



Research Article

Volume-06|Issue05|2026

The Paradox of Program Expansion: A Decade-Long Analysis of Scheduled Caste Employment under MGNREGA in India (2015–16 to 2025–26)

Dr. Gurmel Singh

Assistant Professor Department of Economics SDWG Govt. College Beetan Himachal Pradesh India Pin 176601

Article History

Received: 22.08.2026

Accepted: 01.10.2026

Published: 08.10.2026

Citation

Singh, G. (2026). The Paradox of Program Expansion: A Decade-Long Analysis of Scheduled Caste Employment under MGNREGA in India (2015–16 to 2025–26). *Indiana Journal of Economics and Business Management*, 6(5), 1-6.

Abstract: This study evaluates the comparative participation and employment outcomes of Scheduled Castes (SCs) under the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) in India between FY 2015–16 and FY 2025–26. Utilizing secondary panel data from the Ministry of Rural Development, absolute changes and per-centage growth across social categories were analyzed. The findings reveal a marked contraction in employment intensity for SC households despite overall national expansion. While total job-card holders grew by 19.3%, SC household registrations increased by only 4.0%. Crucially, active SC households provided employment dropped by 11.1%, individual SC workers fell by 21.4%, and generated SC persondays declined by 26.9%. Furthermore, SC families completing the statutory 100-day entitlement plummeted by 67.6% (from 10.53 lakh to 3.41 lakh). In contrast, ST and Other groups recorded employment gains. The study underscores the necessity of targeted local administrative interventions, proactive work allocation, and Job Card activation to restore workfare equity for marginalized rural communities.

Keywords: MGNREGA, Scheduled Castes, Rural Employment, Persondays, Social Equity

JEL Classification: J48, I38, H53, Q18, O15

Copyright © 2026 The Author(s): This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC BY-NC 4.0).

INTRODUCTION

The issue of rural poverty in India remains a critical structural challenge, disproportionately affecting Scheduled Castes (SCs) who face high rural concentration due to minimal urban migration as highlighted by Census 2011, where 72.75% of SCs resided in rural areas. Grappling with shrinking agricultural employment, these vulnerable households rely heavily on public workfare programs. Enacted in 2005, the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) serves as a vital safety net, legally guaranteeing 100 days of unskilled manual employment annually. In Himachal Pradesh, where 74.13% of the population is rural, MGNREGA plays a central role alongside state welfare programs.

However, empirical national performance metrics between 2015–16 and 2025–26 reveal concerning social disparities. While overall job-card coverage grew by 19.3%, SC household registrations increased by a modest 4.0%. More critically, active participation among SC households experienced a sharp contraction: SC households provided employment dropped by 11.1%, individual SC workers fell by 21.4%, and generated SC persondays declined by 26.9%. In contrast, ST and Other categories recorded overall gains in employment and persondays. The realization of the statutory guarantee also severely weakened across all

groups, with SC families completing 100 days of work plummeting by 67.6% (from 10.53 lakh to 3.41 lakh).

These findings indicate that despite national-level program expansion, MGNREGA coverage and labor intensity for SC households have significantly diminished over the decade. Addressing these gaps requires targeted administrative interventions, proactive work planning, strengthened job card activation, and regular local monitoring to restore employment security for marginalized rural households.

LITERATURE OF REVIEW

Empirical literature highlights the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) as a critical socio-economic safety net for marginalized rural communities, particularly Scheduled Castes (SCs). In Andhra Pradesh, Kumar and Somasekhar (2022) demonstrated that targeted workfare significantly improves SC living conditions by mitigating agrarian distress. Similarly, in Himachal Pradesh, Kaushal and Singh (2023) documented growing SC/ST participation, with notable engagement in Kangra and Chamba districts. Beyond caste-based inclusion, MGNREGA enhances female labor force empowerment (Dheeraja & Rao, 2010) and regulates rural wage floors, accounting for 48% to 66% of total household earnings (Pani & Iyer, 2011).

