 2014-15 to 2022-23 reveals a nuanced and dynamic landscape. The study focused on key indicators such as the issuance of job cards, employment provided, persondays generated, and the number of families completing 100 days of employment. The issuance of job cards to Scheduled Caste households exhibited an overall increasing trend in absolute numbers over the years. However, a declining percentage in recent years suggests a potential shift in the distribution of job cards among different demographic groups.

The employment trends for Scheduled Caste households showed periods of both growth and decline. While there was a consistent increase in the number of households employed from 2014-15 to 2020-21, a significant drop in subsequent years, particularly in 2021-22 and 2022-23, indicates a degree of volatility in the program's impact on Scheduled Caste employment. The persondays generated by Scheduled Caste households demonstrated fluctuating patterns, with periods of growth and decline. Despite variations, Scheduled Caste households consistently contributed a substantial percentage of total persondays, indicating their active participation in MGNREGS. Participation in completing 100 days of employment displayed a dynamic trend, with significant increases in some years followed by declines in others. The percentage analysis and growth rates highlighted the variability in the level of participation by Scheduled Caste families, with negative growth rates indicating a decline in specific years.

In summary, the MGNREGS has witnessed shifts and fluctuations in its impact on Scheduled Caste households over the years. The findings emphasize the importance of continued monitoring, evaluation, and targeted interventions to ensure equitable and sustained benefits for Scheduled Caste communities within the framework of the program.

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