

Gains from Short-term Public Works: A Review of Performance of MGNREGA in Tripura

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Abstract

This paper attempts to evaluate the performance of the rural public works programme MGNREGA in Tripura. MGNREGA is not only a basic income guarantee scheme for rural households, particularly during lean agricultural season, it is also a mechanism of income transfer through infrastructure development and promotion of rural markets of production and consumption. Tripura, the third smallest State of India has been consistently a good performer in terms of man-days of employment generated. This paper presents a brief review of the major performance indicators of MGNREGA in Tripura, particularly in terms of employment generation (the primary objective of the Act) and its possible dynamic impact on the basis of secondary data available on government websites and reports. Attempts have also been made to gain some preliminary insights from a pilot survey conducted in 2012 over 48 households in Girania Block in the district of West Tripura.

Keywords: MGNREGA, Tripura, Employment, Multiplier-accelerator Interaction, Agricultural Productivity.

1. Introduction

Since independence, the issue of poverty has always been a major concern of the policymakers in India. About 70%¹ of India's population live in rural areas and about 26%² of rural population belongs to the BPL category. The incidence of poverty in our country is highest among the

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wage-dependent families (Mazumdar, 2010). The majority of the rural poor in India consists of landless agricultural labourers and small and marginal farmers who are also forced to work as agricultural labourers (Radhakrishna, 2006). Moreover, since India is a vast and diverse country, the outreach of economic growth and many of the mainstream poverty alleviation programmes often fail to reach certain geographical pockets. These regions are generally perceived to be remote and inaccessible due to their topography, poor transport infrastructure, lower levels of urbanization and distances from the state capital and growth centres. The farm dependent rural population in these regions are more likely to be marginalized in the process of national development. Any initiative that benefits these sections of people is a landmark step towards inclusive growth and development. Tripura situated in the far northeast of India is inhabited by a significant section of tribal population. This paper explores the consequences of MGNREGA in Tripura mainly on the basis of secondary data available in official websites and reports; attempts have also been made to gain some preliminary insights from a pilot survey conducted in 2012 over 48 households in Girania Block in the district of West Tripura.

2. Rural Public Works in India

2.1 The Background

Elimination of poverty and attainment of self-reliance were the main objectives of India's Fifth Five Year Plan. The Approach Paper to the Fifth Five Year Plan diagnosed unemployment, under-employment and low resource base particularly in agriculture as the main cause of 'abject poverty' in the country.³ Subsequently it was realized that the focus of planning should be employment-oriented rather than being production-oriented – as echoed by S. Chakravarty (1987) – “The solution to the problem of rural poverty will require that small farmers must also be given access to land-augmenting innovation along with a program of well-conceived public works.....many of the specific tasks will need to be done on a decentralized basis.”

Public works programmes in various forms have been in practice in many countries across the world with State playing the role of the 'employer of the last resort (ELR)'. Generally, in the form of non-farm employment, they provide a way for helping the poorer classes to tide over their times of difficulty (such as droughts etc.). Many of the labour-intensive poverty alleviation programmes undertaken in post-independent India are of the same nature.

On recommendation of the Bhagwati Committee (1973), the Government of India, has from time to time implemented various self-employment schemes as well as short-term wage-employment programmes in form of labour-intensive rural public work-fares such as: Employment Guarantee Scheme (1972); Food for Work Programme (1977); National Rural Employment Programme (1980); Integrated Rural Development Programme (1980); Rural Landless Employment Guarantee Programme (1983); Jawahar Rozgar Yojana (1989); Employment Assurance Scheme (1993); National Food for Work Programme (2000); Sampoorna Gramin Rozgar Yojana (2001) and so on. Unfortunately the critical reviews of these programmes suggest that the achievements always fell short of targets due to the reasons such as failure to reach the target-group, little community participation, corruption in handling of funds, low female participation, bureaucratic 'red tapism' etc. Another notable lacuna was that these programmes were not based on 'right to work'- they were just additional employment opportunities provided by the state as and when the resources were available.