Despite its developmental benefits, structural exclusions and administrative bottlenecks hamper equitable program delivery across states. Manjula and Rajasekhar (2015) revealed that while SC households in Karnataka exhibit strong labor demand, actual employment remains restricted due to discriminatory local practices. Carswell and De Neve (2018) reinforced this by showing how village power structures and informal patronage mediate job allocation, generating uneven outcomes across social strata. Furthermore, Narayanan and Das (2020) highlighted that systemic operational hurdles such as wage disbursement delays and work rationing disproportionately disincentivize vulnerable SC workers from achieving their statutory 100-day entitlement. Overcoming these administrative impediments and securing uniform wage rates (Taufique, 2023) remain imperative for maximizing MGNREGA's poverty-reduction potential in rural India.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

- To examine the trends and changes in MGNREGA employment coverage among Scheduled Castes (SCs) in India during 2015–16 and 2025–26, with reference to job cards issued, households and workers provided employment, and persondays generated.
- To assess the participation and employment outcomes of Scheduled Caste households under MGNREGA, particularly in terms of women's participation and the number of families completing 100 days of employment, and to compare these outcomes with ST and Other categories.

METHODOLOGY

The present study is based on a descriptive and comparative research design and examines the participation and employment outcomes of Scheduled Castes (SCs) under the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) in India. The study is entirely based on secondary data collected from the official MGNREGA/NREGA portal of the Ministry of Rural Development, Government of India. The analysis covers the financial years 2015–16 and 2025–26 and focuses on major indicators of MGNREGA implementation, including households issued job cards, households provided employment, women provided employment, workers provided employment, persondays generated, and families completing 100 days of employment. The performance of SCs is analysed in comparison with Scheduled Tribes (STs) and Other categories to identify changes in their participation and employment outcomes over the study period. Descriptive statistical techniques are used to present the data, while absolute change and percentage growth are calculated to measure the extent of change between 2015–16 and 2025–26. The study particularly examines the changing

employment coverage of SC households, women's participation, generation of persondays, and the extent to which households complete the guaranteed 100 days of employment. The findings are interpreted in a comparative manner to assess the changing position of SCs under MGNREGA at the national level. Since the study is based on aggregate secondary data, it does not examine household-level socio-economic characteristics, regional variations, or individual-level determinants of participation.

ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION

This section analyses the changing participation and employment outcomes of Scheduled Castes under the MGNREGA scheme in India during 2015–16 and 2025–26. The analysis focuses on job cards issued, households and workers provided employment, women's participation, persondays generated, and families completing 100 days of employment. A comparison with Scheduled Tribes and Other categories highlights the changing employment coverage and participation of SCs under the scheme. The findings also reflect the extent of employment opportunities and the changing intensity of MGNREGA participation among different social categories. The analysis further identifies the major changes in employment outcomes of SC households and provides an overall assessment of their participation under MGNREGA during the study period.

