

Rural employment guaranteed scheme: A study in Churachandpur district of Manipur

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■ **ABSTRACT** : Rural employment guarantee programme is an important element for a State like Manipur where employment opportunities are less, there are no big industries and unsustainable agriculture production is practiced. Poverty is the main hindrances for the development of the State. The Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme aims to provide the rural people with short-term employment in which they could get direct wages and long-term employment opportunity for the future if the permissible works are designed acknowledging the needs of the poor. The study was carried out in 2 blocks of Churachandpur district of Manipur namely Tuibuong block and Henglep block. The study focussed on the awareness level of beneficiaries, its livelihood impact and the role of Gram Panchayat (GP) in provisioning and implementation of the programme. The study found that majority of the beneficiaries were aware about their rights under employment guarantee programme except for getting employment within 15 days, getting wages within 15 days of work done and getting unemployment allowance. The programme has enabled the beneficiaries to have two square meals a day, reduce abject poverty and search for other means of work. However, untimely payment of wages is the major problem faced by beneficiaries in both the blocks. Gram Panchayat played an important role in provisioning and implementing the programme in both the selected blocks by registering, issuing job cards, providing employment and payment of wages. Development work was taken up such as water conservation, plantation, horticulture, rural connectivity and flood protection by GP. Nevertheless, better implementation of the programme at each level of governance will further enhance social, environment and economic development of the district.

■ **KEY WORDS**: Awareness, Livelihood impact, Provisions, Implementation

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Wage employment programmes have been an important element for generating employment opportunities for the growing labour force in our country. Around 22 per cent of the India's population lived below poverty line in 2011-2012. The magnitude

of rural poverty in 2011-2012 was estimated to be 216.65 million. And more than 66 per cent of the country's labour force is engaged in agriculture and allied activities (Tripathy, 2014). And more than 75 per cent of poor people reside in villages where most of them are daily

wagers, landless laborers and self-employed house holders (George, 2002). Recognising the needs of the rural poor, the Government of India (GOI) restructured the poverty alleviation programme since their inception (Anonymous, n.d). Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) is the latest initiative taken up by the GOI in the year 2005. Initially it was implemented in 2 Feb, 2006, in 200 most backward districts of the country and was extended to additional 330 districts in 2007-2008. The remaining districts have been notified with effect from 1st April, 2008 (Ministry of Rural Development, Government of India 2008; Singh, 2008 and Yojana, 2009). The act is now being implemented in 626 districts of our country (Tripathy, 2013). MGNREGS was launched in Tamenglong district of Manipur in the 1st Phase with effect from 1st April 2006. It was extended in two districts *viz.*, Churachandpur and Chandel districts in the 2nd Phase in 2007-08 (Govt. of Manipur, 2012). The objective of MGNREGA is to enhance livelihood of the rural poor by providing 100 days of guaranteed wage employment in a year to every household whose adult member volunteer to do unskilled manual work (Ministry of Rural Development, Government of India 2008 and 2013) and with auxiliary objective of generating productive assets, protecting environment, reducing rural-urban migration and fostering social equity (Raghavan *et al.*, 2008). Economic empowerment gives people a voice, both within and outside households. Meaningful employment makes them feel that they belong to the society and increases their confidence, which is necessary for social and human development. Unemployed people feel left out and humiliated and this outsider syndrome can be detrimental to the society as it can encourage unlawful and divisive activities (Rao, 2008). Mahatma Gandhi NREGA give priority not just to wage employment but also to activities related to water harvesting, groundwater recharge, drought-proofing, flood protection and rural connectivity etc. (Ministry of Rural Development, Government of India 2006-2010 and 2013; Gupta and Patel, 2015 and Kaur and Randhawa, 2016). It focus on eco-restoration and sustainable livelihoods. MGNREGA has arrived as an unprecedented opportunity for rural India as it guarantees one of the Crucial rights, Right to Work, envisaged in the Article 41 of the Indian Constitution (Ministry of Rural Development, Government of India, 2009).

The study district namely Churachandpur district

of Manipur also commands a huge educated population however, acute problem of unemployment in the government, private and public sector prevails in the State. The educated youth of the district have become more of a liability than an asset for the district (DRDA, 2007-2008). The district population both educated and uneducated with no means of employment heavily depend on agriculture and forest land to earn their living. Agriculture and forest resources have become the sole sources of income available in the district. However, the production are poor due to monsoon condition and non-availability of technology (Copyright, 2013). In the district there are total 61,919 thousand job seekers of which 46,108 are male and 15,811 thousand female (Kangla Online, 2011). The district also lacks the capital or initiative to set up industries or firms in private sector to generate employment. The ever decreasing employment opportunity led to crisis of another kind. Hence, MGNREGS is an important programme for a State like Manipur where the population can get employment and generate income on a sustainable manner if the assets/work to be created are designed according to the future need. MGNREGS also recognised the role of Gram Panchayat (GP) by giving them the right to implement the scheme (Mihir Shah Committee, 2012). The Act is also a significant vehicle for strengthening decentralization and deepening processes of democracy by giving a pivotal role to local governance bodies, the Panchayati Raj Institutions (Ministry of Rural Development and UNDP, 2009). This positive aspect of the government would further enhance success of the programme.

