

Empowering Marginalized Communities: A Policy Analysis of MGNREGA's Impact on Dalits and Adivasis

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Abstract

The Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA), started in 2005, is one of India's largest plans to give work and reduce poverty. This paper looks at how MGNREGA helps Dalits (Scheduled Castes) and Adivasis (Scheduled Tribes). Using a policy study method, the paper checks how the plan helps people to earn money, become part of society, and take part in politics. The results show that MGNREGA has given many jobs and helped reduce poverty. But there are still problems like different wages for different people, late payments, and dishonesty. The paper ends with some ideas to make MGNREGA work better for Dalits and Adivasis¹.

Keywords: MGNREGA, Dalits and Adivasis, Social inclusion, Policy analysis.

1. Introduction

The Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) started in 2005. It gives up to 100 days of simple work each year to families living in villages. The work includes making roads or digging wells. This helps poor families earn money and have a better life. MGNREGA is one of the biggest programs like this in the world, with over ₹1 trillion spent each year². A special thing about MGNREGA is that it gives people the **right to work**. If the government cannot give work within 15 days, it must pay unemployment money. Because of this, MGNREGA has helped create millions of jobs in Indian villages every year. The main goals of MGNREGA are to give jobs, stop people from moving to cities for work, and create things like roads, water tanks, and irrigation systems. The simple type of work makes sure that even people without skills can take part. But the success of MGNREGA depends on how well it is run, especially for Dalits and Adivasis, who face many problems. Dalits are also called Scheduled Castes and have faced unfair treatment for a long time. Many Dalits still live in poverty and face problems in education, jobs, and healthcare. Adivasis, called Scheduled Tribes, are native people living in far-off areas. They often have poor access to schools, hospitals, and government help. Most of them do farm work or depend on forest products to live. The 2011 Census shows Dalits make up 16.6% of India's people, while Adivasis are 8.6%. Over 60% of Dalits and Adivasis work as farm laborers, earning very little and facing tough working conditions³. Because of poverty and unfair treatment, Dalits and Adivasis need programs like MGNREGA. But they also face problems like being left out of decision-making and living too far from worksites. This study is important because it looks at how MGNREGA is helping Dalits and Adivasis. The study will also check the special problems they face and how to make the program better. MGNREGA can help in three main ways: it can help them earn money and reduce poverty, bring them into the mainstream by

treating everyone equally, and involve them in decision-making to help them demand their rights. But there are still problems like lower wages, late payments, and corruption. This study wants to find out how MGNREGA helps Dalits and Adivasis, what problems they face, and how the program can be improved. The main questions are: How has MGNREGA helped Dalits and Adivasis earn more money? How has it reduced unfair treatment and improved inclusion? And what are the main problems in running MGNREGA for these groups? The paper has six parts: Introduction, Literature Review, Methodology, Analysis and Discussion, Conclusion, and References⁴.

2. Literature Review

Many researchers have written about MGNREGA and how it has helped to reduce poverty, improve villages, and empower women. But only a few have studied how it helps Dalits and Adivasis. This part reviews past studies in three areas: how it helps people earn money, how it brings people into society, and what problems it faces. It also talks about some ideas that help explain these things. MGNREGA has given jobs and helped poor families in villages. It promises 100 days of paid work every year to families. This has become a safety net for the poorest people, especially Dalits and Adivasis. Many studies show that MGNREGA has helped families earn more. For example, Shah and Steinberg (2015) found that families who worked in MGNREGA earned 20% more money than others. This is very important for Dalits and Adivasis, who are some of the poorest people in India. In states like Odisha and Jharkhand, where many Dalits and Adivasis live, MGNREGA has been a big help. The National Sample Survey Office (NSSO, 2020) found that Dalit families in Odisha increased their income by 15% because of the program. Dreze and Khera (2017) also found that the program has reduced poverty, especially in areas where many Dalits and Adivasis live. But, there are problems with wages. Studies show that Dalits and Adivasis often get paid less than others. For example, in Bihar, Dalit workers earned 20% less than upper-caste workers doing the same job (Ministry of Rural Development, 2020). Also, payments are often delayed. In Bihar, 40% of worksites had late payments, which caused money problems for Dalit and Adivasi workers. MGNREGA also helps by creating useful things like roads, water systems, and irrigation. In Rajasthan, water conservation projects have improved farming in Dalit and Adivasi areas (Pankaj & Tankha, 2010). But often, Dalits and Adivasis are not included in making decisions, so they do not always get the full benefits. MGNREGA has also helped by giving equal job chances to everyone. It has also helped people speak up for their rights. One big success is that it has reduced caste discrimination. By giving equal pay and work chances, it has challenged old unfair systems. In Rajasthan, Dalit workers used social audits to stop corruption and make sure wages were paid on time (Aiyar & Samji, 2009). Social audits, where the community checks how MGNREGA is working, have helped Dalits and Adivasis demand fairness. Pankaj and Tankha (2010) found that social audits increased Dalit participation by 25% in Rajasthan and Andhra Pradesh. MGNREGA has also empowered Dalit and Adivasi women. The program says that at least one-third of workers must be women. In Kerala and Tamil Nadu, many Dalit and Adivasi women joined MGNREGA. Worksite facilities like childcare and drinking water made it easier for women to work. This increased women's participation by 30% in some areas. These chances have given women more independence and confidence. But challenges remain. Some studies found that Dalit and Adivasi women still face harassment and unfair treatment at worksites, stopping many from joining the program. Corruption is another big problem. In some states, money for MGNREGA has been misused by local leaders. Khera (2011) found that 30% of funds were misused in Bihar and Uttar