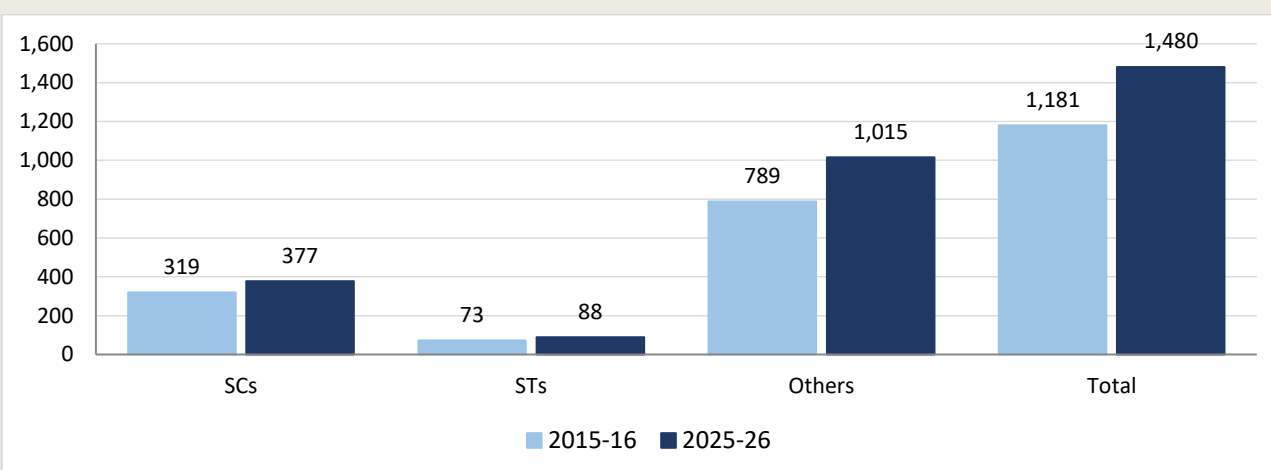
Table 5.1: Social Category-wise Number of Households Issued Job Cards under MGNREGA in India, 2015–16 and 2025–26 (in lakh)

Category	2015-16	2025-26	Change	Growth %
SCs	278.48	289.69	11.21	4.0%
STs	178.99	212.99	34.01	19.0%
Others	842.60	1,048.89	206.29	24.5%
Total	1,300.06	1,551.57	251.51	19.3%

Source :

<https://mnregaweb4.dord.gov.in/netnregarep/MISreport4.aspx>.

Table 5.1 indicates that the number of households issued MGNREGA job cards increased substantially between 2015–16 and 2025–26. The total number of job-card-holding households increased by 251.51 lakh, from 1,300.06 lakh to 1,551.57 lakh, registering an overall growth of 19.3 per cent. Among the social categories, SC households increased by 11.21 lakh (4.0 per cent), while ST households increased by 34.01 lakh (19.0 per cent). The Other category recorded the highest absolute increase of 206.29 lakh households and the highest growth rate of 24.5 per cent. Thus, although the number of SC households possessing job cards increased during the period, their growth was considerably lower than that of ST and Other households. This suggests that the expansion of MGNREGA job-card coverage was not uniform across social categories.

Figure 5.1: Social Category-wise Number of Households Issued Job Cards under MGNREGA in India (in lakh)**Table 5.2: Category-wise Number of Households Provided Employment under MGNREGA in India, 2015–16 and 2025–26 (in lakh)**

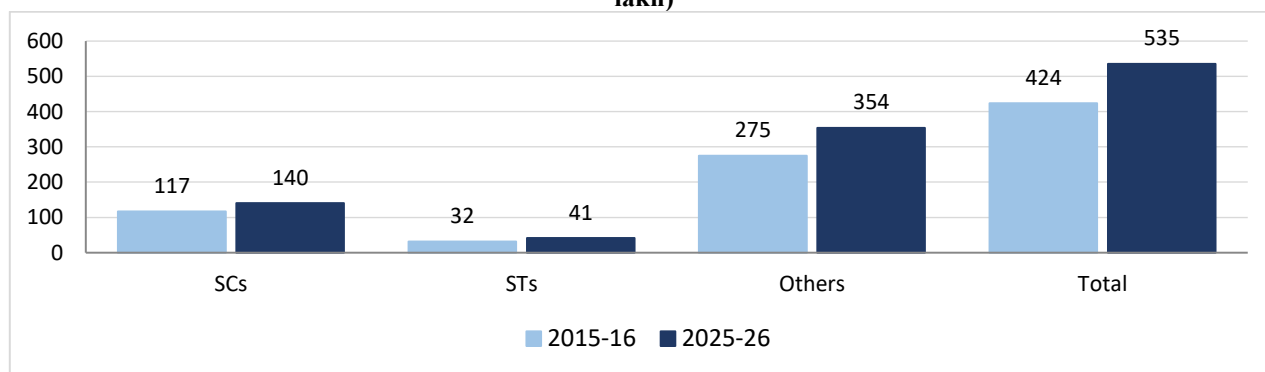
Category	2015-16	2025-26	Change	Growth %
SCs	110.67	98.38	-12.29	-11.1%
STs	81.68	92.59	10.91	13.4%
Others	288.81	342.72	53.91	18.7%
Total	481.16	533.69	52.53	10.9%

Source :

<https://mnregaweb4.dord.gov.in/netnregarep/MISreport4.aspx>.

