**Review Article**

# Enhancing Employment Opportunities for Scheduled Castes in Rural India: A Study on the Impact of MGNREGA in Himachal Pradesh

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**Abstract:** The Indian government's prominent flagship policy, aimed at increasing employment opportunities for Scheduled Castes in rural areas, is known as the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee program (MGNREGA). The primary objective of this program is to ensure that every household with adult members seeking unskilled manual labor jobs receives a minimum of 100 days of guaranteed employment within a single financial year. The current study focuses on the participation of MGNREGA in creating employment opportunities for Scheduled Castes in the Himachal Pradesh region. Additionally, it examines the role of MGNREGA in improving their economic conditions and generating jobs. These findings represent the central outcomes of the research. The successful utilization of secondary data has enabled this paper to achieve its intended objectives. The study's results underscore the significance of MGNREGA in supporting Scheduled Castes by effectiveness for those who have chosen to participate in this scheme. However, the analysis of MGNREGA reveals that the positive sentiment indicates only a modest increase in employment opportunities. Consequently, it has been determined that in order to address and overcome the shortcomings and obstacles of MGNREGS in Himachal Pradesh, strengthening and expanding the program is essential to achieve more effective outcomes and develop its regulations.

**Keywords:** Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Castes in Rural India, Employment Opportunities, MGNREGA, MGNREGA in Himachal Pradesh,

## INTRODUCTION

Based on data from the 2011 census, nearly 70 percent of India's population resides in rural regions. The National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA) of India is a government initiative designed to integrate this substantial rural population into society and enhance their income. The primary objectives of this program are to reduce income disparities between rural and urban areas, increase the income of rural residents, and mitigate the population pressure resulting from rural-to-urban migration.

The implementation of the MGNREGS scheme has led to notable improvements in various areas. The number of households participating in the MGNREGA program has steadily increased over time. Additionally, there has been a noticeable rise in the percentage of daily wage workers who have gained access to employment through this scheme. A significant contributing factor is the increased participation of women in the program, leading to a higher overall percentage of women actively engaged. Notably, women are not only provided with employment opportunities but are also paid equally with men. Consequently, MGNREGS has contributed to the social and economic empowerment of women, granting them greater autonomy.

The National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA), which came into effect on September 7, 2005, is an exceptional regulation that enhances the sense of autonomy and empowerment in rural areas. This shift in policy has transitioned from the supply side to the demand side, legally granting individuals the right to demand employment. The primary goal of this law is to enhance the overall standard of living, livelihood, and security for those residing in rural India. It aims to provide a minimum of one hundred days of job security to every capable and willing adult in a household, performing manual or unskilled labor.

The first phase of NREGA became fully operational on February 2, 2006, with the participation of about 200 districts across the nation. The second phase, anticipated to commence between 2007 and 2008, aimed to include an additional 130 districts, bringing the total to 330 districts when combined with those covered in Phase 1. On September 28, 2007, a formal notification was issued to each of the 266 districts where NREGA had been implemented by April 1, 2008. This marked a significant achievement in the successful implementation of the plan across all districts in the country, making it the largest public employment scheme in India's history. Subsequently, on October 2, 2009, the NREGS scheme was renamed in honor of Mahatma Gandhi, the nation's father, and is now known as the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MGNREGS).

On February 2, 2006, MGNREGA was first implemented in the Himachal Pradesh districts of

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Chamba and Sirmaur, followed by the Kangra and Mandi districts on April 1, 2007. Unlike the third phase, the Act applied to the remaining eight districts of the state on April 1, 2008. MGNREGA's primary aim is to enhance the livelihood security of rural households by providing each family with 100 days of guaranteed paid work for those willing to engage in unskilled physical labor during each fiscal year. The Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act extends assistance to all rural households in areas designated as eligible by the Indian government (State Institute of Rural Development, 2017).

# LITERATURE REVIEW

The MGNREGA program has proven to be a success in enhancing the socio-economic conditions of rural areas. Therefore, it is imperative to improve the training programs for MGNREGA employees and raise public awareness of upcoming policies and initiatives related to the program (Bahauguna, Pandey, and Sudan, 2016).

The MGNREGA program aims to provide employment opportunities to the underprivileged rural population in approximately 200 underdeveloped areas in India. The majority of the rural socio-economic classes, engaged in agriculture and related industries as skilled laborers, are the Scheduled Castes (Kumar & Somasekhar, 2022). In districts with a high frequency of Scheduled Caste residents, there is a significant demand for MGNREGS employment, yet Scheduled Caste households have limited access to employment days. This suggests a bias in the MGNREGS program against Scheduled Caste households, with various reasons limiting their participation (Manjula & Rajasekhar, 2015).