There are a number of studies conducted by various researchers in different States of the country which look at employment generation, infrastructure, income earned, socio-economic impact and so on. But the present study attempts to understand awareness level of beneficiaries regarding their rights and if any livelihood impact has been brought out by MGNREGS, as means to livelihood is a major concern in the selected district. Besides the study also includes Gram Panchayat role in implementation of the programme in order to examine the institutional mechanisms under which the entire programme is being implemented. The problems and prospects of MGNREGA can then be better understood and accordingly necessary measures can be devised to make the programme realize its set objectives.

■ RESEARCH METHODS

The present study was carried out in Manipur, Churachandpur district, which has the highest literacy rate among the hill districts of State, but has high level of unemployment rate. The study was conducted in 2 blocks namely Tuibuong block and Henglep block. Random sampling technique has been used to draw district, blocks, villages and beneficiaries. Within these 2 blocks, 2 villages from each block were selected and 10 households were studied from each of the selected villages, thus making a sample size of 40 households in both the blocks. From Tuibuong block the selected villages were Molnom and D.M. Veng and from Henglep block the selected villages were Molpheitampak and Leinom villages. In addition one member of GP from selected villages has been included in the study making a total sample size of GP to 4. The study was conducted in the financial year 2009-2010. A semi-structured interview schedule was used for the beneficiaries and Gram Panchayat comprising of close-ended and open-ended questions to gather information. Both quantitative and qualitative data was collected to study the Beneficiaries and Gram Panchayat with respect to provisions and its implementation of the programme. The objectives of the study include awareness level of beneficiaries which focuses on obtaining job card free of cost, getting work within 15 days of application, getting provisions like crèche, drinking water, first aid facilities and wages paid within 15 days of work done. Livelihood impact were studied with respect to enrolling children in school, being able to provide two square meals a day, reduction of abject poverty and better housing/settlement. On the other hand role of Gram Panchayat on implementation of the programme was studied on the aspects of registering, issuing job cards, providing employment and payment of wages. Besides, the researcher also studied the type of works taken up in all the selected villages.

■ RESEARCH FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The findings of the present study as well as relevant discussion have been presented under following heads :

Beneficiaries (Tuiboung Block and Henglep Block):

Regarding awareness level of beneficiaries about their right to obtain Job Card free of cost, majority of the respondents from both the blocks were aware about

this right. From Tuibuong block (70%) and Henglep block (85%) of beneficiaries were aware about this rights. Further all the beneficiaries in both the blocks obtained Job Card free of cost. However, the study found that beneficiaries in both the blocks paid for the photograph which they were supposed to be provided without any cost. The beneficiaries paid Rs. 10-15 for the photograph and most of the beneficiaries reported that they did not mind paying for it as they were getting employment which had never happened before. As far as beneficiaries getting work within 15 days of their application is concerned, beneficiaries awareness in both the blocks was very low (95% from Tuiboung block and 90% from Henglep block). Even though majority of the beneficiaries in both the blocks were not aware of this, they were not deprived of their right by the GP in providing employment within specified time. Awareness on unemployment allowance is very low in both the blocks (Tuibuong block 35% and Henglep block 25%). Besides, it was found that there was no provision of unemployment allowance in both the blocks. Regarding awareness about getting provisions like crèche, drinking water and first aid facilities, beneficiaries from Tuiboung block were more aware than Henglep block (70% and 65%, respectively). In Tuiboung block it was also found that these provisions were provided to beneficiaries in both the selected villages. However, crèche provisioning was the least provided. As per the Gram Panchayat from Molnom village, crèche used to be provided in the initial year 2007-2008, however due to mismanagement and with the agreement between the beneficiaries, the women beneficiaries who have children below 6 years have to look after their respective children and were given a relaxed work. In D.M. veng beneficiaries reported that crèche provisioning was not available. And as per the GP if children below 6 years were present at the worksite, the respective mothers were given the responsibility to look after their children. From Henglep block it was found that though beneficiaries were aware about this right, provisions of crèche was not found in one of the selected villages. Women beneficiaries from Molpheitampak village reported that they do not go to work when there is nobody at home to look after their children. However, in Leinom village women with children were allowed to participate in work as they were given relaxed work. No provision of crèche is a hindrance for women in participating in MGNREGS work.

Most of the beneficiaries from Tuiboung block and Henglep block were aware about getting their wages within 15 days of work done. However, wages were not provided as specified by the Act. Gram Panchayat in both the blocks reported that wages were provided as and when they received the fund from the block level. Delay in wages occurred for more than 2 weeks, sometimes a month and even for 2 to 3 months. This was a major concern faced by the beneficiaries in the selected district as they were earning for their day to day living.