Table 5.2 shows the number of households that were actually provided employment under MGNREGA in 2015–16 and 2025–26. The total number of households provided employment increased from 481.16 lakh in 2015–16 to 533.69 lakh in 2025–26, showing an

increase of 52.53 lakh households, or 10.9 per cent growth. However, the trend differs across social categories. The number of SC households provided employment declined from 110.67 lakh to 98.38 lakh, representing a decrease of 12.29 lakh households or 11.1 per cent. In contrast, ST households increased from 81.68 lakh to 92.59 lakh, an increase of 10.91 lakh households or 13.4 per cent. The Other category recorded the largest increase, from 288.81 lakh to 342.72 lakh households, showing an increase of 53.91 lakh households or 18.7 per cent. Thus, while overall MGNREGA employment coverage increased during the period, SC households experienced a decline in the number of households provided employment, unlike ST and Other households. This indicates that the expansion of employment under MGNREGA was uneven across social categories.

Figure 5.2: Social Category-wise Number of Households Provided Employment under MGNREGA in India (in lakh)**Table 5.3: Employment Provided to Women under MGNREGA in India, 2015–16 and 2025–26 (in lakh)**

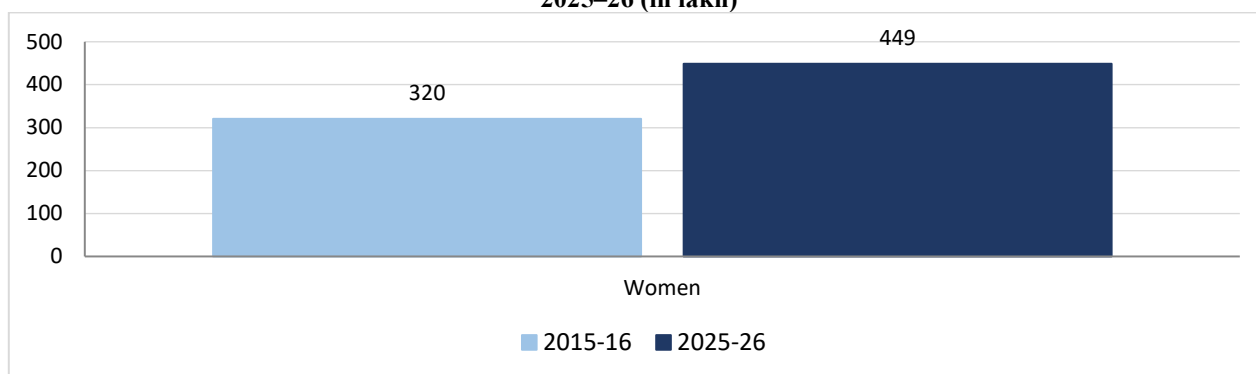
Category	2015-16	2025-26	Change	Growth %
Women	364.44	405.35	40.91	11.2%

Source :

<https://mnregaweb4.dord.gov.in/netnregarep/MISreport4.aspx>.

Table 5.3 presents the number of women's households provided employment under MGNREGA in

India during 2015–16 and 2025–26. The number increased from 364.44 lakh in 2015–16 to 405.35 lakh in 2025–26, showing an absolute increase of 40.91 lakh households. This represents an overall growth of 11.2 per cent during the period. The increase indicates that the coverage of women under MGNREGA employment has expanded over time, providing more women with access to wage employment and income-generating opportunities under the programme.

