

Does MGNREGA Lead to Agrarian Crisis? Evidence from Andhra Pradesh

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Abstract

Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) is an ambitious public works programme which was introduced in 2006 to provide a basic safety net for the rural poor. It has already completed 10 years of its journey. This study attempted to draw some lessons from the past 10 years' experiences of MGNREGA implementation. During this journey, MGNREGA influenced the rural economy in different ways, especially, the agriculture sector, in addition to providing employment to the rural poor. So, this study mainly focused on agriculture to understand the effects of MGNREGA. The objective of the study was to analyze reasons for increasing wage rates in the agricultural sector which are influenced by MGNREGA. Increasing agricultural wages are caused by several factors along with MGNREGA. Although it couldn't be completed successfully, it brought some changes in the rural economy through setting up a floor wage rate which ultimately affected the cost of cultivation. In the process of undergoing structural changes in the economy, the MGNREGA was also responsible for agrarian crisis along with several other factors.

Keywords: MGNREGA, minimum support price, schedule of rates

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On August 15, 1947, India began its journey as an independent nation with major challenges like chronic poverty, rising unemployment, malnutrition, rural distress, etc. Since independence, the Government of India has been introducing several welfare programs from time to time to bring the nation out of these maladies. Still, it is left as an unfinished assignment for the country as the programs did not deliver desirable outcomes to solve the deep-rooted problems (Dogra, 2005). It is well known that unemployment in rural India is predominantly disguised in nature. According to National Sample Survey estimates, the rate of growth of unemployment in the rural sector increased at the annual rate of 0.58% between 1993-94 and 1999-2000, while the rate of growth of the rural labour force was much higher. To address the challenge of rural unemployment, the Government of India launched the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) in 2006. With its right-based framework, the MGNREGA implementation is a paradigm shift from all other development programs that were traditionally supply-led to demand-led in principal. It is perceived as a part of the inclusive growth strategy that aims at reducing social and economic inequalities by providing gainful employment opportunities at the local level.

The main objective of MGNREGA is to provide at least 100 days of guaranteed wage employment in a financial year to every rural household whose adult members are willing to do unskilled manual work. MGNREGA has been implemented in India with multiple objectives such as employment provision, durable assets creation, women empowerment, and generating sustainable income through wage works. In a decade of the

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long voyage, it has shown its impact on rural employment, agriculture, migration, environment, etc. Now, there is clear evidence of increasing agricultural wages after implementation of MGNREGA. Therefore, MGNREGA is directly accused of being responsible for rising wages and agrarian distress. In this context, it is very important to understand the ground reality, how MGNREGA exacerbates agriculture distress. The present study attempts to answer the question by taking some evidence from the Indian state of Andhra Pradesh.

Review of Literature

Unlike earlier schemes, MGNREGA came into effect with a conceptual legal framework. MGNREGA draws upon the experience of the Maharashtra Employment Guarantee Scheme which has been acclaimed as reasonably successful in guaranteeing the provision of work on demand to the rural poor (Papola, 2005). Mathur (2007) closely observed that there were some similarities between the MGNREGA and the Plan 'Jefes y de Hogar' which was introduced in Argentina. While implementing such right based programmes across the country, a deliberate and planned direction is necessary to work out a strategy for attaining its objectives. Proper care is necessary for surviving defects and problems in the implementation that have been historically embedded in the structure. It is important, nonetheless, to recognize this opportunity not just to improve, but to make a clean break.

Economists like Shah (2004) and Samji and Aiyar (2008) gave suggestions about the guidelines and design for implementation of the program. They believed that MGNREGA was well designed before its implementation as compared to previous employment programmes, particularly, its progress would be monitored with the help of information technology, social audit, post office involvements, etc. The delivery systems can be improved with the new approach of participatory development, social mobilization, right to information, involvement of civil society, and Panchayat Raj Institutions (Mahendra Dev & Venkatanarayana, 2009) to ensure transparency and accountability. Ideally, MGNREGA should serve the deprived and the poorer sections through self-selection mechanisms on the basis of the belief that wages under MGNREGA will provide adequate motivation to labour who intend to work but do not have access to work in the local economy.

Economists like Mihir Shah, Santosh Mehrotra, Pinaki Chakrabarty, Jean Dreze, Reetika Khera, Pramatesh Ambasta, Anant Jayant, and others have worked on the MGNREGA with the help of secondary data and field surveys at the village, block, and district levels in different states. During the past decade, employment generation under MGNREGA increased continuously till 2009-2010 and started declining thereafter in the country (Ministry of Rural Development, 2012 ; Ministry of Rural Development, 2014). Shariff (2009) stated that MGNREGA wage rates should not be too high or too low, but such that when the poor intend to seek employment, it is available on demand. So far, under MGNREGA, the wage rates are being revised every year by the Centre and this has led to increasing the existing wage rates under the scheme. Wages may vary among the states with respect to their local labour market conditions. Possibly, these changes might have influenced local economies of rural India.