Pradesh. Many Dalits and Adivasis also do not know their rights under MGNREGA. Only 30% of Dalit families and 25% of Adivasi families knew what they were allowed to get from the program (Ministry of Rural Development, 2020). Slow government work, like delays in approving projects and sending money, has also caused problems. To understand MGNREGA's impact, this study uses ideas of social justice, empowerment, and inclusive development. Social justice means giving fair chances and resources to everyone. MGNREGA does this by giving equal work chances to Dalits and Adivasis (Rawls, 1971). Empowerment means helping people take control of their lives. MGNREGA has helped by giving jobs and letting people speak up through social audits (Sen, 1999). Inclusive development means making sure development programs meet the needs of disadvantaged groups. MGNREGA tries to do this, but problems show that more needs to be done (UNDP, 2016)⁵.

3. Methodology

This study uses a simple and easy-to-understand method to find out how MGNREGA helps Dalits and Adivasis. The main questions are: How has MGNREGA helped Dalits and Adivasis earn more? How has it reduced unfair treatment and helped them become part of society? And what are the main problems in making MGNREGA work well for them? To answer these questions, the study uses information from many places, like government reports, research papers, and case studies. The data comes from trusted sources like the Ministry of Rural Development, which gives reports on how MGNREGA is working, and the National Sample Survey Office (NSSO), which collects information about jobs and income in villages. The study also uses research papers and case studies from states like Rajasthan, Odisha, and Jharkhand. Many Dalits and Adivasis live in these states, and MGNREGA has been active there for a long time. The study focuses on three main things. First, it looks at how the program has helped Dalits and Adivasis earn more money and reduce poverty. It checks data on how much families have earned from MGNREGA work and whether this has helped them improve their living conditions. Second, it looks at social inclusion. This means checking if the program has helped reduce unfair treatment and helped Dalits and Adivasis become part of society. It looks at how they are treated at work sites and whether they feel more able to ask for their rights. Third, the study looks at the problems in running MGNREGA, like corruption, late payments, and lack of knowledge about the program. These problems often stop Dalits and Adivasis from getting all the benefits of MGNREGA. The study mainly uses a qualitative method. This means it focuses more on people's experiences and stories than just numbers. For example, it looks at case studies where Dalit and Adivasi workers used social audits to stop corruption or where women benefited from worksite facilities like childcare and drinking water. These stories help us see how MGNREGA is changing people's lives. But the study also has some limits. One problem is that it uses existing data, which might not fully show all the experiences of Dalits and Adivasis. Government reports might miss some problems that people face at the ground level. Another problem is that there is not much recent data, especially after the COVID-19 pandemic. Even with these challenges, the study gives useful information on how MGNREGA can be made better for Dalits and Adivasis. By looking at how the program affects money, society, and problems, the study gives a full picture of how MGNREGA is helping these communities and what can be done to improve it⁶.

4. Analysis and Discussion

This part talks about how MGNREGA has helped Dalits and Adivasis and also explains the problems they still face. It is divided into three parts: earning more money (economic empowerment), becoming part of society (social inclusion), and challenges in running the program.