2.2 Right to Work

The Constitution of India does not include the right to work under the Fundamental Rights but refers to it under the "directive principles of state policy". Article 39 states that the State should ensure that "the citizens, men and women equally, have the right to an adequate means to livelihood" and that "there is equal pay for equal work for both men and women". Article 41 emphasizes that "the state, shall within the limits of its economic capacity and development, make effective provision for securing right to work..." This should be interpreted in conjunction with Article 21 which provides the 'Fundamental Right to life'. In 1978 the Supreme Court of India ruled that 'life' under Article 21 implies not merely 'animal existence', but would include right to live with human dignity and all other aspects which made life 'meaningful, complete and worth living'. In other words, it was felt that recognition of 'right to work' is necessary to ensure protection of life and personal liberty guaranteed by Article 21 of our Constitution.

The first step towards recognizing people's right to work in India was found in the 'Employment Guarantee Scheme' (EGS) launched by the Government of Maharashtra in 1979. Article 3 of Maharashtra's EGS states that "Every adult person in the rural areas in Maharashtra shall have the right to get guaranteed employment for doing unskilled manual work and to

receive wages thereof weekly, or in any case, not later than a fortnight". Numerous studies indicate that EGS had an impressive impact on employment in the state of Maharashtra compared to other anti-poverty programmes in India. Taking cue from Maharashtra's experience, many civil society groups and human rights activists during the late 1980s and early 1990s, advocated for the introduction of a nation-wide legally binding employment guarantee programme.

The Common Minimum Programme of the United Progressive Alliance Government that came to power in 2004 promised to enact a National Employment Guarantee Act for the poor and lower middle-class households in rural areas. Finally the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA) was passed by the Parliament on August 25, 2005. NREGA found priority policy attention for the Eleventh Plan Period (2007-2012) under a broader objective of 'Bharat Nirman' aiming for resurgence in rural areas. This flagship programme of the government of India was finally launched in February 2, 2006. It is looked upon as a multifarious strategy for inclusive growth – a mechanism of income transfer through development of rural infrastructure and promoting rural markets of production and consumption.⁴

This demand-driven labour-intensive rural work-fare was renamed as Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) on October 2, 2009. It provides legal guarantee for 100 days of employment in every financial year to the adult members of any rural household willing to participate in unskilled manual job at a statutory minimum wage rate. It also maintains that one-third of the stipulated workforce must be women. MGNREGA aims at generation of productive assets, empowerment of rural women, reduction of rural-urban migration, fostering social equity and environmental protection among others. It also focuses on infusing transparency and accountability in governance through people's participation in planning and social audit.⁵ The Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) play the pivotal role in planning, monitoring and the implementation of MGNREGA.

Ever since its implementation, MGNREGA has become a subject of research for a number of scholars. It also appears from the literatures that wherever implemented successfully, the scheme has made a difference in the lives of the beneficiaries (Khera 2009; Ravi 2009; Dutta 2012). But most of the studies are carried out over the major states of the country and

the north eastern states comprising a significant proportion of tribal population and backward classes have been paid little attention to despite performing consistently under the scheme. Nonetheless, the available literatures on northeast subscribe to similar views (Panda, Dutta and Prusty 2009; Rahman and Sheereen 2013; Borah and Bordoloi 2014). Despite wide variation in the performance levels across the districts of Assam, Manipur, Nagaland and Mizoram, the Act, if implemented efficiently, has been found to make significant positive impact on the lives of the beneficiaries: it led to the improvement of rural physical infrastructure, social and economic empowerment of the vulnerable section particularly the women, creation of supplementary income, enhancement of food security, improvement in standard of living including health status of the women, reduction in rural-urban migration and even school drop-out cases. The difficult terrain and topography of the land in this part of the country has been identified as one of the major constraints towards effective implementation of the Act besides the factors such as lack of awareness and perception about the Act, misuse of funds, delay in payments, unavailability of worksite facilities, irregular flow of funds, etc.

