

NREGA AND RURAL EMPLOYMENT IN PUNJAB
AN EVALUATIVE STUDY OF HOSHIARPUR DISTRICT

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National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA) 2005 is a unique policy intervention by the State for providing 'livelihood security' to the resource poor people in rural India. Under the Act, the Governments are legally bound to provide 100 days guaranteed manual employment on local public works to every rural unskilled adult (job-card holder) who is willing to work at the prevailing minimum statutory wage rate. In the absence of employment they would be paid unemployment allowance.

Economic and Political Weekly in its editorial of 26 January 2008 termed the Act as one of the most creative initiatives of our times in the field of social policy. It further says that though the Comptroller and Auditor General (CAG's) Performance Audit Report on NREGA programme should be viewed as a useful stocktaking of the procedural problems regarding implementation of the Act yet it should not be allowed to dampen the initiative. Both Shah (2007) and Mathur (2008) see a great potential in NREGA for providing 'big-push' in India's regions of distress.

According to CAG report, only 3.2 per cent of registered households have been provided work for 100 days. The EPW editorial, however, points out that only around 55 per cent of registered households have actually accessed NREGA employment. Therefore, the percentage of the registered households accessing 100 days is not an indicator of the health of the programme. The CAG report also points that out of 513 of the surveyed Gram Panchayats 74 have not completed the distribution of job cards. Nevertheless, it means 439 (85.58 per cent) panchayats have actually completed the task of distributing the job card.

The implementation of NREGA in all the districts in all the states in India, with effect from April 1, 2008, would, however, place the biggest challenge before the Indian democracy. The polity, executive, judiciary and civil society would have to be sensitized to attain NREGA's fundamental objective of providing 'livelihood security' to the underprivileged, more so to the BPL population in rural India.

Though the period of two years is not sufficiently enough to evaluate the performance of such a gigantic programme in a vast country like India, yet, a stock taking exercise is must. The present paper is an attempt to evaluate the implementation and effectiveness of the Act in Punjab in this context. The Act was implemented in only one district of Punjab, namely, Hoshiarpur, w.e.f. the financial year 2006-07.

The paper is also an attempt to study the socio-economic background of the job-seeker households and of those who got employment under the Act. The perspective of the card-holders, those who get employment and that of the Panchayats shall also be studied.

The entire primary data and information has been collected through a questionnaire. In all 10 villages, from each of the 10 development blocks, were randomly selected. Out of each village, 10 beneficiaries were randomly selected from each of the sampled villages. The study, thus, pertains to 100 households.

It is important to note that there is a widespread impression that Punjab is a very prosperous state. However, all is not well with Punjab. The sheen of green revolution is no more there. Rather the adverse effects of the green revolution had

started surfacing since the last about two decades. As such the rural Punjab in general and agrarian economy in particular, is passing through a serious crisis (Ghuman, 2008).

Agriculture sector has been experiencing a deceleration for the last about two decades in terms of stagnating yield and rising cost. The trend growth rate of per hectare net return, over operational costs in wheat and paddy combined, at constant prices, was minus 2.18 per cent per annum during the decade of 1990s. In the case of cotton, it was minus 14.24 per cent (Ghuman, 2001). The ever shrinking net income, led to increasing economic distress which in turn resulted in farmers' suicides in Punjab.

Unemployment in general and rural unemployment in particular has become a serious phenomenon in Punjab. It is more the so in view of the shrinking employment opportunities in agriculture in particular and rural economy in general. Out of the total workers in Punjab nearly 70 per cent are engaged in rural sector. Further out of the total rural workers 31.5 per cent are cultivators, 22.0 per cent are agricultural labourers, 3.1 per cent are engaged in household industry and 43.4 per cent are other workers. The proportion of agricultural workers (cultivators + labourers) in all the workers in Punjab has declined from 55.2 per cent in 1991 to 39.4 per cent in 2001 (GOI, 2001).