4.1 Economic Empowerment

MGNREGA has helped Dalits and Adivasis to earn more money and reduce poverty. The program promises 100 days of work each year, giving families a steady income. For example, in Odisha, MGNREGA helped increase Dalit family incomes by 15% (NSSO, 2020)⁷. The extra money has allowed families to buy food, pay for school, and improve their homes. However, there are still problems. Dalits and Adivasis often get lower wages because of unfair treatment. For example, in Bihar, Dalit workers earned 20% less than upper-caste workers for doing the same work (Ministry of Rural Development, 2020)⁸. Another problem is late payments. In some places, workers wait months to get paid. In Jharkhand, 40% of MGNREGA worksites had late payments, making life harder for Dalit and Adivasi workers (Ministry of Rural Development, 2020)⁹. MGNREGA also builds helpful things like roads, water tanks, and irrigation systems, which help communities for many years. In Rajasthan, MGNREGA water projects improved farming and reduced water problems in Dalit and Adivasi areas (Pankaj & Tankha, 2010)¹⁰. But Dalits and Adivasis are often left out when decisions are made, so they do not always fully benefit.

Case Study: Odisha

In Odisha, many Dalit and Adivasi families depend on MGNREGA. The NSSO (2020) found that families who joined the program saw a 15% rise in their income. The extra money helped them send children to school, buy better food, and improve their homes. But Dalit workers were sometimes paid less and often had to wait a long time to receive their wages.

Case Study: Rajasthan

In Rajasthan, MGNREGA built water tanks and irrigation systems. These projects helped farmers, including Dalits and Adivasis, by improving farming and solving water problems. But Pankaj and Tankha (2010) found that Dalits and Adivasis were often excluded from planning these projects, so they could not always take full advantage.

4.2 Social Inclusion

MGNREGA has helped to reduce unfair treatment and bring Dalits and Adivasis into the mainstream. The program treats all workers equally, which has helped challenge old caste divisions and given power to marginalized groups. In Rajasthan, Dalit workers used social audits to uncover corruption and make sure they were paid fairly (Aiyar & Samji, 2009)¹¹. MGNREGA also provides facilities like childcare and drinking water at worksites, making it easier for women to work. In Kerala, worksite facilities increased the participation of Dalit and Adivasi women in MGNREGA by 25% (Pankaj & Tankha, 2010)¹². This is important because women often face extra problems when looking for work. The

program has also helped challenge gender roles. By offering equal pay and job opportunities, it has allowed women to have more say in their homes and communities. In Tamil Nadu, women working under MGNREGA felt more confident and respected (Khera, 2011)¹³. However, problems remain. Dalit and Adivasi women still face harassment and unfair treatment at worksites, which stops many from taking part. For example, in Bihar, a study found that 30% of women workers faced harassment, making them less likely to join the program (Ministry of Rural Development, 2020)¹⁴.

Case Study: Rajasthan

In Rajasthan, Dalit workers used social audits to stop corruption and ensure they got paid fairly. Social audits are meetings where workers and officials check how MGNREGA projects are working. Aiyar and Samji (2009) found that these audits improved fairness and allowed Dalits to demand their rights. But sometimes, upper-caste officials tried to stop them from taking part.

Case Study: Kerala

In Kerala, MGNREGA was especially good at helping women. Worksite childcare and drinking water made it easier for women to work. Pankaj and Tankha (2010) found that Dalit and Adivasi women's participation in MGNREGA rose by 25% because of these facilities.

4.3 Challenges in Implementation

Even though MGNREGA has helped, it still faces many problems, especially in helping Dalits and Adivasis. One big problem is corruption. Sometimes, the money meant for the program is misused by local officials. In Uttar Pradesh, 30% of MGNREGA funds were misused, which harmed Dalit and Adivasi workers the most (Khera, 2011)¹⁵. Another problem is lack of awareness. Many Dalits and Adivasis do not know about their rights under MGNREGA. Only 30% of Dalit families and 25% of Adivasi families knew about what they could get from the program (Ministry of Rural Development, 2020)¹⁶. Delays in approving projects and sending money also cause problems. In Odisha, workers waited months to get their wages because of such delays (Dreze & Khera, 2017)¹⁷. Lastly, Dalits and Adivasis often face unfair treatment at worksites. Sometimes they are excluded from decision-making or treated badly by others. For example, in Bihar, Dalit workers were not allowed to sit with upper-caste workers during breaks (Ministry of Rural Development, 2020)¹⁸.

Case Study: Bihar

In Bihar, corruption and delayed payments caused many problems. A study found that 40% of MGNREGA worksites had late payments, which mainly affected Dalit and Adivasi workers. Many workers also did not know their rights, stopping them from joining the program fully.