2.3 A Brief National Overview of the Performance of MGNREGA

The MGNREGA has potential of eliminating poverty in the long run and broad-base the growth process via multiplier-accelerator interaction (Shah 2009). The additional purchasing power in the rural sector would stimulate investment by generating additional consumption demand. This however requires convergence of MGNREGA with other developmental programmes for rural livelihoods so that the wage employment programme in effect becomes a source of sustainable livelihoods by facilitating self-employment. In other words, the assets to be created shall be productive so as to generate indirect employment opportunities in turn. Thus, the sustenance of the success of MGNREGA in long run largely depends on the magnitude of the scheme's multiplier effects.

Items		Financial Year							
		2006-07	2007-08	2008-09	2009-10	2010-11	2011-12	2012-13	2013-14
Person-days generated(%)	SC	25	27	29	30	31	22	22	23
	ST	36	29	25	21	21	18	18	17
	Women	40	43	48	48	48	47	53	53
Person-days per household		43	42	48	54	47	42	46	44
Budget outlay (in Rs. crores)		11300	12000	30000	39100	40100	40000	33000	33000
Funds spent(percentage of total available fund)		73	82	73	76	73	78	86	87

Source: Report to the People, 2011-12, www.nrega.nic.in

It can be observed from Table-1 that during the initial years a significant proportion of employment has been generated for the vulnerable groups though the trend declined after 2010-11; the person-days generated per household increased till 2009-10 but fell thereafter. Percentage of available funds spent however has shown a considerable increase in FY 2012-13 yet the budget allocation for the programme remains unchanged for the FY 2013-14. Kumaraswamy (2012) and other critics of the MGNREGA however, point out that there is no evidence to support employment multiplier effect due to the scheme; instead of being a source for generating additional income during the lean season for farmers and labourers in rural areas, the scheme has rather encouraged many to leave their traditional jobs to work under the Act. Hence net increase in employment has not been remarkable and the levels of consumption have not altered for the better (Jagannathan 2012).

3. The State of Tripura

Tripura, the third smallest state of India is situated in north eastern part of the country and is surrounded by Bangladesh on three sides. The state shares its eastern border with Assam and Meghalaya. Geographically isolated from the rest of the mainland (Roy 2010), Tripura was once a princely state which became a part of independent India on October 15, 1949 (as a group C category state). It was given the status of a Union Territory in 1963 and was recognized as a state only in 1972.⁶ Its geographical isolation, demographic changes, socio-economic backwardness and the once rampant insurgency-

can be attributed to the partition of British India.

The Partition of Bengal in 1947 had led to heavy influx of impoverished Bengalee refugees into the essentially tribal society of Tripura. It also isolated the state from the rest of India leaving the Siliguri corridor as the only route to access the states in the rest of the country. The rail-heads towards the north, south and west were rendered useless as they fell into East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) after the Partition; with no water transport system and only recent rail and road connectivity by the metre gauge and NH-44, the state has suffered economically due to its isolation.⁷ Tripura is rich in forest resources, with almost 60% of the land covered by forests. It is also the second largest producer of natural rubber in the country. The state has natural gas reserves which are largely unexploited as is the case with the forest resources and rubber plantations.⁸ Only 27% of the total state area is available for cultivation with the average land-holding size of only 0.97 hectare (Roy 2010). The state had four districts viz. West Tripura, North Tripura, South Tripura and Dhalai. For the purpose of further administrative decentralisation, 4 new districts viz. Unokoti, Khowai, Sipahijala and Gomati were created with effect from January 2012 taking the total number of districts to eight. Himanshu (2005) observed that from 1987-88 to 1999-2000, the tribal population was excluded from the benefits of growth and development experienced by the other social groups in the state (including the Scheduled Castes). According to Census 2001, the average literacy rate in Tripura was 73.66%, well above the national average of 65.38%.⁹ It rose to 87.75% as compared to the national average of 74.04% as per Census 2011. The birth rate, death rate and infant mortality rate in Tripura is lower compared to the national average (vide Table-2); it has also scored better in terms of different development indices in comparison to the national scenario –but parts of the state suffer from acute poverty and high incidence of unemployment. The process of capital formation has been slow and the per capita income is less than all India (which was only 75% of the national average in 1980-81 but steadily rose to 93.71% by 2006-07).¹⁰ For a state grappling with poor infrastructure the immediate need was to construct roads, provide clean water, electricity and better housing facilities. This need was accommodated by the introduction of the National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (NREGS) in the state.