Figure 5.3: Number of Households Provided Employment to Women under MGNREGA in India, 2015–16 and 2025–26 (in lakh)**Table 5.4: Social Category-wise Number of Workers Provided Employment under MGNREGA in India, 2015–16 and 2025–**

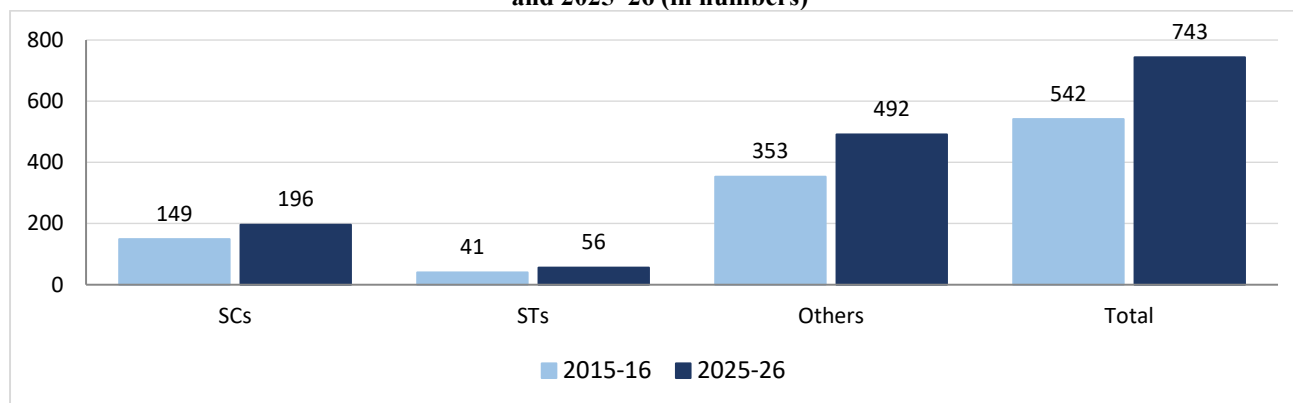
Category	2015-16	2025-26	Change	Growth %
SCs	1,63,11,285	1,28,20,488	-34,90,797	-21.4%
STs	1,33,44,787	1,32,48,463	-96,324	-0.7%
Others	4,25,98,835	4,58,81,399	32,82,564	7.7%
Total	7,22,54,907	7,19,50,350	-3,04,557	-0.4%

Source :

<https://mnregaweb4.dord.gov.in/netnregarep/MISreport4.aspx>.

Table 5.4 presents the number of workers provided employment under MGNREGA in India across different social categories during 2015–16 and 2025–26. The total number of workers provided employment declined marginally from 7,22,54,907 in 2015–16 to

7,19,50,350 in 2025–26, showing a decrease of 3,04,557 workers or 0.4 per cent. Among the social categories, the number of SC workers declined substantially from 1,63,11,285 to 1,28,20,488, a decrease of 34,90,797 workers or 21.4 per cent. Similarly, ST workers declined slightly by 96,324, from 1,33,44,787 to 1,32,48,463, representing a 0.7 per cent decline. In contrast, the number of workers belonging to the Other category increased from 4,25,98,835 to 4,58,81,399, an increase of 32,82,564 workers or 7.7 per cent. Thus, the table shows that while the overall number of workers provided employment remained almost stable, SC workers experienced the largest decline, whereas the Other category recorded an increase in employment coverage during the period.

Figure 5.4: Social Category-wise Number of Workers Provided Employment under MGNREGA in India, 2015–16 and 2025–26 (in numbers)**Table 5.5: Social Category-wise Person-days Generated under MGNREGA in India, 2015–16 and 2025–26 (in lakh)**

Category	2015-16	2025-26	Change	Growth %
SCs	5,302.84	3,874.01	-1,428.83	-26.9%
STs	4,202.91	4,559.51	356.59	8.5%
Others	13,988.73	14,621.10	632.37	4.5%
Total	23,494.49	23,054.62	-439.87	-1.9%
Women	13,006.20	13,198.53	192.32	1.5%

Source :

<https://mnregaweb4.dord.gov.in/netnregarep/MISreport4.aspx>.