MGNREGA has the potential to reduce poverty by providing more employment and income options for the poorest residents of rural areas. Data from the National Sample Survey Office (NSSO) revealed that in several backward States, MGNREGA participation rates were relatively low (Dutta, Murgai, Ravallion, and Dominique, 2012). Consequently, MGNREGA can prove to be a cost-effective method for enhancing employment, directly and indirectly contributing to the revitalization of the rural economy and improving the bargaining power of rural workers (Ghosh, 2009).

Offering 100 days of guaranteed employment, MGNREGA plays a key role in mitigating the employment crisis among rural workers, reducing labor migration, and providing sustainable livelihoods for impoverished individuals (Venkatesh, 2009). It also offers a long-term solution for enhancing rural self-employment opportunities, which can boost rural productivity (Harsha, 2010). The impact of MGNREGA on the agricultural economy during lean agricultural seasons indicates its potential to strengthen rural economies, stabilize agricultural productivity, and reduce labor migration from rural to urban areas (Basu, 2011).

MGNREGA encourages rural residents to work for themselves, creating additional sources of income. As agricultural laborers can now contribute to the growth of the rural economy, the government may reduce grants for MGNREGA in the future (Shah, 2009). Data from the 66th round of the National Sample Survey Office (NSSO) shows that 25 percent of rural families are benefiting from MGNREGA employment, with 19 percent of all rural households seeking employment (NSSO, 2010). When MGNREGA is effectively implemented, it not only reduces poverty but also empowers the most vulnerable members of the rural community, positively impacting employment, consumption, and expenditure levels (Hirway, 2011).

MGNREGA has significantly improved the lives of vulnerable populations, including women and the poorest of the poor. As a result of MGNREGA, the percentage of women beneficiaries with a family income under Rs 8,000 decreased from 94% to 57%, leading to a positive impact on household income (Dheeraja & Rao, 2010).

MGNREGA serves as a vital tool for poverty reduction, pressuring rural wage rates to meet statutory minimum wages (Bhattacharyya, Gaiha, & Jha, 2011). Low-income households, through MGNREGA, are better equipped to withstand inflation and its unpredictable economic shocks (Banerjee & Saha, 2010).

While MGNREGS is highly beneficial for rural poor people, there are implementation issues that need attention at both the national and state levels of government. It is essential to ensure that the plans are effectively implemented on the ground to benefit those in need of employment. Moreover, there should be a focus on building necessary infrastructure in rural areas so that residents can take full advantage of such initiatives, resulting in a significant impact (Singh, 2022).

MGNREGA wages significantly regulate the economy of rural areas, with a considerable portion of wages going to the rural economy, ranging from 48 to 66 percent for both men and women (Pani & Iyer, 2011). The participation of Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes in MGNREGA is increasing over the years (Kaushal & Singh, 2023).

In Himachal Pradesh, the average percentage of employment offered to Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes households was 27.13 and 7.34 percent, respectively. Job cards were issued to 26.46 percent of Scheduled Castes households and 6.10 percent of Scheduled Tribes households. Additionally,

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27.25 percent of person-days were provided to Scheduled Castes, and 8.32 percent to Scheduled Tribes, while women's participation accounted for more than 60 percent of all person-days produced each fiscal year, indicating high female involvement in the state (Singh, D 2023).

Rural economic development should benefit all sections of society and each geographical area. According to the 2011 census, Himachal had a population of 68, 64,602, with 25.19 percent belonging to the Scheduled Castes. In 2032, the Finance Ministry emphasized the need to evaluate the benefits received by Scheduled Castes through MGNREGA wage payments, underscoring its importance. This study aims to address these issues, focusing on the Enhancing Employment Opportunities for Scheduled Castes in Rural India and Impact of MGNREGA in Himachal Pradesh (Singh, D 2023).