Indicators	Tripura	India
Per capita Income at current prices in 2011-12(in Rs.)	50750	61564
Percentage of total Population living below Poverty Line (using Tendulkar Methodology)	14.05	21.92
Rural Population(as percentage of total population)	73.83	68.85
Percentage of small and marginal operational holdings in Agriculture (Agriculture Census 2005-06)	96	83
Literacy Rate(in percentage)	87.75	74.04
Female Literacy Rate(in percentage)	82.73	64.64
Crude Birth Rate (per '000)	14.3	21.8
Crude Death Rate (per '000)	5.0	7.1
Infant Mortality Rate	29	44
Health Index(as in 2006)	0.643	0.577
Education Index(as in 2006)	0.611	0.506
Human Development Index(2006)	0.663	0.605
Gender Development Index(2006)	0.626	0.590

Source: Census 2011, Planning Commission of India, July, 3013, Agriculture Census 2011-12

4. Gains from MGNREGA in Tripura:

4.1. Employment generation and inclusions

In its first phase of implementation in February 2006, the scheme was introduced in the Dhalai district of Tripura as a part of the 200 most backward districts in the country. By 2008, the scheme was gradually extended to other districts in the state (Roy 2010). The work was mainly related to rural connectivity, water conservation, land development, agriculture, horticulture, forestry, irrigation and maintenance of the assets created under the Act.¹¹ In the very first year, within six months of its implementation in Dhalai (from February 2006 to August 2006), 90 per cent of families in the district got themselves registered under the Act and around 46 days of employment was provided to each registered job card holder.¹² In 2006-07, Tripura generated highest person-days of employment per household among all states in the country and a remarkable women participation (75% of total man-days) too which was described as “an unprecedented achievement in the history of social security in India” (Dreze & Oldiges 2007).

Table-3 below shows the performance of the MGNREGA in Tripura from 2006-07 to 2013-14 in terms of employment generated.

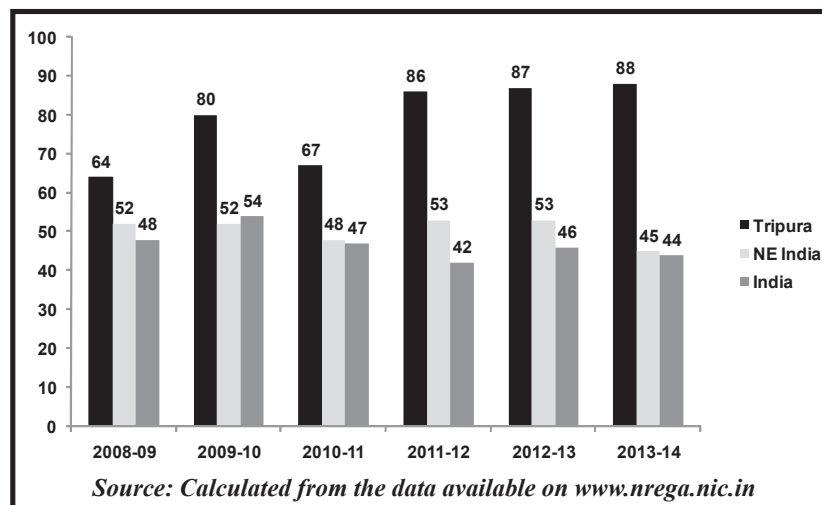
Year	Total Number of		Percentage of Household provided employment	Employment Generated				
	Household demanded employment	Household provided employment		Total Man-days (in lakhs)	Average Man-days per Household	SC (%)	ST (%)	Women (%)
2006-07	74800	74335	99.38	50.13	67	16	62	75
2007-08	425299	423724	99.63	181.05	43	21	42	45
2008-09	549145	549022	99.98	351.12	64	23	45	51
2009-10	577540	576487	99.82	460.23	80	18	41	41
2010-11	557413	557055	99.94	374.51	67	18	43	39
2011-12	567129	566793	99.94	490.12	86	18	42	39
2012-13	597430	596530	99.85	518.51	87	18	43	41
2013-14	604943	597767	98.81	521.60	88	17	43	47