Table 5.5 presents the number of person-days generated under MGNREGA in India across different social categories during 2015–16 and 2025–26. The total person-days generated declined from 23,494.49 lakh in 2015–16 to 23,054.62 lakh in 2025–26, showing a decrease of 439.87 lakh person-days or 1.9 per cent. Among the social categories, SC person-days declined considerably from 5,302.84 lakh to 3,874.01 lakh, a decrease of 1,428.83 lakh person-days or 26.9 per cent. In contrast, ST person-days increased from 4,202.91 lakh to 4,559.51 lakh, showing an increase of 356.59 lakh person-days or 8.5 per cent. The Other category also recorded an increase from 13,988.73 lakh to 14,621.10

lakh person-days, representing a rise of 632.37 lakh person-days or 4.5 per cent. The table further shows that women's person-days increased from 13,006.20 lakh to 13,198.53 lakh, an increase of 192.32 lakh person-days or 1.5 per cent. Overall, the data indicate that although total

person-days under MGNREGA declined marginally, SC person-days experienced a substantial decline, while ST, Other and women's person-days showed increases during the period.

Figure 5.5 Social Category-wise Person-days Generated under MGNREGA in India, 2015–16 and 2025–26 (in lakh)

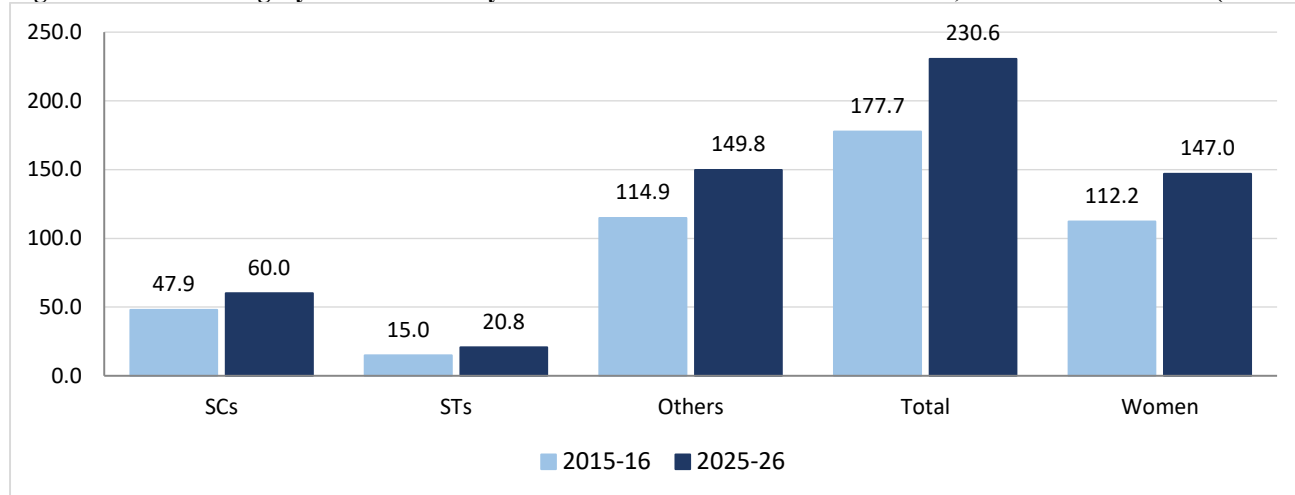


Table 5.6: Social Category-wise Number of Households Completing 100 Days of Employment under MGNREGA in India, 2015–16 and 2025–26 (in lakh)

