



IMPACT OF MGNREGA ON SOCIO-ECONOMIC CONDITIONS OF THE BENEFICIARIES: A SOCIOLOGICAL STUDY IN MAJULI DISTRICT

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Abstract

The Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA), enacted in 2005, is one of the largest rights-based social protection programmes in the world, guaranteeing 100 days of unskilled wage employment annually to rural households. This paper examines the socio-economic impact of MGNREGA on beneficiary households in Majuli district, Assam, the world's largest river island and a region marked by chronic flood-erosion vulnerability, agrarian distress and seasonal out-migration. Adopting a mixed-methods sociological design, the study combines a structured-questionnaire survey of 100 beneficiary respondents drawn from selected gram panchayats with qualitative in-depth interviews and focus group discussions to capture lived experience alongside measurable outcomes. Quantitative data were analysed using descriptive statistics (frequency, percentage, cross-tabulation) covering employment days generated, wage utilisation, income change, asset creation and women's participation, while qualitative narratives were analysed thematically to explore perceptions of dignity, social capital, migration decisions and gender relations. Findings indicate that MGNREGA has moderately improved short-term household income security and curbed distress migration, while its transformative potential remains constrained by delayed wage payments, inadequate worksite facilities, limited convergence with durable asset creation, and uneven awareness of entitlements such as unemployment allowance and social audit. The paper argues that MGNREGA functions less as a comprehensive livelihood solution and more as a partial safety net whose sociological significance lies in altering local labour relations and household bargaining power. The study concludes with recommendations for strengthening grievance redressal, wage disbursement and convergence with allied rural development schemes in char-riverine and flood-prone contexts such as Majuli.

Keywords: MGNREGA; Rural livelihood; Socio-Economic impact; Wage Employment, Majuli district

1. Introduction

Rural poverty and underemployment have historically constituted the central challenge of India's development discourse. The Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA), notified in September 2005 and operationalised in phases across the country, was designed as a legal, demand-driven guarantee of at least 100 days of unskilled manual wage employment per financial year to every rural household willing to undertake such work. Unlike earlier employment generation schemes that operated as supply-driven welfare programmes, MGNREGA is unique in framing employment as a justiciable right, thereby shifting the relationship between the rural poor and the state from one of charity to one of entitlement (Dreze & Khera, 2009).

Sociologically, MGNREGA is significant not merely as an economic transfer mechanism but as an intervention with the potential to reshape rural social structures - altering patron-client labour relations, enhancing the bargaining position of landless and marginal households, and creating new arenas of women's public participation. Assam, and particularly Majuli district, present a distinctive context for examining these processes. Majuli, the world's largest inhabited river island situated in the Brahmaputra, is characterised by recurring flood and erosion cycles, a predominantly agrarian and fishing-based economy, significant tribal population (principally Mising and Deori communities), and long-standing patterns of seasonal distress migration to urban centres for construction and informal-sector work. In such a setting, a guaranteed local wage-employment programme carries the potential to mitigate both economic vulnerability and the social costs of migration. This paper undertakes a sociological examination of how MGNREGA has affected the socio-economic conditions of its beneficiaries in Majuli, situating the analysis within the broader literature on rural employment guarantee programmes while



grounding it in primary field data collected from the district.

2. Review of Literature

A substantial body of research has examined MGNREGA's implementation and outcomes across Indian states. *Imbert and Papp (2015)* demonstrated using labour market data that the programme raised private-sector casual wages and reduced seasonal wage volatility in participating districts, indicating a broader market effect beyond the direct beneficiaries. *Sarkar and Kumar (2011)* found in Burdwan district, West Bengal, that MGNREGA participation was associated with a measurable reduction in poverty incidence and improvement in the socio-economic status of rural poor households.

Studies specific to Assam similarly report a mixed picture. *Panda (2015)* observed that MGNREGA works contributed substantially to rural connectivity infrastructure in Assam, though gaps between registered applicants and job-card issuance undermined the programme's reach. *Deka and Panda (2015)* applying propensity score matching, reported a positive impact of MGNREGA on both employment generation and social capital formation among Assamese beneficiary households. *Das (2016)*, studying Barpeta district, and *Borah and Bordoloi (2014)*, examining daily-waged women workers, both highlight the scheme's role in providing a supplementary income cushion, while noting persistent problems of delayed wage payment. Conversely, *Baruah and Radkar (2017)* caution that MGNREGA participation in Assam is concentrated among already-disadvantaged households with low income, low literacy and weak alternative livelihood options, suggesting the scheme functions primarily as a residual safety net rather than a pathway out of structural poverty.