Source: Calculated from the data provided on www.nrega.nic.in

Table-3 clearly indicates that the schemes under MGNREGA have been successful in providing employment to the marginalized communities like the SCs and STs as about 60% of total man-days generated accrued to this group. Women also form an important part of the work force and the proportion of willing non-participants has been negligible. Person-days of employment generated per household in 2012-13 and 2013-14 have been close to the target of 100 man-days per household.

Graph 1 shows that Tripura has always remained quite above the national level with regard to man-days generated per household. It can also be noted that during the last three financial years Tripura has more or less maintained the average man-days per household while Northeast India as a whole experienced a declining trend – poor performance by Assam, Manipur and Nagaland being the major factors.

According to the MIS report for the FY 2013-14, Tripura recorded the highest number of average person-days generated per household (88 days) in the country which is way above that in Rajasthan (49 days), Andhra Pradesh (48 days), Maharashtra (44days) and Himachal Pradesh (52 days) – the states that previously had a good performance record in MGNREGA.

Graph 1: Average Man-days in Tripura, North-East India and India

Moreover, the data also indicate that among the north eastern states, Tripura was neck to neck with Mizoram who topped the list in 2012-13 with regard to average person-days generated per household, leaving others way behind although in respect of total number of person-days generated Tripura is far ahead of others followed by Assam. During the last fiscal year (2013-14) however Tripura has topped the list with an average employment of 88 man-days per household.

A comparative study of average employment under MGNREGA for all north eastern states over the period from 2008-09 to 2013-14 shows upward trend only for Tripura, Sikkim and Meghalaya. For all the five remaining states a declining trend is observed. It is clear from Table 3 that the percentage of man-days generated through participation of SCs in Tripura remained the same from 2009-10 to 2012-13, only to fall marginally in 2013-14, though has always been less compared to the national level (vide Table 1). More or less a similar trend could be observed for the STs in Tripura which always remained higher than the national level. This trend however is not unlikely in view of the fact that about 57% of rural population in Tripura belongs to the socially marginalised categories.¹³

Year	Non SC-ST households	ST households	SC households
2011-12	82	92	84
2012-13	82	94	84
2013-14	84	94	85

Source: Calculated from data available on www.nrega.nic.in

Nevertheless, given the category-wise share of rural population in the state vis-a-vis average employment of the respective categories indicate that the Act has been able to reach out to the socially marginalised section in this state (vide Table 4). Moreover, the data provided in the MIS reports indicate that participation of these groups under the Scheme have improved over the years though a sharp decline in employment under the Act in general, was experienced in FY 2010-11 by most of the states including Tripura.

Another important feature of the Act is the mandate of 33% female labourer in the workforce. With the creation of jobs in the form of construction of roads, water conservation and so on, women could find work in their villages and avoid walking large distances. For the tribal women in the state particularly, it has become a major source of livelihood; with agriculture being dominated by men, women had few opportunities to earn before the implementation of the MGNREGA (Talukdar, 2008). Participation of women in Tripura has improved significantly after 2012-13 (Table 3) though has always been less than the national average of 53% except in FY 2006-07 (Table 1).