Category	2015-16	2025-26	Change	Growth %
SCs	10.53	3.41	-7.12	-67.6%
STs	9.72	5.91	-3.81	-39.2%
Others	28.15	14.11	-14.05	-49.9%
Total	48.41	23.42	-24.99	-51.6%

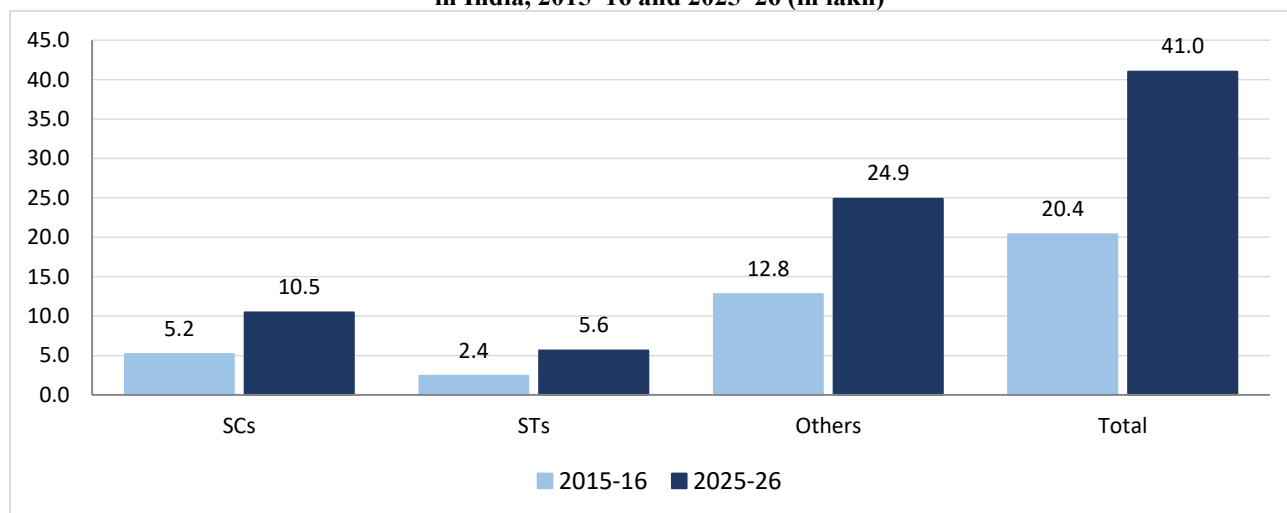
Source :

<https://mnregaweb4.dord.gov.in/netnregarep/MISreport4.aspx>.

Table 5.6 presents the number of families that completed 100 days of employment under MGNREGA in India during 2015–16 and 2025–26. The total number

of families completing 100 days declined from 48.41 lakh in 2015–16 to 23.42 lakh in 2025–26, showing a decrease of 24.99 lakh families or 51.6 per cent. Among the social categories, SC families recorded the largest percentage decline, falling from 10.53 lakh to 3.41 lakh, a decrease of 7.12 lakh families or 67.6 per cent. Similarly, ST families declined from 9.72 lakh to 5.91 lakh, representing a decrease of 3.81 lakh families or 39.2 per cent. The number of families in the Other category also decreased from 28.15 lakh to 14.11 lakh, a decline of 14.05 lakh families or 49.9 per cent. Overall, the table indicates a substantial reduction in the number of households completing the full 100 days of employment, with the decline being particularly pronounced among SC families.