**Objectives of the Study**
- To study the Current scenario of MGNREGA for Rural Employment Development
- To study the significance of MGNERGA in uplifting the socio-economic condition of Scheduled Castes

# METHODOLOGY

The current study is primarily of an exploratory nature, relying solely on secondary data sources for its research. These secondary data sources encompass a wide range of materials, including research papers, newspapers, online sources, the Annual Economic Survey, annual reports from the Rural Development Department of Himachal Pradesh, journal articles, published documents, and various websites. Within the scope of this study, multiple variables are taken into consideration, including but not limited to the number of households actively seeking and successfully obtaining work opportunities under the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA), as well as the total number of workdays provided through this program. The study also delves into the impact of MGNREGA in terms of job creation.

In order to analyze the data and assess the effectiveness of the study, various tools were employed. This included the use of Microsoft Excel for data manipulation and statistical tools such as percentage calculations to gain insights from the collected information.

**Analysis and Interpretation**

The initial part of this segment serves to underscore the significance of the MGNERGA Scheme in the context of addressing the economic conditions and social status of individuals belonging to scheduled castes. It emphasizes the crucial role played by this scheme in fostering societal upliftment and contributing to the overall development of rural areas. Additionally, it sheds light on the program's profound impact on the socio-economic landscape of Scheduled Castes in the Himachal Pradesh region.

Furthermore, it examines the scheme's role as a supplementary source of employment generated through MGNERGA, aligning with the established provisions and guidelines governing its implementation. In doing so, the segment seeks to provide a comprehensive understanding of how MGNERGA functions as a vehicle for social and economic progress, particularly for the Scheduled Castes in the specific context of Himachal Pradesh.

**MGNREGA: Enabling the Right to Work and Transforming Rural India**

In Article 41 of the Indian Constitution, the right to work is enshrined, making the MGNREGA Act crucial. This Act stands out from its predecessors by guaranteeing employment, a fundamental shift in this category of programs. It ensures uniform Wage Employment nationwide and focuses on creating durable assets, aiming for a real transformation in public investment to foster growth in underdeveloped regions.

MGNREGA's core objective is to provide employment to those who cannot find work elsewhere, instilling a sense of security in rural unemployed individuals. Unlike previous employment initiatives, MGNREGA limits laborers to those possessing Job Cards. What sets it apart is its time-bound nature, ensuring employment allocation and payment within 15 days of the work period. Furthermore, the program introduces the concept of a Job Card, valid for a maximum of 100 days.

MGNREGA also champions the advancement of laborers, women's empowerment, transparent and accountable work systems, social audits, labor-intensive projects, and decentralized participatory planning. Its innovative use of technology enhances transparency and expedites monitoring and implementation. Notably, wage credit through banks and post offices reduces the need for muster lists. MGNREGA is designed with a broader vision for India's economic growth and prosperity, aiming to be more than just a welfare program.

**Empowering Scheduled Castes in Himachal Pradesh: MGNREGA's Impact and Transformation**

In Himachal Pradesh, the Scheduled Castes community represents a significant portion of the population, comprising 25.2%, compared to the national average of 16.6% (Census 2011). Notably, ten out of the state's twelve districts have a higher percentage of Scheduled Castes residents compared to the national average. Over time, Scheduled Castes and

Scheduled Tribes have experienced relatively slower progress across various economic and social dimensions. Within Himachal Pradesh, the Scheduled Castes face higher rates of poverty, unemployment, and illiteracy compared to other demographic groups. Their educational and employment outcomes stand in stark contrast to those of other communities.

For the residents of the region, MGNREGA is the primary rural employment scheme they are familiar with. In the agricultural sector, labor demand experiences significant seasonality, leading to fluctuations in employment needs. MGNREGA has been designed to provide 100 days of guaranteed public employment during lean periods, such as when there is no harvesting season or a reduced demand for labor. This program has greatly benefited the unemployed rural population in the area. Furthermore, the financial well-being of the predominantly female Scheduled Castes community has seen improvements due to MGNREGA. This has not only increased their involvement in family decision-making but has also enabled them to support their family members, including children, with their financial needs. Additionally, this financial empowerment has boosted the women's confidence in dealing with the day-to-day challenges of life. In a relatively short time frame, MGNREGA has significantly enhanced the social and economic status of the Scheduled Castes in the region.

## MGNREGS Driving Rural Development through Diverse Initiatives

The MGNREGS schemes encompass significant rural development initiatives, addressing aspects such as rural connectivity, flood protection, and control measures like the construction and maintenance of embankments. In addition to these, the program's workforce is engaged in collecting and conserving water resources, which involves the construction of additional tanks, ponds, percolation tanks, minor check dams, and micro-irrigation projects, including the creation of small canals. Furthermore, the program extends irrigation services to land owned by SC/ST citizens, beneficiaries of land reform, and recipients of the Indira Awas Yojana, among others. The renovation of traditional water features is also a part of the program's objectives.