Some researchers like Nayak and Khera (2009) ; Berge, Bhattacharya, Durgam, and Ramachandra (2012) ; Ramakrishna and Ramana (2014) ; Rao (2014) ; and Reddy, Reddy, and Bantilan (2014) etc. observed a substantial increase in agricultural wages across the country because of MGNREGA. Although tremendous growth in wages brings pleasure to the faces of labourers, it is definitely bitter news to the farmer community as it increases cultivation costs and reduces profitability in agriculture.

Objectives, Data, and Methodology

The present research aims to study the impact of the MGNREGA on agriculture and wages in the rural sector. The main objectives of the study are to analyze the reasons for increasing agricultural wages and to explain the conditions in agriculture after the introduction of the well-known employment guarantee programme. The

analysis is based on observations of the experiences of the MGNREGA in Andhra Pradesh during the period from 2006 - 2016. For the study, data was taken from secondary sources such MGNREGA official reports (India & Andhra Pradesh) ; National Sample Survey Reports ; Reports of prices, wages, and index numbers of Andhra Pradesh ; Agricultural Statistics at a Glance of Andhra Pradesh, etc. This study attempts to give a real picture of the current agriculture scenario and how it has been affected by MGNREGA.

Analysis and Results

(1) MGNREGA in Andhra Pradesh : In India, Andhra Pradesh is one of the better performing states. It has successfully implemented MGNREGA by providing huge employment to destitutes. In accordance with the guidelines of MGNREGA-2005, the Government of Andhra Pradesh formulated the scheme with separate administrative set up, social audit unit, innovative technological support, and implemented it initially in four backward districts, namely, Anantapur, Chittoor, Kadapa, and Vizianagaram in the state. Later, the scheme was extended to six more districts (East Godavari, Guntur, Kurnool, Prakasam, Nellore, and Srikakulam) totalling 10 districts for the period of 2007-2008. From April 2008, remaining three districts, Krishna, Visakhapatnam, and West Godavari were brought under the coverage of the employment guarantee programme.

To understand the MGNREGA employment generation in Andhra Pradesh, the chosen time period was divided into two periods, that is, 2006-2007 to 2008-2009 (expansion phase) and 2009-2010 to 2015-2016 (realization phase). During the period from 2006 - 2007 to 2008 - 2009, the scheme was extended to all the districts in a phased manner over a 3 - year period. Since MGNREGA was extended to other districts, employment generation gradually increased with a large number of person-days. In 2006-2007, MGNREGA covered 8.1 lakh households with 291.71 lakh person-days in four districts in the first phase. For the period from 2007-2008, it covered 25.6 lakh households, and 1047.21 lakh person-days were generated in 10 districts. During the period from 2008 - 2009, 1498.95 lakh person-days of employment was given to 32.1 lakh households in the state. During this period, on an average, employment was provided to every household under the MGNREGA for 35 days, 39 days, and 44 days for the years of 2006-2007, 2007-2008, and 2008-2009, respectively.

It would be justifiable to judge MGNREGA performance only after the coverage of all the districts in the state during 2009-2010 to 2015-2016. This phase can be termed as the realization phase. Initially, 33.8 lakh rural

Table 1. MGNREGA Employment Trends in Andhra Pradesh

Year	Employment provided to households (in Lakhs)	Person-days (in Lakhs)	Average household employment (days)
2006-07	8.1 (9)	291.71	35
2007-08	25.6 (28)	1047.21	39
2008-09	32.1 (36)	1498.95	44
2009-10	33.8 (37)	2235.00	62
2010-11	34.7 (39)	1863.29	52
2011-12	28.7 (32)	1753.78	59
2012-13	32.9 (37)	1938.05	56
2013-14	34.2 (38)	1819.97	51
2014-15	32.1 (36)	1397.68	42
2015-16	33.8 (38)	1578.98	46
AVERAGE	29.6 (33)		49

Note: Parentheses indicate the percentage of total rural Census households.