Figure 1.6: Social Category-wise Number of Households Completing 100 Days of Employment under MGNREGA in India, 2015–16 and 2025–26 (in lakh)



Main Findings

The study reveals significant changes in the participation and employment outcomes of Scheduled Castes (SCs) under MGNREGA between 2015–16 and 2025–26. SC households holding job cards increased marginally by 4.0%, from 278.48 lakh to 289.69 lakh, indicating limited expansion compared with STs and Other categories. However, SC households actually provided employment declined by 11.1%, from 110.67 lakh to 98.38 lakh. Similarly, SC workers provided employment decreased substantially by 21.4%, while SC persondays declined by 26.9%. The participation of women showed an overall increase, with women's employment rising by 11.2% and women's persondays by 1.5%. A major concern is the sharp decline in families completing the guaranteed 100 days of employment. Among SC families, completion declined by 67.6%, from 10.53 lakh to 3.41 lakh. Overall, the findings indicate that although MGNREGA coverage expanded in some areas, SC employment participation and employment intensity weakened considerably during the study period.

SUGGESTIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

The study concludes that although MGNREGA continues to provide an important source of rural employment, the participation and employment intensity of Scheduled Castes have declined considerably between 2015–16 and 2025–26. Therefore, greater attention should be given to improving access to MGNREGA employment among SC households. The registration and activation of job cards should be strengthened, and eligible SC households should be effectively informed about their employment rights and entitlements. Special efforts are required to increase the participation of SC workers and ensure adequate availability of work throughout the year. The sharp decline in families completing 100 days of employment indicates the need for better planning and timely provision of work so that households can approach the guaranteed employment limit. Women's participation should also be further encouraged through suitable and accessible employment opportunities. Regular monitoring of SC participation and persondays at the local level can help identify gaps and improve implementation. Overall, targeted implementation can strengthen MGNREGA's employment-support role for SC households.

REFERENCE

1. Banerjee, A., & Saha, S. (2010). *Workfare programs, employment, and wage rates in rural India: An empirical assessment of MGNREGA*. Indian Journal of Labour Economics, 53(4), 621–638.
2. Carswell, G., & De Neve, G. (2018). *Managing MGNREGA: Local power, patronage, and the delivery of work in rural Tamil Nadu*. Development and Change, 49(5), 1227–1250. <https://doi.org/10.1111/dech.12411>
3. Dheeraja, C., & Rao, R. P. (2010). *Impact of MGNREGS on rural women: A study in select states*. National Institute of Rural Development and Panchayati Raj (NIRDPR).
4. Kaushal, K., & Singh, R. (2023). *Participation dynamics of Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes under MGNREGA in Himachal Pradesh*. Journal of Rural Development and Social Welfare, 12(2), 145–158.
5. Kumar, P. S., & Somasekhar, K. (2022). *Role of the MGNREGS in improving socio-economic conditions of Scheduled Castes in Guntur District: An assessment*. International Journal of Humanities and Social Science Research, 10(1), 34–41.
6. Ministry of Rural Development, Government of India. (2018-2023). The Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act 2005 Reports: R 5 Physical Progress, SC ST Employment Status.
7. Ministry of Rural Development, Government of India. (2026). "Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA)." Accessed September 20, 2026. https://nrega.dord.gov.in/MGNREGA_new/Nrega_home.aspx.
8. Manjula, R., & Rajasekhar, D. (2015). *Participation of Scheduled Caste households in MGNREGA: Evidence from Karnataka* (Working Paper No. 342). Institute for Social and Economic Change (ISEC).
9. Narayanan, R., & Das, S. (2020). *Administrative delays, wage suppression, and worker rationing under MGNREGA: An empirical analysis*. Economic and Political Weekly, 55(14), 45–53.
10. Pani, N., & Iyer, K. (2011). *Evaluation of the impact of MGNREGA on wage rates and rural household economies*. Indian Journal of Agricultural Economics, 66(3), 312–327.
11. Sharma, D., Karim, A., & Khanuja, S. S. (2017). MGNREGA: A Tool for Generation of Employment & Poverty Alleviation. *SSRG International Journal of Humanities and Social Science*, 4(4), 1-5. Crossref. <https://doi.org/10.14445/23942703/IJHSS-V4I4P101>
12. Taufique, M. (2023). *Regional disparities in employment and wage structures under MGNREGA: A cross-state analysis*. Asian Journal of Development Studies, 15(3), 88–102.