To achieve these goals, the program strives to address the need for managing hazardous tanks, ponds, old canals, and open wells. It's essential to note that any work undertaken within this project strictly prohibits the use of machinery or contractors. In summary, the program aims to fulfill several objectives, including the generation of employment and the development of physical assets and infrastructure.

## The Perpetual Struggle: Scheduled Castes and the Caste Hierarchy in India

The Indian caste system comprises four Varnas, creating a hierarchical structure. However, this hereditary caste structure impedes social mobility due to the imposition of numerous irrational socio-cultural and religious regulations and practices. At the core of Indian society are the building blocks of hierarchical caste relations, marked by social exclusion, caste prejudice, and blatant inequities. The Scheduled Castes find themselves in the lowest strata of society, enduring impurity and severe socioeconomic hardships. The current socioeconomic conditions faced by the Scheduled Castes in India stand as a stark testament to this reality. In nearly every aspect of social and personal life, they experience impoverishment compared to the rest of society. Furthermore, their lives become even more distressing as they endure various forms of egregious caste-based abuses, discrimination, and social exclusion within the community. This contradicts several constitutional provisions and policies that the Indian government has implemented since the country's independence with the intention of empowering and safeguarding the Scheduled Castes.

In Himachal Pradesh, the socioeconomic conditions of the Scheduled Castes are far from ideal. Scheduled caste households experience very poor living conditions, and the majority of them reside in rural areas. In Himachal Pradesh, MGNREGA serves as a supplementary source of employment for the rural population.

## The Historical Struggles of Scheduled Castes for Educational Equity

The educational status of Scheduled Castes has long been marked by adversity. In ancient India, these communities were systematically denied access to education, with no provision for their learning within Gurukuls or the Brahmacharya Ashram system. They were forbidden from receiving Vedic or archery education, even during the Mughal era. Although the British government established schools, limited access meant that only a fraction of Scheduled Castes could benefit from these educational opportunities. Most schools were located in urban areas, making education inaccessible to impoverished rural communities.

Post-independence, both the central and state governments have initiated various measures to enhance education, particularly for Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes. Today, primary education is freely available up to the age of 14, and middle schools have been established across rural areas. Furthermore, students from these communities receive free food, clothing, books, lunch-boxes, and supplies. While these measures have improved access, the Scheduled Castes still face socio-educational disparities compared to the upper castes.

Historically, Dalits were entirely excluded from formal education. Early attempts to improve their

educational prospects were often linked to British authority and Christian missionary efforts in India. It wasn't until the introduction of western secular education during British rule that some castes gained newfound educational opportunities. However, these educational advancements did not alleviate the widespread illiteracy and social backwardness experienced by Dalits. Access to western education was highly controlled by the upper castes, and Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes were not allowed to attend schools until the early 20th century. They were confined to menial jobs as formal education was considered of little use, and rural schools were established much later. Consequently, Dalit education remained dormant and in deplorable conditions for an extended period.

## Caste, Occupation, and Economic Disparities: The Case of Dalits in Traditional India

In the traditional social structure, caste and occupation were intricately connected. The specialization of one's occupation, determined by the Hindu social structure to establish one's caste, played a crucial role in understanding the economic situation of Dalits in India. Given their significance in shaping the economy, the occupational and employment prospects of the individuals in question needed to be thoroughly examined.

The caste system continues to exert a dominant influence on rural society. Despite some recent changes, the occupational structure in villages closely resembles the ancient system. This means that upper castes traditionally practice "clean" vocations, while menial and "unclean" jobs are reserved for and expected of the lower castes. These symbolic occupational connections have seen very little alteration because the rural economy still heavily relies on them.

As a result, the upper castes continue to engage in these "clean" vocations, while the lower castes are constrained to perform menial and unclean tasks. The rural economy's continued dependence on these symbolic occupational ties has resulted in minimal transformations to date.

## Income Determinants and Economic Challenges for Scheduled Castes in India

Income plays a pivotal role in shaping a person's economic circumstances, and this is especially relevant for Scheduled Castes (Dalit) individuals. As the most marginalized group in the country, their historical exclusion from property ownership left them reliant on wages as their sole source of income. Due to the restrictive caste-based employment opportunities of the past, Dalits struggled to substantially improve their earnings without significant societal changes.