Sources: 1. www.nrega.ap.gov.in 2. Census of India (2011)

households were given employment with 2235 lakh person-days in 2009-2010. In 2010-2011, the number of households given employment marginally increased to 34.7 lakhs, but there was a decline in generation of person-days, that is, 1863.29 lakhs approximately. It indicates that less employment was given to more number of households, therefore, average employment came down to 52 days per household. In the next year, there was a drastic decline in household employment and person-days creation. For the period of 2011-2012, household employment decreased to 28.7 lakh households with the production of 1753.78 person-days. As it is shown in the Table 1, there is no clear trend in MGNREGA employment generation in terms of households coverage and person-days generation during 2012-2013 to 2015-2016. In this period, households that were given employment ranged between 32.1 lakhs and 34.2 lakhs and total person-days varied from 1397 lakhs to 1938 lakhs. During this period, coverage of households increased from 9% to 36% of total rural households in the state.

In the realization phase (2009 - 2016), the MGNREGA coverage oscillated between 32% and 39% of rural households. Average employment given per household steadily came down during this period. The maximum average employment given per household was 62 days in the first year, that is, in 2009-2010, which was far away from the proposed target of 100 days of employment per household. During 2009-2010 to 2014-2015, average household employment continuously declined from 62 days to 42 days. It was observed to increase a little to 46 days for the period from 2015-2016. From the analysis, it is clear that MGNREGA didn't achieve its target of 100 days of employment, although it completed 10 years of its voyage.

From this discussion, it can be said that employment generation increased as MGNREGA expanded to all the districts of the state in the period from 2006-2007 to 2009-2010. After that, there is a mixed trend in household coverage and person-days generation and a declining trend in average household employment. These trends indicate that the performance of the scheme did not meet its objectives as intended because it could not provide beyond 62 days of employment per household per annum. This is far away from the 100 days of employment guarantee promised by the scheme.

(2) MGNREGA Wage Rate : According to the MGNREG Act, every worker is entitled to wages at the minimum wage rate fixed by the State Government for agricultural labourers under the Minimum Wages Act, 1948. As stated in the Act (Schedule I, Section 6), labourers shall not be paid less than the minimum wage rate under any circumstances. Equal wages shall be paid to both men and women workers. In practice, wages are paid on piece rate basis to MGNREGA workers. When wages are paid on a piece-rate basis, the work norms must be such that any person working at a normal pace for seven hours earns no less than the minimum wage, as per the Schedule of Rates (SoRs). The value of work is currently estimated using the SoRs prepared by the district level authorities. Workers are entitled to be paid on a weekly basis, and in any case, within a fortnight of the date on which work was done [MGNREGA, Section 3 (3)]. In the event of any delay in wage payment, workers are entitled to compensation as per the provisions of the Payment of Wages Act, 1936 (MGNREGA, Schedule II, Section 30).

In Andhra Pradesh, the average wage rate per day varies between ₹ 81 to ₹ 123 under MGNREGA. For the first three years, there was no notable change in the wage rate. Since 2009, the Government of India has been revising notified wage rates every year according to the Consumer Price Index for Agricultural Labourers (CPI-AL) to adjust inflation. The same is reflecting in wages received by MGNREGA workers. Therefore, average wage rate for the MGNREGA works went up continuously from ₹ 88 in 2009-2010 to ₹ 123 in 2015-2016. As mentioned in the Table 2, the wages received by MGNREGA workers are always less than the notified wages due to piece-rate process, but higher than the minimum wages. Unfortunately, the gap between notified wage rate and received wage rate has been widening over the years. Actually, under the piece-rate mechanism, work should be done as per SoRs by allotted members in a given period of time; otherwise, workers wouldn't get the proposed wage in the scheme. At the field level, sometimes, these norms are not strictly followed at the worksite, such as engagement of workers is more or less than required for a particular piece of work, improper calculation of measurements after work is done. This may be due to lack of technical knowledge and sometimes, reporting is inaccurate. These wage

Table 2. MGNREGA Notified Wages and Received Wages (₹)

Year	Notified wage rate per day	Received wage rate per day
2006-07	80	81
2007-08	80	83
2008-09	80	83
2009-10	100	88
2010-11	100	96
2011-12	121	97
2012-13	137	106
2013-14	149	105
2014-15	169	119
2015-16	180	123

Sources: 1. www.nrega.ac.in

2. www.nrega.ap.gov.in

rates also depend on the nature and drudgery level of work. All these constraints lead to lesser wages under the scheme. The payment of wages also takes much time, that is, more than 15 days because of the delay in funds released from higher authorities, but there is no evidence of compensation being paid to workers.