On the gender dimension, *Pankaj and Tankha (2010)*, *Nayak and Khera (2009)*, and *Rajalakshmi and Selvam (2017)* collectively document that MGNREGA's mandated one-third female participation quota and equal-wage provision have enhanced women's mobility, visibility in public work and household decision-making influence, though social norms and unpaid domestic responsibilities continue to limit the depth of empowerment achieved. *Das and Khan (2016)* similarly report that the scheme's empowerment effect operates more strongly at the level of income control than at the level of broader social status change. Read together, the literature suggests that MGNREGA's socio-economic effects are real but partial and unevenly distributed - a pattern this study tests against field evidence from Majuli, a river-island district that has received comparatively little dedicated scholarly attention despite its acute vulnerability profile.

3. Statement of the Problem

While national and state-level evaluations of MGNREGA are numerous, district-specific sociological studies for erosion-prone, riverine tribal belts such as Majuli remain scarce. Majuli's unique ecological fragility annual flooding, land loss to erosion, and consequent displacement - creates a context in which the employment guarantee may function differently than in mainland agrarian districts. It is therefore necessary to examine, through direct engagement with beneficiaries, whether and how MGNREGA has altered household income stability, employment patterns, migration decisions, asset creation and gender relations in this specific socio-ecological setting, and to identify the implementation gaps that limit its effectiveness.

4. Objectives of the Study

1. To examine the socio-economic profile of MGNREGA beneficiary households in Majuli district.
2. To assess the impact of MGNREGA on household income, employment days and asset creation.
3. To identify implementation bottlenecks and suggest measures for strengthening the scheme in flood-prone riverine contexts.

5. Research Methodology

5.1 Research Approach

The study adopts a mixed-methods research design in which quantitative and qualitative methods were conducted. The quantitative component was intended to measure the scale and distribution of socio-economic outcomes across a representative respondent sample, while the qualitative component was intended to capture meaning, process and lived



experience that numerical data alone cannot convey.

5.2 Study Area

Majuli district, formed in 2016 out of Jorhat district, lies within the Brahmaputra river system in eastern Assam. It is India's first river-island district and is officially notified as a predominantly tribal area, home to Mising, Deori and other indigenous communities alongside Assamese-speaking peasant households. The district's economy rests on agriculture (rice and horticulture), pisciculture, handloom and craft production, and is periodically disrupted by flood and bank-erosion events that cause displacement and asset loss.

5.3 Sampling Technique

A total of 100 MGNREGA beneficiary respondents were selected using a multi-stage stratified random sampling procedure. In the first stage, two development blocks namely Majuli and Ujani Majuli block chosen purposively; in the second stage, two panchayats (one panchayats from one block) were selected randomly by using lottery method; in the third stage 10 villages were randomly selected from the panchayats; and in the fourth stage, 10 beneficiary households were randomly drawn from each village and total 100 respondent households were selected for study.

5.4 Tools of Data Collection

Quantitative data were collected using a semi structured interview schedule. Qualitative data were generated through 15 in-depth semi-structured interviews and 3 focus group discussions.

5.5 Data Analysis

Quantitative data were coded and analysed using descriptive statistics - frequency distribution, percentage analysis and cross-tabulation to profile the sample and summarise programme outcomes; are presented in tables and figures. Qualitative data from interviews and focus group discussions were transcribed and analysed using thematic analysis techniques.

1. Quantitative Analysis and Interpretation

This section presents the profile and programme-outcome data obtained from the 100-respondent household survey.