In fact, agricultural sector in general and rural sector in particular have been pushing out the surplus workers for the last about two decades in Punjab. In the absence of employment generation in non-agricultural sectors, these surplus workers have no place to go. It has been estimated from the cost of cultivation data that 12.85 lakh (10.08 lakh cultivators and 2.77 lakh labourers) workers are surplus in agriculture and livestock. Total man-days employment in crop-rearing declined from 48 crore man days in 1983-84 to 43 crore man days in 1996-97, according to estimates generated from cost of cultivation data (Gill, 2002).

The labour absorption capacity of agriculture in Punjab has been experiencing a negative trend growth rate (Bhalla, 1987). The fact of the matter is that growth rate of employment in agriculture was just 0.02 per cent during 1993-94 and 1999-2000 in India. The employment elasticity in agriculture during the same period was 0.01 (GOI, 2002).

As per the Punjab Government estimates (GOP, 1998), 10.40 lakh persons (5.84 lakh educated and 4.56 lakh uneducated) in the 18-25 years age group were unemployed in Punjab in 1998. In the absence of very low growth rate of employment this might have gone above 20 lakhs now. The employment growth rate in Punjab during Ninth and Tenth Five Year Plans was far below the growth rate of labour force.

A very high proportion of hired labour by the agriculture sector in India consists of casual labour. The proportion of casual labour in total hired labour has crossed 90 per cent during 1990s as compared to 60 to 80 per cent in 1970s, in major states of India. The share of hired labour in total hired labour in Punjab agriculture increased from 29 to 71 per cent in 1970s to 68 to 84 per cent in 1990s (Gill and Ghuman, 2001). Due to shrinking employment opportunities in agriculture, these casual labourers are able to work for a lesser number of days in agriculture in a year. A little more than 16 per cent casual labourer could find work only for 8 to 10 days a month. Another 79 per cent get work for 10 to 20 days a month. On an average the

agricultural labourers in Punjab get Rs. 73 per day, whereas non-agricultural labourers earn Rs. 95 per day (Ghuman, et. al., 2007). As regards rural workers, working partially in agriculture and partially in non-agricultural sectors, the average wage earnings are Rs. 77 per day. In fact, the agricultural labourers are also committing suicides in Punjab, mainly due to their poor economic conditions and outstanding loan. The average amount of outstanding loan of the deceased agricultural labourers was Rs. 57121 per household (Singh, Gurpreet, 2008).

It is significant to note that the proportion of agricultural workers in total rural workers declined from 73.5 per cent in 1991 to 53.5 per cent in 2001 (GOI, 2001). This means 46.5 per cent of rural workers are in the non-agricultural sector. However, the empirical studies do not support such a high percentage of rural workers in non-agricultural sector in Punjab. According to one of those studies (Ghuman, 2005) nearly 16 per cent of the rural workers in Punjab (3 villages in 3 districts) are in non-agricultural sectors. In fact, the agricultural sectors has started pushing the labour out and non-agricultural sector are not absorbing those workers.

At the same time, quality of education in government owned rural schools in Punjab is experiencing a serious set back and the education given by private schools is not affordable by a very high proportion of rural population. According to Ghuman, et. al. (2007), 69 per cent of the total rural households and 90 per cent of the rural agricultural labour households do not have even a single member with an education upto matric.

The proportion of rurally educated students in higher education is declining. According to a recent study (Ghuman, et. al., 2006), the proportion of rural students in the universities of Punjab was only 4 per cent during the academic-session 2005-06.

In the back drop of forgoing scenario, the relevance of NREGA cannot be minimized. In Punjab, it has been implemented in Hoshiarpur District w.e.f. April, 2006.

Hoshiarpur is the only district, out of 20 districts of Punjab, which was selected for the implementation of NREGA. The district is predominantly a rural district with 80.33 per cent rural population and 81.94 per cent rural workers. According to the Census 2001, the district has a total population of 14.78 lakh and the sex-ratio is quite high: 935 females for 1000 males.

Compared to it, the sex ratio in Punjab is 874. It is interesting to note that nearly 80 per cent male population and about 90 per cent of female population in district Hoshiarpur lives in rural area, as is evident from table 1. Similarly, the proportion of rural workers in district Hoshiarpur is nearly 82 per cent. The corresponding proportion of females is approximately 89 per cent.