According to The Economic Survey 2012, Tripura is the only state to enjoy increased allocation by the Centre for the fiscal year 2012-13 as Rs.1146 crores (Rs.104 crores higher than 2011-12) was allotted to the state.

4.2 Poverty Alleviation

The term poverty is used to encapsulate the simultaneous occurrence of malnutrition or under-nutrition, low income levels, poor access to health facilities, illiteracy, and improper housing conditions among other inadequacies. On the basis of the NSS data in 1999-2000, the BPL population in Tripura was estimated to be 34.44% - the sixth highest among all the states and Union Territories in the country.¹⁴ Reports suggest that the poverty levels of the Scheduled Tribes were almost twice that of the other social groups (Himanshu, 2005). According to the Department of Rural Development, STs and SCs accounted for 55% of the BPL families in rural areas in 2007. A majority of the BPL families are dependent on agriculture for their livelihood and agricultural wage labour is the main source of income for 44% or approximately 170,000 families.¹⁵ With 83%¹⁶ (as per Census 2001) of the population living in the rural areas addressing the concerns of the rural population becomes one of the primary concerns of the state government. Here arise the question of an alternative and viable employment option for the majority of those living in rural Tripura.

According to the Planning Commission of India the poverty ratio in rural Tripura was 22% as measured in the year 2004-05.¹⁷ In this official estimates of the incidence of poverty released by the Planning Commission of India the poverty line as well as measures of poverty and inequality for all the north eastern states including Tripura were not calculated separately. This data was arrived at based on the head count ratio of Assam for the Uniform Recall Period (URP) used for consumption distribution data of National Sample Survey in its 61st Round Report in 2004-05. According to the state report however, 55%¹⁸ of the population were below the poverty line in the rural areas in 2002.

One of the most important impacts that the MGNREGA has had is on the level of poverty in the state. For the five year period from 2004-05 to 2009-10, 52.5 million people in the country progressed to income levels above the poverty line. As Jagannathan (2012) notes, this figure is “uncannily” close to the 52.53 million households that were provided employment through the MGNREGA in 2009-10. It was in these five years that Tripura recorded a fall in poverty of over 15% (Jagannathan, 2012). According to the press note (dated March 19, 2012) released by Planning Commission of India, the poverty in Tripura dipped by almost 25% - from 44.5% in 2004-05 to 19.8% in 2009-2010 when calculated as per Tendulkar

Method using implicit price indices (Fisher price index).

It must be mentioned here that MGNREGA has possibly been a major factor though not the sole reason of decline in the poverty ratio in the state. The official data indicates that ever since its inception, more than 90% of the families in the respective districts of Tripura get to work under the scheme for considerable number of days every year: out of 6 lakhs rural households 5.7 lakhs, i.e. nearly 95% of the rural households, were covered under the Act by 2009-10 each enjoying the provision of additional income for 80 days on an average (vide Table 3) during this year.

4.3 Impact of assets creation under MGNREGA

Rural Public Works Programmes (RPWPs) are primarily conditional cash transfer programmes that provide work and wages to the unskilled labourers for creating rural infrastructure. Success of the RPWPs therefore largely depends on the creation of durable productive assets so as to derive dynamic gains and care should be taken not to build the roads that would be ‘washed away with the first rain’ (Basu, 1981). In other words choice of projects and planning should take care of fulfilling the objectives of productivity-enhancement as well as environmental protection of the economy.

Since its inception in Tripura the Scheme has diversified to include flood control measures, water conservation and harvesting, drought proofing, micro irrigation, land development and allied activities (Roy, 2010). Table-5 indicates that improving rural connectivity was of highest importance initially though works related to water conservation drew almost equal attention. The works related to flood control and land development also increased significantly from 2010-11 onwards; schemes to promote irrigation facilities are also on the rise gradually.