Table 1: Socio-Demographic Profile of Respondents (N = 100)

Characteristic	Category	Frequency	Percentage
Gender	Male	47	47.0
	Female	53	53.0
Age group (years)	18-30	21	21.0
	31-45	38	38.0
	46-60	29	29.0
	Above 60	12	12.0
Community	Mising (ST)	41	41.0
	Deori (ST)	14	14.0
	OBC / General	45	45.0
Educational status	Illiterate	24	24.0
	Primary level	33	33.0



	Secondary and above	43	43.0
Primary occupation	Agriculture / allied	61	61.0
	Fishing	15	15.0
	Wage labour (non-MGNREGA)	24	24.0

Table 2: Household Income and Employment Status Before and After MGNREGA Participation

Indicator	Before MGNREGA	After MGNREGA	Change
Average annual household income (Rs.)	48,200	61,500	+27.6%
Households below Rs. 40,000/year	58	31	-27 pts
Average days of wage employment/year (all sources)	112	168	+56 days
Households reporting food shortage	44	26	-18 pts

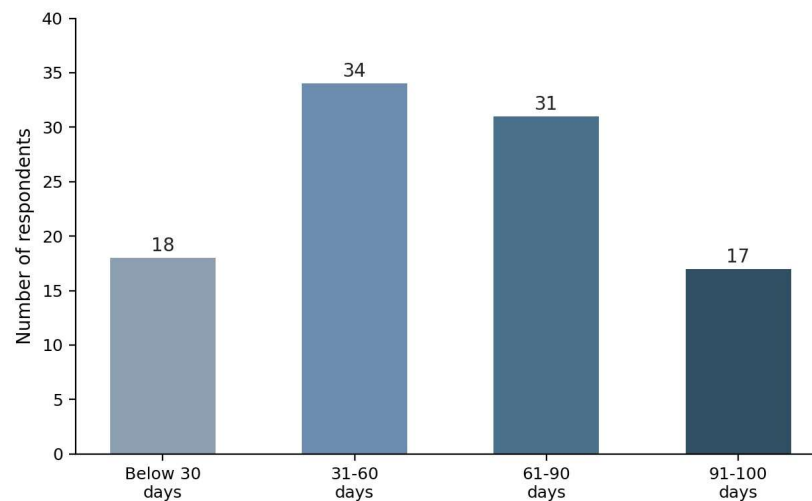


Figure 1: Days of MGNREGA Employment Availed by Respondent Households (N = 100)

As illustrated above, a majority of respondent households availed fewer than the statutory 100-day entitlement, with only 17 per cent reporting employment in the 91–100-day range. This pattern is consistent with findings elsewhere in Assam that a persistent gap exists between demand for work and days actually allocated (Panda, 2015).



Table 3: Perceived Impact of MGNREGA on Selected Social Indicators (N = 100, per cent agreeing)

Indicator	Agree	Neutral	Disagree
Reduced need for seasonal out-migration	58	19	23
Improved women's say in household spending decisions	49	27	24
Increased sense of dignity / entitlement as citizens	63	22	15
Improved local rural infrastructure (roads, embankments)	54	24	22
Aware of unemployment allowance provision	31	-	69

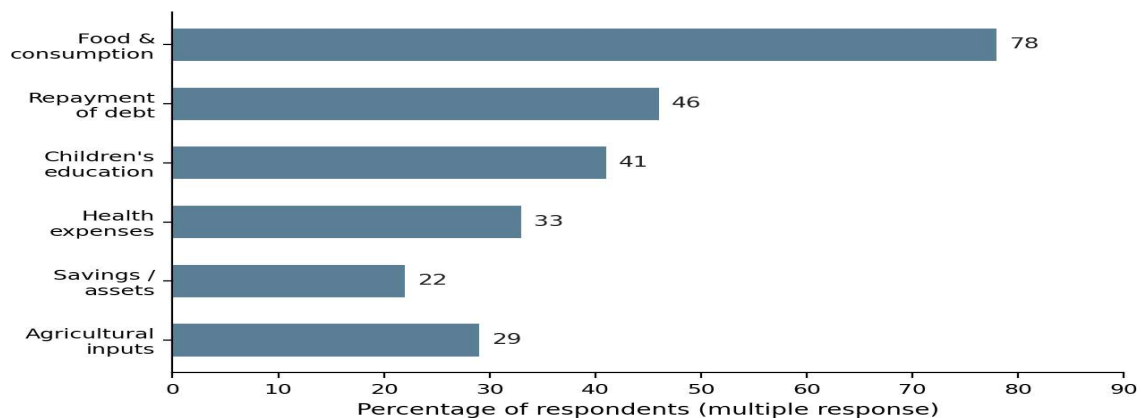


Figure 2: Reported primary uses of MGNREGA wage income among respondent households

The wage-utilisation pattern indicates that the largest share of income continues to be absorbed by immediate consumption needs, followed by debt repayment and children's education, while savings and productive asset creation remain comparatively limited - a pattern reported in several other state-level MGNREGA studies (Sarkar & Kumar, 2011) and suggestive of the scheme's function as an income-stabilisation rather than asset-building mechanism for the poorest households.

