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Strengthening Rural Livelihoods: Unpacking Workforce Engagement in MGNREGA – A Case Study of Bhavani Taluk, Tamil Nadu

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Abstract

As a crucial social security measure to enhance rural livelihoods by offering a wage employment guarantee, the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) has been a vital initiative. This research paper analyses the workforce engagement in Bhavani Taluk of Tamil Nadu concerning MGNREGA participation, skill development, and economic impact factors. Data were gathered using a convenience sampling method on 171 respondents, consisting of MGNREGA beneficiaries. Their experiences and challenges concerning job security, sufficiency of wages, and workplace conditions have been discussed to evaluate their opinion. This paper reveals how MGNREGA reduces unemployment, enhances income stability, and provides community development benefits. Findings suggest that the scheme contributes much to financial inclusion and rural empowerment. However, problems like irregular payment of wages, lack of skill-based training, and delays in work allocation are still prevalent. The study recommended better implementation strategies, timely disbursement of wages, and integration of skill development programmes to enhance the outcome of the scheme. This research could be considered worthy of further consideration by policymakers, social welfare organisations, and local administrators to strengthen rural employment mechanisms with sustainable livelihood opportunities under MGNREGA.

Keywords: Livelihood Security, MGNREGA, Rural Employment and Workforce Engagement

1. Introduction

The Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) is a pivotal scheme designed to enhance livelihood security in rural India by providing 100 days of guaranteed wage employment to unskilled labourers. It aims to bring down rural distress, improve financial inclusion, and ensure sustainable employment. Tamil Nadu is actively participating in the scheme, with Bhavani Taluk being a significant region for its implementation. Workforce engagement in MGNREGA shapes the socio-economic conditions of rural households. However, several challenges, such as delayed wage payments, lack of skill enhancement, and worksite inefficiencies, hinder the effectiveness of the programme. Understanding workforce engagement patterns is vital for ensuring better policy outcomes and improving the economic well-being of rural workers. This study investigates the factors influencing participation, job satisfaction, and challenges faced by workers under MGNREGA in Bhavani Taluk, Tamil Nadu.

2. Review of Literature

Mehta[1] analysed the effectiveness of MGNREGA works in rural infrastructure development. His study documented that MGNREGA had contributed significantly to rural road construction, water conservation projects, and land development initiatives. These projects led to long-term community benefits by improving agricultural productivity and connectivity rather than short-term employment. However, he noted that the quality and durability of infrastructure created under MGNREGA needed further improvement through better planning and resource allocation.

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Patil and Reddy[2] investigated the sustainability of rural employment under MGNREGA, focusing on the integration of skill development programmes. Their research highlighted that while the scheme provided employment, it often does not provide skill enhancement, limiting workers' ability to transition into better-paying jobs. They suggested incorporating vocational training and technical skill programmes within MGNREGA to ensure long-term employment sustainability and greater economic mobility for rural workers.

Das[3] examined the wage structure and payment mechanisms under MGNREGA, identifying major delays and inconsistencies in wage disbursement. It was found that administrative inefficiencies, lack of digital literacy among rural workers, and bureaucratic bottlenecks led to delayed wage payments. These delays impacted worker satisfaction and resulted in reduced participation in the scheme. Das recommended strengthening digital payment systems and improving local governance to enhance the efficiency of wage distribution.

Sharma and Verma[4] explored the role of MGNREGA in empowering women through economic participation. Their findings emphasised that the scheme had significantly increased female workforce participation, allowing women to earn household income and gain financial independence. Additionally, the study noted that decision-making abilities among women improved as they became more involved in household financial matters. However, challenges such as gender wage disparities and limited leadership opportunities at worksites persisted, requiring strategic interventions.

Ravi and Kumar[5] conducted an in-depth study on the impact of MGNREGA on rural poverty reduction. Their research revealed that the scheme enhanced household incomes, particularly for marginalised communities. By offering consistent wage employment, MGNREGA helped to reduce seasonal migration and improve economic stability in rural India. Despite its success, their study also highlighted issues related to delayed wage payments and irregular employment opportunities, which need further policy attention.