Year	Water conservation and harvesting; Drought proofing; Renovation of traditional water bodies	Flood control and Protection; Land development	Micro-irrigation and other irrigation facilities	Rural connectivity; Projects taken up by MoRD; Bharat Nirman Rajiv Gandhi Sewakendra Scheme
2008-09	25.2	23.5	16.9	34.4
2009-10	37.8	22.7	8.8	30.7
2010-11	31	24.2	9.5	35.4
2011-12	33.3	27.3	9.7	29.7
2012-13	27.4	34.6	9.9	28.2
2013-14	27.1	37.1	10.6	25.2

Source: calculated from the data in www.nrega.nic.in

The data provided by the MGNREGA website indicate that the rate of work completion has been quite impressive; over a period of 5 years (i.e. FY 2009-10 to FY 2013-14), the average rate of completion of work in Tripura has been 83.9%. The rate of work-completion in the state was highest in 2010-11– more than 99% of works undertaken has been completed. Rate of work completion however started to decline thereafter and recorded the worst ever performance (38%) in 2013-14 which is dichotomous as the state generated highest number of man-days (88days) in the country in this year. Data also reveals that a huge number of projects that have been approved remain shelved which calls for more thoughtful planning and capacity building initiatives on part of the Gram Panchayats.

Reports¹⁹ indicate that convergence of the activities related to agriculture under the MGNREGA in conjunction with specific policy implementations (e.g. Rashtriya Krishi Vikas Yojana, 2007) have enhanced agricultural productivity in the state. More than 10 hectares of barren land has been made cultivable in Lankamura Gram Panchayat under West Tripura District through land levelling efforts. Renovation of water bodies has given a much needed boost to the pisciculture in the state. Land reclamation and micro irrigation have benefitted agriculture (Roy, 2010). Digging of Contour Trenches and ditches along the hillside with the help of unskilled labourers increased the productivity of Jhum cultivation practised by the tribals. Tea plantation has also been undertaken under the Scheme on tilla lands owned by the villagers.

4.4 A Brief Summary of the findings from a Pilot survey

A pilot survey conducted in March, 2012 on 48 households from Girania Bloc in the district of West Tripura, revealed that the villagers were indeed enthusiastic about working under MGNREGA. This however did not seem to cause a distortion in the labour market (as is often alleged by the critics of the Act) as the market wage rates of both agricultural and non-agriculture labourer in Girania were found to be greater than the MGNREGA wage rate. With male members mostly opting for non-NREGA works, women got the opportunity to participate in the programme. Only 1 out of 48 households belonged to General category – the remaining households were from SC, ST and other backward classes. Participation rate of women found to be more than double compared to men. 22 out of 51 female workers said that they would otherwise have not worked at all had there been no NREGA. When asked about the benefits they derived from the Programme, quite a few female workers mentioned of sending their children for private tuitions apart from buying durable goods such as almirah, chairs etc. even vehicles e.g. bicycles. For a few women this scheme proved to be particularly useful and if there were no NREGS work they had to walk down to forest for collecting wood which they would sell in the local market for a meagre earning. Some women however said that they would not have worked elsewhere had there been no MGNREGA work in their village. It has also made it easier for the children to attend at the Anganwadi centres.

Two non-participant households found withdrawn from the Programme during the survey year as they moved on to self-employment (poultry farming) with the help of the additional income earned during previous years. This corroborates the contention regarding MGNREGA's potential of eliminating poverty in the long run through multiplier-accelerator synergy – a dynamic impact of the wage-employment programme to promote self employment. Construction of village roads has resulted in greater mobility of the villagers who are mostly daily wage earners living below the poverty line and virtually have had no assured or sustainable source of income before introduction of the Act, more so during the rainy season; it was interesting to find out that the state initiated convergence of MGNREGA with other schemes in agriculture and horticulture which would in effect enhance agricultural productivity. The Scheme also facilitated marketing of agricultural and forest produce, fish, tea leaves etc. and thus enhanced self-reliance among the villagers.