(3) MGNREGA's Impact on Agricultural Wages : According to official statistics, wage rates were ₹ 60 for men and ₹ 43 for women per day in the agricultural sector in Andhra Pradesh in 2005, prior to the MGNREGA. Although employment generation under the MGNREGA is not up to the target, it provides minimum wages to labourers in rural areas. The farmers who used to pay less than minimum wage to agricultural workers are forced to pay equally or more than MGNREGA wages to attract the labour force. In a way, the MGNREGA has strengthened the bargaining power of the labour and they have started demanding higher wages. Hence, the wage rates went up to ₹ 243 for men and ₹ 173 for women in the agricultural sector for the period of 2013-2014. These rates are even more in irrigated regions where abundant irrigation is available. In the peak season of farm activities, wage rates become more costly, sometimes double along with incentives. In general, labour is required for all the farmers at the same time during peak agricultural season; in this case, farmers offer higher wages to labour, but it is a temporary phenomenon. The availability of public works has enhanced the bargaining power of rural workers in several ways: firstly, the dependence of workers on large farmers and elite classes for work has declined significantly; secondly, pressure of employers on their family members has come down, and thirdly; workers, particularly women, now have a freedom of not working when they want to take a break (Hirway, 2010).

In addition to that, there are several other factors which are responsible along with the MGNREGA that should not be ignored. In 2004-2005, suddenly the prices of rice doubled in the market from ₹ 15 to ₹ 30 per kilogram because of reduction in food grains production between 2002 and 2005. This was due to drought and floods and agriculture was seriously affected. According to official statistics, rice production in Andhra Pradesh was 113.9 lakhs tonnes in 2001-2002, after that the production of rice was stumpy. It was 73.27, 89.53, and 96.01 lakh tonnes in 2003, 2004, and 2005 respectively (Agricultural Statistics at Glance, Government of India). The decline in rice production led to severe inflationary changes in the state's economy, especially food inflation. These inflationary price fluctuations directly disheartened poorer sections. With such inflationary changes, labour couldn't meet their basic needs with the existing wage rate. Incidentally, wage rates have gone up in the agricultural sector. Even though rice production continuously picked up since 2006, there is no declining trend in wage rates due to the impact of inflation oscillations of food and non-food items.

Since 2004, a picture of the rural lives changed positively towards the welfare of people in Andhra Pradesh. In 2004, the state government started providing rice at a cheaper cost (just ₹ 2 per kilogram) under the public distribution system for poorer sections. After the scheme inception in 2006, poor people acquired some assurance for their livelihood from the public distribution system and minimum employment guarantee through MGNREGA. When people address their hunger, they have a chance to postpone doing agricultural work where drudgery is involved. At the same time, the farmers started offering some extra money and incentives in addition to existing wage to get labourers to complete farm operations in time. The farmers are also afraid of nature ; they cannot postpone farm activities once sowing is complete. All these resulted in pushing up the wage rates in agriculture. Hence, all these factors are collectively responsible for increasing the wage rates in agriculture.

(4) How Far is MGNREGA Responsible for Distress in the Agriculture Sector ? : At present, agriculture faces severe problems in Andhra Pradesh, which gambles with monsoons and is also labour-intensive. Generally, agriculture is affected by floods in delta areas and drought in dry areas due to irregular rains of South - West and North - East monsoons in both the seasons of Kharif (July - October) and Rabi (October - March). Most of the crops in the state such as paddy, maize, sugarcane, cotton, turmeric, chillies, etc., are mostly labour-intensive. Nowadays, the cost of cultivation has become very high due to the high cost of labour and inputs; whereas, it had never been covered by agricultural prices.

In the case of paddy, the cost of cultivation became much higher than earlier. According to the report of Kanda, Rao, Reddy, Rao, Muralidhar, and Rani (2011), the cost of production of paddy per quintal went up from ₹ 921 in 2008-2009 to ₹ 1092 in 2010-2011 in Andhra Pradesh. At the same time, minimum support price (MSP) per quintal announced by the government was ₹ 900 in 2008-2009, ₹ 950 in 2009-2010, and ₹ 1000 in 2010-2011. Almost all the years, the cost of production per quintal was more than the MSP (Kanda et al., 2011). So, a huge gap has been created between the cost of cultivation and revenue from agriculture in normal years ; however, the situation would be extremely worse during bad years when the crop is affected by either drought or floods or both. Remaining crops also faced more or less the same kind of problems, whatever is explained before. Due to this, most of the farmers were thrown into a debt trap.