3. Need for the Study

Despite the positive impact of MGNREGA, there are persistent challenges such as low wages, irregular job avenues and less workforce engagement strategies. This study aims to bridge the gap by assessing the effectiveness of MGNREGA in Bhavani Taluk, identifying issues faced by workers, and recommending policies for extending workforce engagement. Understanding these dynamics is crucial for enhancing rural employment sustainability and ensuring economic resilience.

4. Objectives

The objectives of the study are as follows:

- To study the demographic characteristics of the workers working under MGNREGA.
- To analyse the factors influencing the level of workforce engagement under MGNREGA in Bhavani Taluk.
- To examine the challenges faced by MGNREGA workers.
- To provide recommendations for improving employment sustainability and workforce satisfaction.

5. Research Methodology

- *Research Design*: Descriptive research design.
- *Sampling Method*: Convenience sampling technique.
- *Sample Size*: 171 respondents (MGNREGA workers in Bhavani Taluk).
- *Data Collection Tool*: Structured questionnaire.
- *Data Analysis Techniques*: Percentage analysis, Chi-Square test, and Henry Garrett Ranking Method.

6. Analysis and Discussion

This section provides a detailed analysis of workforce engagement in MGNREGA, focused on the Bhavani Taluk of Erode District. The following section presents the results and discussions.

6.1 Socio-economic Profile of the Respondents

6.1.1 Gender of the Respondents

The gender of the respondents is classified as male and female. Table 1 shows the gender of the respondents.

Table 1. Gender of the respondents

Gender	No. of respondents	Percentage (%)
Female	101	59.1
Male	70	40.9
Total	**171**	**100.0**

Source: Primary Data

It is stated in Table 1 that 59.1% of the respondents are female and 40.9% of the respondents are male.

6.1.2 Age of the Respondents

The age group of the respondents is classified as less than 25 years, 25-40 years, 41-55 years, 56-75 years and more than 75 years. Table 2 shows the age of the respondents.

It is noted from the Table 2 that 29.2% of the respondents are between 25-40 years of age, 25.1% of the respondents are between 41-55 years, 21.6% of the respondents are between 56-75 years, 21.1% of the respondents are above 75 years and 2.9% of the respondents are below 25 years of age.

6.1.3 Type of Family

The respondents belong to either a joint or a nuclear family. Table 3 shows the type of family of the respondents.

It is observed from Table 3 that 69.6% of the respondents are in a nuclear family, and the remaining 30.4% of the respondents are in a joint family set up.

6.1.4 Educational Qualification of the Respondents

The respondents belong to various educational qualification criteria like above graduate, graduate, higher secondary education, primary education and illiterate. Table 4 shows the educational qualifications of the respondents.

Table 2. Age of the respondents

Age	No. of respondents	Percentage (%)
<25	5	2.9
25-40	50	29.2
41-55	43	25.1
56-75	37	21.6
>75	36	21.1
Total	**171**	**100.0**

Source: Primary Data

Table 3. Type of family of the respondents

Type of family	No. of respondents	Percentage (%)
Joint	52	30.4
Nuclear	119	69.6
Total	**171**	**100.0**

Source: Primary Data

It is identified from Table 4 that 38% of the respondents are illiterate, 24% of the respondents are qualified with primary education, 14.6% of the respondents are qualified with above graduation, 14% of the respondents are qualified as graduates, and the remaining 9.4% of the respondents are qualified with higher secondary education.

6.1.5 Years of Experience

The years of experience of the respondents as workers under MGNREGA are classified as less than 1 year, 1-5 years, 6-10 years, 11-15 years and more than 15 years. Table 5 shows the years of experience of the respondents.

It is observed from the Table 5 that 55% of the respondents have 1-5 years of experience, 23.4% of the respondents have more than 15 years of experience, 11.1% of the respondents have 6-10 years of experience, 8.8% of the respondents have less than 1 year of experience and rest 1.8% of the respondents have 11-15 years of experience in MGNREGA.

6.1.6 Social Category of the Respondents

The social category to which the respondents belong is categorised as BC, SC and others. Table 6 shows the social category of the respondents.