About 79 per cent main workers and 94 per cent marginal workers in district Hoshiarpur are rural workers. The corresponding proportion of male and female marginal workers is 92 per cent and 96 per cent, respectively. The share of rural marginal workers in the total rural workers in the district is also higher than the average of Punjab. Such a high proportion of marginal rural workers in the district are expected to be benefited by NREGA. The cultivators with very tiny operational holdings and the agricultural labourers would also get benefit under NREGA in view of the ever shrinking employment opportunities in the agricultural sector. The proportion of marginal operational holdings in Hoshiarpur is more than double (26.72 per cent) than that in Punjab (12.31 per cent). The proportion of small operational

holdings in the district is 23.49 per cent whereas in Punjab their proportion is 17.35 per cent (GOP 2006).

Table 1: Percentage share of rural population and rural workers in Punjab and district Hoshiarpur

	Persons		Male		Female	
	Punjab	Hoshiarpur	Punjab	Hoshiarpur	Punjab	Hoshiarpur
in total population	66.05	80.34	65.55	79.82	66.62	80.88
SCs in rural population	33.04	36.40	32.97	36.59	33.12	36.20
Rural workers in total workers	69.82	81.94	65.96	79.71	82.60	88.97
Rural main workers in total main workers	67.70	78.99	64.72	78.05	77.96	83.51
Rural marginal workers in total marginal workers	86.75	94.35	80.97	91.99	90.79	96.43
Total rural workers in rural population	39.73	35.43	54.45	50.91	23.15	19.08
Rural main workers in total rural workers	82.30	77.92	65.79	63.71	16.51	14.21
Rural marginal workers in total rural workers	17.70	22.08	34.21	36.29	83.49	85.79
AWs in total workers	39.40	40.70	59.60	40.10	36.20	42.50
AWs in total rural workers	53.51	48.33	60.06	48.81	36.17	46.99
Rural cultivators in rural workers	31.51	28.42	27.30	22.61	4.21	5.81
Rural ALs in rural workers	22.00	19.91	16.30	13.41	5.70	6.50

Source: 1. Government of India, *Census of India, 2001*, Series 4, Punjab, Paper 1, 2 and 3.

2. Government of Punjab, *Statistical Abstract of Punjab, 2006*.

Note: SCs, AWs and ALs stand for Scheduled Castes, Agricultural Workers (cultivators + agricultural labourers) and Agricultural Labourers, respectively.

The marginal and small farmers, alongwith rural workers, particularly the marginal workers, are expected to supplement their income by working under guaranteed employment schemes.

Though the district has highest literacy rate in the state yet it is economically backward. Its economic backwardness is mainly due to its topography. The Shivalik Hills, from North-East and South-East alignment, run throughout the length of the district. The foothill plains and flood plains of the river Beas constitute the remaining part of the district. The hill track known as 'KANDI' area cover roughly one-half of the district. In fact, the variant topography has been the main cause for the economic backwardness of the district.

The district consists of 10 development blocks. Out of 1426 villages 1396 are inhabited villages which have 1317 gram panchayats. The total number of households is 2.35 lakhs in the district. The number of panchayats per block per block varies from 82 to 168 across the blocks.

The number of job card holder households in the district was 42225 by March end 2008, which is 20 per cent of the total households, as shown in table 2. Across the ten development blocks, the proportion of job card holder households to total households, ranges from 10.87 per cent (Hoshiarpur-II block) to 24.77 per cent (Hoshiarpur – I block).

