

A critical analysis of the effectiveness of employment policies in Assam

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- Assam, one of the seven states in the north-east of India, covers a geographical area of 78,438 sq. km, which is 2.4 per cent of the country's total geographical area.
- With a population of 26.6 lakhs, the population density per sq km in the state stands at 340 as against India's 324 (Census 2001).

- Endowed with rich natural resources, the entire north-eastern region of India, including Assam has remained an industrially backward region.
- Historically, Assam was a prosperous land, with its per capita income 4 per cent above the national average at the time of independence.
- Today, Assam is one of the poorest states of the country with its per capita income less than 60 per cent of the national average.

- Natural calamities, mainly floods, insurgency, terrorism, ethnic tension, economic backwardness and poverty, massive unemployment problem and serious financial crisis have resulted in such a situation.
- Geographical isolation of the region started with the partition of the country in 1947. Wars with China in 1962, Indo-Pak war of 1965, formation of Bangladesh in 1971, which led to a large flow of refugees into Assam, resulted in an atmosphere where prospective investors realized that Assam is not a safe place for investment.

- The Assam agitation, which began in 1979, the rise of ULFA in mid 1980s followed by unrest in Bodo areas engulfed the state with militancy, insurgency, terrorism and associated killings, extortions, etc.
- Despite being rich in natural resources and industrial raw materials, the process of industrialization of the state came to a halt, with no fresh investment but the flight of capital from the state.

- The state government has not been able to take any strong development initiative but engaged in fighting terrorism, insurgency, ethnic uprising, etc.

In addition to the direct cost of fighting terrorism (including life and property), there has been an immense indirect cost in terms of loss of production, employment, investment and an environment of insecurity and uncertainty.

- Although the magnitude of unemployment in Assam is not precisely known, the live register of the employment exchanges reveals that the number of persons seeking jobs through the employment exchanges is increasing at an alarming rate.
- Besides, there is a huge extent of under-employment or disguised unemployment existing in the rural areas of Assam.
- Moreover, the problem of unemployment has been aggravated with the joining of an increasing number of educated job seekers, including technical and professional personnel in the rank of unemployed from year to year.

Number of Applicants on the Live Register and the Number of Placement in Assam

Year	Applicants on Live Registrar	No. of Placements
1980	3,47,567	6,297
1991	13,56,057	4,329
2001	15,24,616	942
2002	15,71,966	747

- Post liberalization, when most parts of the country experienced growth, both in terms of income and employment, Assam had nothing new to offer.
- With almost no growth in the manufacturing sector, the state has not been able to provide adequate employment opportunities to the fast growing population.

Government Employment Schemes

- **Sampoorna Grameen Rojgar Yojana (SGRY):** The main objective of this programme is to create additional wage employment opportunities during the period of shortage of wage employment through manual works for the rural poor living below poverty line. It thus leads to creation of durable community based social and economic assets. Till September 2007-08, employment generated in lakh mandays stood at 73.07. The number of works completed till the same date stood at 10440 and the number of works in progress at 7288.

- **Special SGSY:** This special project aims to increase livelihood of the poor through improvement of traditional sericulture activity in the North Eastern India. The project involves development of non-mulberry silk namely Eri (Endi) & Muga. These silks are found only in the North East India. Department of Panchayat & Rural Development, Assam in collaboration with Central Silk Board and Department of Handloom Sericulture, Assam implements the project. The project is under the special SGSY of the Ministry of Rural Development, Govt. India. The Project Golden Thread is a holistic project covering all aspects from plantation to spinning with modern machines and market linkage. It is now going on in the eight districts of Assam namely Dhemaji, Lakhimpur, Karbianglong, Goalpara, Dhubri, Golaghat, Kamrup and Kokrajhar.

- Chief Minister's Swa-Niyojan Yojana: The Government of Assam launched this new unique self-employment scheme for imparting job oriented training to the educated youths of the state between 18 to 40 years of age in different industrially developed states of the country on 1st March 2001. In the recent budget also an amount of Rs 15 crore has been allotted for this scheme.

- **Employment Generation Mission:** Chief Minister Tarun Gogoi launched the ambitious Employment Generation Mission that seeks to generate employment opportunities for 1.67 lakh people at a cost of Rs 669 crore in August 2007-08. The Mission is based on a study on generation of substantial and sustainable employment opportunities in Assam by noted economist Dr Jayanta Madhab. The study also suggested the proposed approach for tackling the unemployment problem.

Impact of NREGA

- NREGA was introduced in 7 districts of Assam in 2006 (in the first phase). In the second phase, 6 more districts have been included. Under this scheme, employment generated stood at 1066523, in September 2007-08, out of which 8632 have completed the stipulated 100 days of employment.

- A survey was carried out in the Darrang districts to study the micro level impact of the scheme. Darrang came under NREGA in the second phase in November 2007. Darrang has 6 development blocks with 79 gaon panchayats.

Findings:

- First, the act has removed the sense of insecurity in the minds of the workers to a large extent. As they are bound to get work for 100 days, an income of Rs 7700/ (Rs 77 per day) is the minimum additional income they can earn in a year.
- The Act has enabled the workers to get organized and has improved their bargaining strength.

- One very important outcome of the Act has been the creation of durable assets. The development of social infrastructure has been undertaken in all the worksites.
- The NREGA gives power and responsibility to the panchayat institutions. The gram sabha and the gram panchayat are the two implementing agencies in the act. All the BDOs of the study area were of the opinion that the gram sabhas were able to identify the projects/works beneficial for the society in the village.

PROBLEMS:

- The BDOs and JEs of all the Blocks visited said that more manpower was necessary for the implementation of the scheme.
- The workers had complaints on work done on piece rate.

- This problem can however be solved by forming a strong Vigilant Committee by the local members of the concerned work site. In the presence of this Committee work gets done in a proper manner even on wage rate basis.
- Prevention of the use of machinery also hampered the progress of work in some work sites. Sometimes raw materials had to be carried from some distance, and the BDOs expressed that the workers were not willing to do that.

Conclusions:

- The various employment generation programmes implemented so far in Assam (like in other places) have failed to achieve the targeted level of employment due to heavy corruption and other institutional factors.
- There has been limited impact in terms of generation of man-days employment per worker. There had always existed a class of contractors who allowed the benefits of the schemes to people at their whims.

- If effectively implemented , the NREGA will go a long way towards ensuring food security and protecting rural household from hunger.
- This scheme has been extended to all the 27 districts of the State from 2008-09 and the rate of daily wage under NREGA is likely to be raised from Rs.77 at present to Rs.100. Necessary budget provision has been made in 2008-09 budget for this purpose.

- For an employment guarantee programme to generate continuous employment for the poor, and to promote adequate employment opportunities, the selection and sequencing of works should be done systematically, the productive assets generated are to be managed and used well and they promote sustainable employment.
- To achieve these effects, common people should be made aware of the schemes available and training should be imparted not only to the implementing agencies (Gaon Panchayats in this case), but also to the beneficiaries.

- Also, for a scheme to be successful, creation of wage employment itself is not enough. Skill formation of the workers is likely to benefit the workers more by enabling them to absorb themselves elsewhere.
- For all government sponsored scheme to be successful, dedication is required, both from the officers and the workers. Both parties should come with an open mind to make the programmes successful, as everyone is likely to benefit in the long run from the assets created in the process.