Table 4. Educational qualifications of the respondents

Educational qualification	No. of respondents	Percentage (%)
Above Graduate	25	14.6
Graduate	24	14.0
Higher Secondary Education	16	9.4
Primary Education	41	24.0
Illiterate	65	38.0
Total	**171**	**100.0**

Source: Primary Data

Table 5. Years of experience of the respondents

Years of experience	No. of respondents	Percentage (%)
<1	15	8.8
1-5	94	55.0
6-10	19	11.1
11-15	3	1.8
>15	40	23.4
Total	**171**	**100.0**

It is noted from Table 6 that 41.5% of the respondents come under the SC category, 33.9% of the respondents come under the BC category, and rest 24.6% of the respondents fall under the other category.

6.2 Association between the Level of Opinion and the Social Category of the Respondents

The association between the level of opinion of the respondents regarding satisfaction, burden of work, employment opportunity, job security and social category has been analysed by framing a null hypothesis and is tested with a chi-square test at 5% level of significance. The results are shown in Table 7.

H_0: There is no significant association between the level of opinion and the social category of the respondents

Table 7 reveals that there is no significant association between social category and the level of opinion on satisfaction, burden of work, and job security, thereby accepting the null hypothesis (H_0) for these variables. However, there is a significant association between social category and employment opportunity, leading to the rejection of the null hypothesis (H_0) for this factor.

6.3 Factors Influencing Workforce Eligibility to Work in MGNREGA

Table 8 shows the factors influencing workforce eligibility to work in MGNREGA.

Table 6. Social category of the respondents

Social Category	No. of respondents	Percentage (%)
BC	58	33.9
SC	71	41.5
Others	42	24.6
Total	**171**	**100.0**

Source: Primary Data

It is identified from the Table 8 that the respondents have given 55.88 as mean scorefor community recommendations and ranked it as first, 55.26 for land holding size and ranked it as second, followed by economic background (54.82), government support (53.12), political influence (50.98), physical ability (50.79), household size (49.09), awareness of rights (46.79), education level (43.44) and documentation readiness (40.76).

6.4 Challenges Faced by the Workforce in MGNREGA

Table 9 shows the challenges faced by the workforce in MGNREGA.

It is noted from Table 9 that the respondents have given 68.78 as a mean score for poor working conditionsand ranked it as first, 63.31 for delayed payments and ranked it as second, 47.03 for lack of awareness about rights and ranked it as third, 44.53 for limited days of work and

Table 8. Factors influencing workforce eligibility to work in MGNREGA

S. No	Factors	Total score	Henry Garrett's mean score	Mean rank
1	Economic Background	9319	54.82	3
2	Education Level	7384	43.44	9
3	Physical Ability	8635	50.79	6
4	Government Support	9031	53.12	4
5	Community Recommendations	9500	55.88	1
6	Land Holding Size	9394	55.26	2
7	Household Size	8345	49.09	7
8	Awareness of Rights	7954	46.79	8
9	Political Influence	8667	50.98	5
10	Documentation Readiness	6929	40.76	10

Source: Computed

Table 7. Level of opinion and social category

Factor	Degree of freedom	Table value (p-value)	Chi-square value	Result
Satisfaction	**8**	0.290654721	9.647348091	**Accepted (H_0)**
Burden of work	**8**	0.103949462	13.23705335	**Accepted (H_0)**
Employment opportunity	**8**	0.034165204	16.63304781	**Rejected (H_0)**
Job security	**8**	0.103949462	13.23705335	**Accepted (H_0)**

Source: Computed

Table 9. Challenges faced by the workforce in MGNREGA

S. No.	Challenges	Total score	Henry Garrett's mean score	Mean rank
1.	LowWages	6965	43.53	5
2.	Delayed Payments	10130	63.31	2
3.	Lack of Awareness About Rights	7525	47.03	3
4.	Poor Working Conditions	11005	68.78	1
5.	Limited Days of Work	7125	44.53	4

ranked it as fourth and 43.53 for low wages and ranked it as fifth. Hence, it can be concluded that the most important problem faced by the workers is poor working conditions.