Table 2: General information about all the development blocks in district Hoshiarpur, as on 31 March 2008

Name of the block	No. of Gram Panchayats	Total No. of households	No. of Job card holder households	BPL households	Ranking of the block	
					in Punjab	in H.Pur
Tanda	117	21144	3661 (17.31)	177 (0.84) [4.83]	31	01
Talwara	82	18423	3592 (19.50)	1994 (10.82) [55.51]	62	02
Mukerian	142	23952	2776 (11.59)	2174 (9.08) [78.31]	70	03
Dasuya	142	22071	5551 (25.15)	1149 (5.21) [20.70]	87	04
Hoshiarpur-I	168	26859	6653 (24.77)	3947 (14.69) [59.33]	89	05
Garhshankar	144	29559	4580 (15.49)	4074 (13.78) [88.95]	90	06
Hoshiarpur-II	115	28600	3108 (10.87)	2436 (8.52) [78.38]	94	07
Mahilpur	140	24093	3943 (16.37)	477 (1.92) [12.10]	101	08
Bhunga	174	24478	4881 (19.94)	1325 (5.41) [27.15]	105	09
Hajipur	93	15547	3480 (22.38)	681 (4.38) [19.57]	109	10
Total	1317	234726	42225 (17.99)	18434 (7.85) [43.66]		

Source: Office of Additional Deputy Commissioner, Hoshiarpur (Punjab)

- Note:
1. Out of 1426 villages, 1396 are inhabited.
 2. The ranking of blocks was done by the *Economic and Statistical Organization (ESO)*, Punjab, Chandigarh. The number of blocks in Punjab at the time of ranking was 122; now it is 141.
 3. The figures in round brackets and capital brackets indicate percentage share of BPL households in the total households and job card households, respectively.

The proportion of BPL households to total households is 7.85 per cent in the district and across the blocks it varies from 5.21 per cent (Dasuya block) to 14.69 per cent (Hoshiarpur-I block). Two blocks – Tanda and Mahilpur seem to be an exception. The proportion of BPL households to job-card-holder households was

43.66 per cent in the district and across the blocks it varied from 20.70 per cent (Dasuya block) to 88.95 per cent in (Garhshankar block). Here again Tanda and Mahilpur seem to be an exception, as is clear from table 2.

It is significant to note that all the blocks of district Hoshiarpur are quite low in terms of their ranking among other blocks of Punjab. Table 2, shows that the highly developed block of Hoshiarpur (Tanda) ranks 31st in Punjab, in the descending order. The second highest developed block of the district ranks 62nd in Punjab and the least developed block in the district ranks 109 in the state of Punjab. The low level of development of the district and the development blocks highlights the fact that the proper implementation of NREGA would help the poor households.

Table 3: Profile of the Panchayat Head and Panchayat Members in the sampled villages in various blocks of Hoshiarpur District (Punjab)

Name of the village and blocks	Panchayat Head			Panchayat Members					Educational level	
	Sex	Caste	Edu. level	Sex		Caste			upto 8 th	10 th to 12 th
				M	F	GC	SC	BC		
Hasipind (Tanda)	M	GC	Matric	06	03	06	03	-	05	04 [@]
Beh Fatto (Talwara)	M	BC	Middle	03	02	-	-	05	04	01
Fathuwal (Mukerian)	M	GC	BA	03	02	02	02	01	05	-
Passi Kandi (Dasuya)	M	GC	Matric	04	03	04	02	01	06	01
Bassi Maruf Hussainpur (Hoshiarpur-I)	F	SC	Primary	05	02	01	06	-	02	05
Bhawanipur (Garhshankar)	M	SC	Matric	04	02	03	02	01	02	03
Bassi Hasatkhan (Hoshiarpur-II)	F	SC	BA	03	02	01	04	-	04	01
Muggowal (Mahilpur)	M	SC	Matric	06	03	02	06	01	07	01
Johal (Bhunga)	F	GC	Matric	05	02	04	03	-	-	07
Dagan (Hajipur)	M	SC	Middle	03	05	05	02	01	04	04
Total	M=7 F=3	GC = 4 SC = 5 BC = 1	BA=2 10 th =5 8 th =3	42 (61.8)	26 (38.2)	28 (41.2)	30 (44.1)	10 (14.7)	39+2* (57.4)	27 (39.7)

Source: Field survey.

M – Male, F – Female, GC – general caste, SC – scheduled caste, BC – backward class

[@] one member is post-graduate, * only 2 panchayat members were illiterate.