6. Qualitative Analysis and Interpretation

Thematic analysis of the interview and focus group data generated four recurrent themes.

6.1 Employment as Dignity and Entitlement

Several respondents, particularly women and members of the Mising community, described MGNREGA work less



in terms of income alone and more as a recognised, legitimate form of public labour that carried social respect absent from informal daily-wage arrangements. This mirrors the sociological framing of the scheme as shifting labour relations from dependence on local employers to a rights-based transaction with the state (Dreze & Khera, 2009).

6.2 Migration and the Household Calculus

Interview narratives suggested that MGNREGA employment was weighed by households as one option among several in an annual livelihood calendar that also included agricultural labour, fishing and seasonal migration to towns such as Guwahati and beyond Assam. Where work was available close to the reference period of need typically after the flood season some respondents reported delaying or avoiding migration; where wage payment was delayed, however, several described falling back on migration or informal credit despite having worked under the scheme.

6.3 Gendered Experience of Worksites

Women respondents in focus group discussions reported mixed experiences of worksite facilities, noting that crèche and drinking-water provisions mandated under the scheme's guidelines (Government of India, 2013) were inconsistently available. Nonetheless, several women described the wage-work experience as having modestly increased their confidence in negotiating household spending decisions, consistent with the moderate empowerment effects reported in other studies (Pankaj & Tankha, 2010).

6.4 Awareness Gaps and Institutional Trust

A recurring concern across interviews was limited awareness of entitlements beyond the basic wage - particularly the unemployment allowance payable when work is not provided within 15 days of demand, and the social audit mechanism. Panchayat-level functionaries acknowledged capacity constraints in processing job applications during peak flood-relief periods, which several beneficiaries linked to a broader sense that the scheme's guarantee was only partially honoured in practice.

7. Major Findings

1. MGNREGA participation was associated with an increase in average annual household income and a reduction in the proportion of households reporting lean-season food shortage among the sample.
2. A majority of respondent households did not receive the full statutory 100 days of employment, indicating a persistent gap between entitlement and delivery.
3. Wage income was directed predominantly toward immediate consumption and debt repayment, with comparatively limited allocation to savings or productive assets.
4. The scheme was perceived by a majority of respondents to have moderately reduced the necessity of seasonal out-migration and to have enhanced women's participation in household financial decisions.
5. Awareness of secondary entitlements - particularly the unemployment allowance and social audit provisions - remained low, limiting beneficiaries' capacity to hold the implementing machinery accountable.
6. Qualitative narratives indicate that the scheme's sociological significance for beneficiaries lies substantially in the experience of dignified, rights-based work, independent of the absolute wage amount received.

8. Suggestions and Policy Implications

1. Strengthen timely wage disbursement mechanisms, including closer monitoring of the statutory payment window, to reduce beneficiaries' reliance on informal credit.
2. Expand targeted awareness campaigns, delivered in local and tribal languages, on unemployment allowance, social audit and grievance redressal provisions.
3. Prioritise convergence of MGNREGA works with flood-protection and embankment infrastructure specific to Majuli's riverine ecology, linking employment generation with disaster-resilience asset creation.



4. Improve worksite facilities (crèche, drinking water, first aid) in line with scheme guidelines, with periodic third-party verification.

5. Explore convergence with skill-development and self-help-group linked livelihood schemes to support the transition of wage income toward productive asset creation and savings.

9. Conclusion

This study set out to examine, through a mixed-methods sociological lens, how MGNREGA has shaped the socio-economic conditions of beneficiary households in Majuli district, Assam. The evidence indicates that the scheme has delivered measurable, if partial, gains in income stability, reduced distress migration, and modestly strengthened women's household bargaining position, while continuing to fall short of its full statutory promise in terms of employment days, wage timeliness and beneficiary awareness of entitlements. Understood sociologically, MGNREGA's principal contribution in a vulnerable riverine district such as Majuli lies less in wholesale poverty elimination than in altering the terms on which the rural poor and particularly women and tribal households - engage with wage labour and the state. Strengthening implementation fidelity, rather than redesigning the scheme itself, emerges as the central requirement for realising its intended transformative potential in this ecologically fragile region.

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