In Andhra Pradesh, agricultural wages have gone up in the wetland as well as in dry-land areas. Here, some coastal regions are connected with Godavari and Krishna rivers, but remaining areas are rain-fed and are irrigated with tanks and bore-wells irrigation. Generally, the percentage of hired labour accounts for 25% to 30% of cost of cultivation. Wage rate increase immediately affects the cost of cultivation. In peak seasons, farmers need to pay higher wages than normal wages. As discussed earlier, MGNREGA set the floor for minimum wages which pushed up the production costs in agriculture. In addition to this, prices of inputs such as seeds, chemical fertilisers, and pesticides have gone up at a massive scale; prices of fertilisers increased three times. Moreover, high rents, credit provided by moneylenders at high-interest rates, un-remunerative prices, no proper procurement mechanism, and lack of government support are cumulatively responsible for the agrarian crisis in the state.

Recently, some section of the farmers blamed MGNREGA for creating labour shortage for agriculture activities. But it is not all correct. One should keep in mind that labour is not being added to agriculture even though population is exploding. Existing labour is slowly moving towards non-agricultural sector in the process of rural-urban migration. Nowhere these MGNREGA activities took place at the time when agricultural works are in progress in the state. To address the agriculture crisis, some elite farmers demanded converging the scheme with agriculture, but MGNREGA is not an obstacle for agriculture. If it were so, poor people would lose additional employment which comes from this scheme in addition to agricultural work. Also, MGNREGA provides employment for farmers whenever they want to work, usually when the crops are damaged by natural calamities. Despite this, MGNREGA increases the cost of production to some extent. However, it is not solely responsible for crisis conditions in agriculture (Turangi, 2015). The crisis can be addressed through improvement in yields,

provide inputs at subsidized prices, increasing the MSP, and providing institutional credit and support is also required from the government at the time of unforeseen contingencies.

Policy Implications

Implementation of such a historical act over a decade without enfeeblement influences the rural economy significantly. One should accept that agricultural wages increased substantially after MGNREGA implementation. There are other factors behind the growth in wages. In Andhra Pradesh, agriculture seems to be adversely affected due to growth in wage rather than benefiting from MGNREGA. Nearly 60% of the work carried out under the MGNREGA scheme is either directly or indirectly related to agriculture. Probably, this work may not be strong enough in favor of agriculture to compensate the loss arising from a hike in wages. Hence, agriculture and irrigation related MGNREGA works should be well planned and implemented with a specific design to boost productivity in agriculture. In addition, new works should be incorporated in the list of MGNREGA works according to agrarian conditions. However, employment guarantee should be not a permanent solution for the problem of rural unemployment. It has to strengthen the rural economy to generate income and employment.

Conclusion

The results of this study are somewhat similar to those of previous studies like Berge et al. (2012) and Reddy et al. (2014) as MGNREGA is the main driving force behind rising agricultural wage rates in rural areas. However, this study contradicts with those studies when the MGNREGA is blamed as the exclusive reason for escalating wage rates without considering influencing factors. Unlike the earlier wage employment programs, the MGNREGA is well designed. It has constitutional backup to provide employment assurance to workers. In fact, MGNREGA is expected to reduce chronic poverty at the bottom and effectively function as a safety net for rural workers. It has covered almost all the rural districts in India since April 2008. Undeniably, MGNREGA has a major role in providing employment to the marginalized and deprived sections of the society. However, it has been suffering from some limitations in different layers of administration. Therefore, it is becoming weak and less effective in practice.

In practice, it is partially successful since it provides nearly half of the employment target for 33% of rural households. After MGNREGA implementation, wage rates have increased substantially in the agricultural sector in rural areas. Because of the hike in wage rates, now the agricultural labourers are getting minimum wages as compared to the past. Consequently, it has led to increase in the cost of production in agriculture, which adversely affects profitability along with several other factors such as inflation, unregulated input prices, urbanization, growing non-farm sector, lack of institutional support, welfare measures, and so on. On the one hand, it provides employment to farmers and the labour community, and on the other hand, it creates durable community assets like land development, irrigation canals, renovation of water bodies, and horticulture plantation, which promote agriculture development. Therefore, it is not at all against agriculture and farmer community. Nonetheless, there is an urgent need of government support for farmers to get rid of the agrarian crisis in the countryside.

Limitations of the Study and Scope for Further Research

This study made an attempt to scrutinize the impact of MGNREGA in the state of Andhra Pradesh. But these observations may differ among states according to their geographical, social conditions, and administrative efforts. In the same way, these observations may not be the same beyond the time line. In this view, this study

remains partial while showing the particularities. MGNREGA has affected the rural sector in various ways, such as the impact on wage rates, employment, area under cultivation, productivity, farm incomes, migration, consumption, education, health, etc. There is a lot of scope for further research across regions to get new insights for implementing MGNREGA effectively.

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