For Scheduled Castes households, income primarily emanates from three key sources: wages obtained through initiatives like MGNREGA, salaried employment, and earnings from agricultural activities.

## MGNREGA and the Battle against Rural Poverty in India

Since India's independence, the nation has embarked on a journey of socio-economic transformation. Various governments have implemented an array of development plans aimed at reducing rural poverty. Public employment programs have consistently been at the forefront of these initiatives, offering social security and economic relief to the marginalized. Over the decades, the government introduced precursor programs to the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA), including the Jawahar Rozgar Yojana (JRY), Employment Assurance Scheme (EAS), Food for Work Programme (FWP), Jawahar Gramme Samridhi Yojana (JGSY), and Sampoorna Grameen Rozgar Yojana (SGRY).

However, despite these efforts, certain social groups, including Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, and the working class, have not fully benefited from these schemes. The challenges include improper implementation, corruption, institutional inefficiencies, and misalloction of central funds. A comprehensive evaluation and diverse program management are crucial to the success of anti-poverty measures.

MGNREGA stands as a pivotal tool for addressing the complex challenges related to poverty, caste, religion, culture, and socio-economic disparities faced by marginalized communities. This program uplifts all disadvantaged sections in rural areas, significantly contributing to their empowerment.

India's rural landscape, home to approximately 83.3 crore of its 121 crore inhabitants, grapples with significant poverty. The World Bank's 2016 data indicates that 270 million people live below the poverty line, equating to one in every five Indians. Notably, 62% of the impoverished population resides in low-income states such as Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, Odisha, Jharkhand, Chhattisgarh, and Rajasthan. Within this context, the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes constitute roughly 43% of the impoverished population.

It's important to note that around 80% of India's population faces poverty, with rural areas experiencing a 25% poverty rate compared to 14% in urban regions. A significant portion of the rural impoverished are landless, emphasizing the need to address rural poverty to tackle larger social issues. The development of rural areas is crucial for India's inclusive progress, enabling the realization of untapped potential currently stifled by poverty.

**Challenges in Delivering Welfare Programs to Scheduled Populations in Himachal Pradesh**

Scheduled populations in Himachal Pradesh face significant socioeconomic challenges, characterized by poor living conditions and limited access to essential amenities such as housing, education, clean water, and sanitation. This results in lower annual incomes for Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, and low-income groups, contributing to a lower quality of life. Efforts are needed in Himachal Pradesh to prioritize improving access to these vital amenities, addressing the challenges faced by the Scheduled Castes at the local level. Efficient implementation of MGNERGA projects is crucial for better integration into society.

Scheduled populations from privileged backgrounds have a better understanding of government welfare programs, including MGNREGA, compared to other upper castes. However, it is essential for government organizations in rural areas to focus more on the welfare of Scheduled Castes, often relying on local teachers to disseminate information. While male members have held leadership positions in Scheduled population associations, limited representation of women has resulted in a gender gap in awareness of government programs. Collecting input on these programs is vital, as substantial funds allocated for the advancement of Scheduled populations often go underutilized.

Various factors contribute to the inefficiency of MGNERGA schemes, including inadequate promotion, insufficient medical facilities, delayed cash disbursements, and limited employment opportunities. Additionally, issues such as low wages, bureaucratic hurdles, grant delays, and irregular fund disbursements further impede the success of these programs. Furthermore, the state frequently fails to meet the mandatory 15-day wage disbursement period stipulated by MGNREGA.

# CONCLUSIONS

Overall, MGNREGA is a transformative program enshrining the right to work in the Indian Constitution. It guarantees employment and aims to uplift rural regions through durable asset creation. Key features include time-bound employment allocation, Job Cards, and nationwide Wage Employment. MGNREGA's objectives are to provide work during lean periods and empower marginalized communities, notably Scheduled Castes. The program has notably improved the economic status of Scheduled Castes in Himachal Pradesh and contributes to rural development. The caste hierarchy in India perpetuates social exclusion, despite constitutional provisions. Education access and economic disparities persist. Scheduled Castes primarily rely on wages for income, making programs like MGNREGA crucial. However,

challenges in program delivery must be addressed for its full impact.

In essence, MGNREGA is a vital tool for addressing poverty and caste-based inequalities in rural India, empowering marginalized communities and fostering inclusive progress. Overcoming implementation challenges is crucial to ensure benefits reach the most vulnerable in society.

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