- Note:
1. Figures in brackets indicate the percentage share in the respective category.
 2. The names of the blocks are given in brackets.
 3. Four villages – Hasipind, Fathuwal, Bassi Maruf Hussainpur and Muggowal – are at the distance from 2 to 4 kms. from their respective block headquarters. Two villages – Passi Kandi and Dagan – are at a distance 7 to 8 kms and the remaining villages are at a distance of 14 to 20 kms from their block headquarters.

Table 3, presents the social profile of the Panchayat heads and members in all the ten sampled villages. Out of ten heads (sarpanches) seven are male and three are females. Further, four, five and one are from general, scheduled and backward caste, respectively. It is satisfactory to note that all the heads are educated and two are

graduate. Out of the remaining, five are matriculate and three are having elementary level education. But for two members all the Panchayat members are literate/educated. Nearly 40 per cent out of them are having education between 10th and 12th standard. It is worth mentioning that the literacy rate in Hoshiarpur district (81.40 per cent) is highest among all other districts of Punjab (69.95 per cent).

In terms of sex ratio, 62 per cent Panchayat members are male and 38 per cent are females. About 44 per cent members are from scheduled caste whereas 41 per cent are from general caste. The remaining 15 per cent belong to the backward caste. A cursory look at table 1 and 3 makes it clear that the proportion of scheduled caste Panchayat heads and members in the sampled villages is much higher than the proportion of scheduled caste population in rural population of district Hoshiarpur.

As NREGA is aimed at generating employment for unskilled labour and thereby reducing the poverty incidence, we have also tried to look at the poverty incidence in the sampled villages. Out of 100 sampled job card holder households, 93 per cent are BPL, as is clear from table 4. It means the APL households are having little interest in the employment opportunities, generated under NREGA. Only 7 per cent of the job card holder households in the sample are from the APL households. Even these 7 per cent households are just on the margin of poverty line. In 50 per cent of the sampled villages not even one job card holder household is having APL status.

Table 4: Caste, poverty and educational status of the job card holders and family size of their households

Name of the village	Job Card Holder				Caste			Poverty		Education level			Family size (persons)
	Sex		Age (years)		GC	SC	BC	APL	BPL	Illt.	≤8 th	≤10 th	
	M	F	18-35	36-65									
Hasipind	6	4	3	7	1	9	-	1	9	3	6	1	6.0
Beh Fatto	7	3	6	4	3	-	7	2	8	2	7	1	5.0
Fathuwal	7	3	3	7	4	6	-	1	9	2	8	-	5.0
Passi Kandi	6	4	1	9	-	10	-	-	10	4	5	1	5.2
Bassi Maruf Hussainpur	5	5	6	4	-	10	-	-	10	1	8+1*	-	5.3
Bhawanipur	3	7	-	10	6	3	1	2	8	5	4	1	6.7
Bassi Hasatkhan	7	3	4	6	-	10	-	-	10	3	5	2	3.4
Muggowal	3	7	5	5	0	10	0	0	10	2	5	3	5.1
Johal	9	1	6	4	1	9	0	0	10	3	6	1	5.3
Dagan	4	6	1	9	1	8	1	1	9	4	4	2	5.0
Total	57	43	35	65	16	75	09	07	93	29	58	13	5.2

- Note: 1. In the villages at serial No. 3, 6 and 7, there are 1, 2 and 3 job card holders, respectively, whose age was above 65 years.
2. * one job card holder is graduate.
3. APL – above poverty line; BPL – below poverty line.

In terms of sex, 57 per cent job card holders are male and 43 per cent are female, as is clear from table 4. With regard to age, only 35 per cent are in the age group of 18 to 35 years whereas 65 per cent are in the age group of 36 to 65 years. In three sampled villages 90 to 100 per cent job card holders are in the latter age group. Table 5 also reveals that 75 per cent of the job card holders belong to scheduled caste households whereas 16 per cent and 9 per cent, respectively, are from the general

caste and the backward caste. In four of the sampled villages, 100 per cent card holders belong to scheduled caste. In another two villages, 90 per cent are scheduled caste and in one village 80 per cent belong to scheduled caste. As per official information of the District Programme Coordinator (2007), 65.2 per cent beneficiaries were from the scheduled caste households in the entire district. The remaining 21.3 per cent and 13.5 per cent were from backward and general caste, respectively.