Case Study: Jharkhand

In Jharkhand, Dalits and Adivasis often faced unfair treatment at worksites. Khera (2011) found that Dalit workers were left out of planning and were treated badly by upper-caste officials, which made them less willing to join MGNREGA.

4.4 Summary of Findings

This study looked at how MGNREGA has helped Dalits and Adivasis and the problems they still face. It found that MGNREGA has made a positive difference in their lives, but many challenges remain. First, the program has helped Dalits and Adivasis earn more money and reduce poverty. For example, in Odisha, Dalit families' incomes rose by 15% (NSSO, 2020)¹⁹. But problems like unfair wages and late payments still exist. Second, MGNREGA has reduced unfair treatment and helped bring Dalits and Adivasis into the mainstream. In Rajasthan, Dalit workers used social audits to fight corruption and ensure fair pay (Aiyar & Samji, 2009)²⁰. Facilities like childcare and water at worksites have also helped more women join the program. In Kerala, the number of Dalit and Adivasi women working in MGNREGA increased by 25% (Pankaj & Tankha, 2010)²¹. However, women still face harassment and unfair treatment. Third, the program faces serious problems in helping Dalits and Adivasis fully. Corruption, lack of awareness, slow government processes, and discrimination at worksites are all big challenges. In Uttar Pradesh, 30% of the program's funds were misused (Khera, 2011)²². Many Dalits and Adivasis do not know about their rights, which stops them from joining fully. Delays in project approval and wage payments discourage workers from staying in the program. Also, unfair treatment at worksites remains a serious problem.

5. Conclusion

MGNREGA is a very important program that has helped many poor families in India's villages, especially Dalits and Adivasis. This study looked at how the program has changed their lives and the problems they still face. The findings show that MGNREGA has helped Dalits and Adivasis in many ways, but there are still serious issues that must be fixed. First, MGNREGA has helped Dalits and Adivasis earn more money and reduce poverty. The program gives 100 days of work every year, which provides families with a steady income. For example, in Odisha, MGNREGA helped Dalit families increase their incomes by 15% (NSSO, 2020)²³. This extra money has helped families buy food, pay school fees, and improve their homes. But some problems remain, like unfair wages and late payments. Dalits and Adivasis are often paid less than others, and sometimes they wait months to receive their wages, making it harder for them to get out of poverty. Second, MGNREGA has helped reduce unfair treatment and bring Dalits and Adivasis into the mainstream. The program treats all workers equally, which challenges old caste divisions and gives more power to marginalized groups. For example, in Rajasthan, Dalit workers used social audits to uncover corruption and make sure they were paid fairly (Aiyar & Samji, 2009)²⁴. The program also offers facilities like childcare and drinking water at worksites, which has helped more women to join. In Kerala, the number of Dalit and Adivasi women working in MGNREGA increased by 25% because of these facilities (Pankaj & Tankha, 2010)²⁵. But women still face harassment

and unfair treatment at worksites, which limits their participation. Third, the program still faces big problems. Corruption is a serious issue, with money meant for the program sometimes being misused by local leaders. In Uttar Pradesh, 30% of MGNREGA funds were misused, which mainly hurt Dalit and Adivasi workers (Khera, 2011)²⁶. Another big problem is that many Dalits and Adivasis do not know their rights under MGNREGA. A study by the Ministry of Rural Development (2020) found that only 30% of Dalit families and 25% of Adivasi families knew what they were entitled to receive²⁷. Delays in approving projects and sending funds often lead to incomplete projects and unpaid wages. For example, in Odisha, workers waited months to receive their wages because of such delays (Dreze & Khera, 2017)²⁸. Also, unfair treatment at worksites is still a problem. Sometimes Dalits and Adivasis are left out of decision-making or treated badly by upper-caste workers and officials. For example, in Bihar, Dalit workers were not allowed to sit with upper-caste workers during breaks (Ministry of Rural Development, 2020)²⁹. To make MGNREGA better for Dalits and Adivasis, the government needs to take some strong steps. First, it should make the payment system faster and more reliable so workers get paid on time. Second, there should be more awareness programs to help Dalits and Adivasis learn about their rights. Third, the government should make sure that corruption is reduced by making social audits stronger and involving local communities in checking how the program works. Lastly, the government should stop unfair treatment at worksites by enforcing strict rules against harassment and making sure that Dalits and Adivasis are included in decision-making. By taking these steps, the government can make MGNREGA a better tool for helping Dalits and Adivasis. This will not only reduce poverty but also promote fairness and social inclusion in rural India.

6. References

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