Another laudable achievement of this scheme is the payment of wages to the labourers through either banks or post offices preventing the involvement of middlemen which ensured the spread of the postal and banking network into the interiors of rural India (Roy 2010), promoting financial inclusion thereof. No complaint was received about irregularities in wage payment or delayed payments. Social audits were in place but there has been no effort to create awareness among people about their 'right to work'. The villagers put forward their requisite demand for work-projects in the 'gramsabha' after being informed about the scheme and available funds. Hence the Programme could be thought as more of supply-determined (aimed at utilizing the fund) than of 'demand-driven'. It cannot be claimed that there has not been any corruption in the process; but by and large this scheme has reached the poor and the vulnerable section of the society. Incidence of migration was found to be negligible. The villages have become more reliant with more and more women participating in generating income for the family and making decisions at home although it still remains a matter of research whether it has empowered the women in the true sense.

5. Concluding Remarks

In general it can be said that the NREGA has had manifold tangible and intangible impacts on the participants. Nevertheless it should be kept in mind that extent of success of the wage-employment programmes also depends on various region-specific factors. There has been a visible improvement in rural employment generation under the Act in Tripura over the years particularly for the marginalised class though much remains to be achieved with respect to women's participation as compared to Rajasthan, Tamil Nadu, Kerala and Andhra Pradesh. Compared to West Bengal, a state with socio-cultural similarity on the other hand, Tripura scored remarkable success in implementing the scheme in terms of the major performance indicators.

Summary of observations from a pilot survey conducted in March, 2012 on 48 households in Girania Bloc in the district of West Tripura, indicate that working under MGNREGA provided villagers, particularly women, opportunities to get employment and increase earning without distorting the labour market. Incidences of mothers spending the additional income over private tuitions for children, participants of previous years discontinuing participation in the programme and shifting to self-employment activities with the help of the additional income earned during previous years etc., are

reflective of the potential of the Act to create further employment opportunities and eliminate poverty in the long run. Enhanced agricultural productivity and environmental benefits through creation of sustainable assets is also an important objective of the Act. To assess the magnitude of such dynamic gains periodic time-series monitoring of the projects is required – single point surveys would fail to serve the purpose.

Ever since its inception in the year 2006, MGNREGA has been the largest public works programme in the world in terms of the number of households covered. It has been spread over 646 districts and more than 6500 blocks all across the country. The new Union Government of India that took to office in May, 2014, has however decided to confine the Programme in the 200 most backward districts of the country; the state governments have been accordingly asked to identify the poorest blocks in their respective states. This has given rise to a great controversy among the economists. From the national perspective, the overall performance of the Act does call for reforming it. But care should be taken that people's 'right to work' does not get diluted. This would require a careful study of the factors contributing to the success as well as failures of the Programme. For example, a flexible wage-material ratio could actually enable the Act to provide more work under certain conditions: semi-skilled projects using machineries does widen the scope of work in the hilly areas.

It may be concluded that in Tripura the Programme has been able to deliver. The Act has certainly reduced the intensity of poverty among the beneficiaries in the state through its direct impact i.e. person-days generated. Nevertheless capacity building of the Gram Panchayats are essential for proper planning, designing and effective implementation of projects under the Programme so that it can create productive and durable assets to generate other employment avenues and eliminate poverty in the long run. Only then the demand for work under the Act will reduce over time otherwise this workfare will remain as a permanent drain on the public exchequer.

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Notes

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- ⁷ *Economic Review of Tripura 2010–11*, Directorate of Economics and Statistics, Planning (Statistics) Department.
- ⁸ *Ibid.*
- ⁹ *Ibid.*
- ¹⁰ *Ibid.*
- ¹¹ *Ibid.*
- ¹² *Ibid.*
- ¹³ According to Census Report 2011, the proportion of ST and SC in rural Tripura are 41 and 16.1 percent respectively.
- ¹⁴ Tripurainfo dated December 03, 2013.
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