With regard to livelihood impact, MGNREGS did not help the beneficiaries in both the selected blocks in enrolling their children in school. However, in some instances they used the amount earned under MGNREGS for buying books and paying their tuition fees. Majority of the respondents from Tuiboung block reported that MGNREGS wages enabled them to have two square meals a day. However Henglep block beneficiaries responded that they did not depend on MGNREGS wages for their daily meal as wages were not provided to them on time which caused hardship for them and also they had to search for other means of work to sustain themselves. Most of the beneficiaries from Henglep block practiced Jhum cultivation for their living. Poverty was found to be more prevalent in Henglep block than Tuiboung block. MGNREGS had helped both the blocks in reducing abject poverty and search for other means of work (which was reported by 75 % of beneficiaries from Tuiboung block and 60% from Henglep block). The income earned under MGNREGS had helped 30 per cent of the beneficiaries from Tuiboung block to have better housing as they could pay for their rent. And the rest of the beneficiaries in both the blocks were found to have their self-owned house so they did not spend MGNREGS wages on housing.

GP's role in provisions and implementation of the programme (in both the blocks) :

The study found that in both the blocks namely Tuiboung block and Henglep block the GPs registered, issued Job card and provided employment to all the interested households in their villages though writing application was not practiced. However, GP from Leinom village, Henglep block reported that as the number of houses in their village kept increasing every year, around 30 households from his villages did not get Job card and to this effect a memorandum was submitted to Department of Rural Development of the district but

there was no positive response given to the G.P. This inaction by the higher level officer has led to misunderstanding between the GP and the villagers. All registered households in Tuiboung block were provided 50 days of wage employment and this number 65 days in Henglep block. The 100 days employment guaranteed in a year as envisaged under the Act was not fully provided in both the selected blocks. And with respect to this finding the block level officers were consulted and it was reported that due to crop failure and food grain scarcity caused by bamboo flowering, funds were concentrated mainly in the three most affected blocks namely Thanlon, Tipaimukh and Vangai, who were provided 100 days of employment. And the two partially affected blocks of Singat and Henglep were provided 65 days of employment and the blocks not affected due to bamboo flowering were provided 50 days of employment. Regarding untimely payment of wages GPs reported that they provided the wages to the beneficiaries as and when they received the fund from higher level. The scheme not only provided wage employment to the selected villagers but also ensured sustainable development by undertaking works like water conservation, drought proofing, flood protection, land development, horticulture and rural connectivity. The common type of works taken up in both the blocks were inter-village road connectivity, flood protection-drainage and culvert whereas water conservation pond and drought proofing-tree plantation were taken up by Molnom village and D.M. veng of Tuiboung block, respectively. On the other hand, fishery pond and traditional water conservation pond were taken up by Molpheitampak village and horticulture-ginger plantation and land development has been taken up by Leinom village of Henglep block. These works were taken up in the initial three years of MGNREGS implementation in the selected villages during 2007-2009. Rural connectivity was the biggest work taken up during the last three years and it is the pre-requisite of any developmental strategy of the district. The study found that Gram Panchayats played an effective role in implementation of MGNREGS in the selected district.

Conclusion :

It can be concluded that majority of the beneficiaries were aware about their rights except for getting work within 15 days of their application and getting wages within 15 days of work done. Though most

of the beneficiaries were not aware about getting work within 15 days of their application, they were not deprived of their right by the Gram Panchayat in getting employment. On the other hand awareness generation programme for beneficiaries could be initiated and conducted in all the villages. The positive aspect of the scheme is that it also enabled the beneficiaries to arrange two square meals a day and reduced abject poverty as it provided a source of income to them. Some of them who put up in rented accommodation benefited in getting proper housing too. However untimely payment of wages had adversely affected their lives as most of them depended on daily earning for their livelihood. This compelled the rural poor to search for other means of employment in order to sustain their living. The Central Govt. must ensure timely disbursement of funds, and the State government must then ensure timely payment of wages to the beneficiaries and ensure 100 days of guaranteed wage employment to the rural poor as envisaged by the Act. Direct benefit transfer should be incorporated for the beneficiaries to ensure timely payment of wages. The district and block level should also ensure timely and effective grievance redressal, so that all the interested households get employment under MGNREGS. For effective implementation of the scheme monitoring and inspection of work should be frequently conducted by State, district and block level officers. This will also lead to good quality work and timely acknowledgement of difficulties or problems faced at each level. Crèche provisioning should be made mandatory so that women with children are able to participate without any hindrance. The scheme not only provided income to the beneficiaries, it also helped in development of the selected villages by taking up works like water conservation, plantation, horticulture, rural connectivity and flood protection by building culverts and drainages. Gram Panchayat needs to be more logical in planning work for the future needs of the villagers as they are responsible for implementing work at the grass root level. Sustainable development work like water conservation, plantation, minor irrigation facilities horticulture, should be more focussed upon though it has been practiced, so that it can generate employment and income on a sustainable basis.

Therefore, better implementation of the scheme to take care of the above lacunae through concerted efforts by the Central, State, District, Block level officers and

Gram Panchayat would lead to better quality of life of the rural poor. With better monitoring and implementation MGNREGS can go a long way in achieving sustained social, environment and economic development of the district.

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