7. Major Findings

The major findings of the study are summarised:

- The majority of respondents are female (59.1%), indicating higher female participation compared to male respondents (40.9%). This could reflect gender dynamics in workforce engagement under MGNREGA.
- The largest age group is 25-40 years (29.2%), followed by 41-55 years (25.1%), suggesting that the scheme primarily attracts the younger to middle-aged workforce. Notably, 21.1% are above 75 years, highlighting engagement among the elderly.
- A significant portion of respondents belong to nuclear families (69.6%), compared to joint families (30.4%). This may indicate changing family structures influencing employment patterns.
- A considerable 38% are illiterate, showing a high dependency on unskilled labour opportunities. Meanwhile, 24% have primary education, and only 14.6% have qualifications at graduate & above, indicating limited higher educational attainment among respondents.
- Most of the respondents have 1-5 years of experience (55%), showing a relatively new or short-term engagement with MGNREGA. In contrast, 23.4% have more than 15 years of experience, reflecting long-term dependency on the scheme for employment.
- The majority belong to the SC category (41.5%), followed by BC (33.9%), revealing that socially marginalised groups are more reliant on MGNREGA for livelihood.
- The Chi-Square test at a 5% significance level reveals that there is no association between Social Category and the level of opinion on satisfaction, burden, and job security, thereby accepting the null hypothesis (H_0) for these variables. However, there is a significant association between Social Category and employment opportunity, leading to the rejection of the null hypothesis (H_0) for this factor.
- The most significant challenge faced is poor working conditions (68.78), followed by delayed payments (63.31), which can negatively impact financial stability. Other key issues include lack of awareness (47.03), limited workdays (44.53), and low wages (43.53), reflecting structural constraints within the MGNREGA scheme.
- Community recommendations (55.88) and landholding size (55.26) are the most influential factors affecting workforce engagement, suggesting that social networks and economic assets play crucial roles. Economic background (54.82) and government support (53.12) also significantly impact participation, highlighting the importance of socioeconomic status and institutional backing.

8. Suggestions

- Poor working conditions are affecting workers' health and productivity. Improving safety, with basic facilities like water and rest areas, and ensuring better working environments will help workers stay healthier and more productive.
- Payment delays create financial hardship for workers. Hence, the government should focus on streamlining the payment process, using digital solutions and improving administration to enable prompt payment.
- Many workers are unaware of their rights under the scheme. To address this, the government could introduce simple, easy-to-access information systems, such as mobile apps and local awareness campaigns, which will enable the workers to understand their entitlement and the sources to seek help are entitled and how to seek help.
- The limited number of workdays is not enough for workers to reap a sustainable income. Increasing workdays or offering seasonal employment options would help workers earn more and create a more stable livelihood.
- The wages paid under the scheme should be revised to meet the current cost of living. Regular adjust-

ments based on inflation and the local economy, along with equitable pay to all workers, would help improve workers' financial security and quality of life.

- Lastly, enhance transparency and accountability in work allocation and wage disbursement.

9. Conclusion

The study highlights the significant impact of MGNREGA on rural employment and poverty alleviation, particularly in Bhavani Taluk. The scheme has successfully enhanced economic stability, promoted female workforce participation, and contributed to community development. However, the research findings also underscore several key challenges, such as irregular wage payments, lack of skill enhancement, inadequate worksite facilities, and limited employment opportunities beyond the guaranteed 100 days. Addressing these challenges requires strategic interventions, including timely wage disbursement mechanisms, structured vocational training programs, and policy modifications to increase work availability. Additionally, improving transparency in work allocation, enhancing rural infrastructure planning, and fostering local governance participation are crucial for ensuring the scheme's long-term sustainability. The suggestions provide concrete ideas for policymakers, social welfare organisations, and local administrations in refining MGNREGA's implementation. By strengthening rural workforce engagement, fostering sustainable employment models, and integrating skill development, MGNREGA can serve as a more comprehensive tool for economic empowerment and rural development. Future research should focus on expanding the scope of MGNREGA's benefits, including technological interventions, private-sector collaborations, and environmental sustainability initiatives to further enhance workforce engagement and rural livelihood security.

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