Table 4 also highlights that a very high proportion (71 per cent) of the job card holders are literate and only 29 per cent are illiterate. In view of the high literacy rate in the district, even 29 per cent illiterate job card holders seem to be very high.

The average family size of the sampled job card holders is 5.2 persons per households, shown in table 4. Across the villages it varies from 5 persons to 5.6 persons. Village Bassi Hasatkhan seems to be an exception as the average family size in that village is just 3.4.

Table 5 reveals the occupation of job card holders, the age and sex of the workers who actually reported for work under NREGA and number of days the household got employment under NREGA. Though 23 per cent of the job card holders are cultivators, yet, it is significant to note that their land ownership is just negligible, ranging from 0.13 acres to half an acre. Their land holding can neither generate sufficient amount of employment for all the members in the household nor can they sustain them. As such they have offered themselves to work under NREGA. It is significant to note that in one of the villages, the proportion of cultivator job card holders is as high as 80 per cent. Nevertheless, on an average 77 per cent job card holders in all the sampled villages together are agricultural labourers. Compared with the proportion of agricultural labourers (19.91 per cent) in the rural workers in district Hoshiarpur, this 77 per cent share of agricultural labourers under NREGA is very significant. It is significant indicator that agricultural sector is unable to provide round the year employment to the labour.

Out of 100 sampled job card holder households, 126 persons actually reported for work under NREGA, during the two years period of its operation, as is clear from table 6. Among them 63.5 per cent and 36.5 per cent were males and females, respectively. As per official information, prepared by the district coordinator the proportion of males and females was 75.05 per cent and 24.95 per cent, respectively, in the entire district. Further, 41.3 per cent of the workers were in the age group of 18-35 years whereas 52.4 per cent were between 36-65 years. It is interesting to note that 6.4 per cent (all male) were above 65 years of age. In the absence of social security and livelihood people with such a ripe age are compelled to do work. In terms of work force definition, these old age persons should not enter into workforce.

Table 5 Occupation of job card holders, sex and age of persons employed under NREGA and employment generated under NREGA in the sampled villages in District Hoshiarpur

Name of the village	Occupation		Age and sex of workers who were actually called for work (years)					Employment (mandays)	
	C	AL	18-35		36-65		65+	2006-07	2007-08
			M	F	M	F	M		
Hasipind	01	09	02	01	05	02	-	107	41
Beh Fatto	08*	02	05	05	03	02	-	668	108
Fathuwal	01	09	02	03	04	03	01	800	600
Passi Kandi	01	09	02	01	06	05	-	242	126
Bassi Maruf Hussainpur	02	08	02	03	03	02	-	570	395
Bhawanipur	03	07	01	01	05	05	03	266	42
Bassi Hasatkhan	03	07	05	01	03	-	03	680	62
Muggowal	02	08	02	04	03	02	-	945	15
Johal	01	09	06	-	03	-	01	131	122
Dagan	01	09	04	02	06	04	-	178	133
Total	23 (23.0)	77 (77.0)	31 (24.6)	21 (16.7)	41 (32.5)	25 (19.8)	08 (6.4)	4587 (73.6)	1644 (26.4)

Source: Field survey.

Note: 1. The average (per person) employment days came out to be 49.45 in two years ($4587+1644=6231 \div 126=49.45$ days). The yearly average comes out to be 24.73 days

2. C and AL stand for cultivator and agricultural labourer, respectively.

3. No female above the age of 65 years reported for work.

* The ownership of land ranges from 0.13 acres to 0.5 acres.

As per official information prepared by the District Programme Coordinator (2007) 91.3 per cent workers were in the age group of 18 to 50 years and 1.2 per cent was of more than 65 years in the entire district. The remaining 7.5 per cent workers were in the age group of 51 to 65 years.

The proportion of female workers, under NREGA, in each age group is lower than the male workers, as is evident from table 5. However, keeping in view their lower work participation rate and their low proportion (6.50 per cent, table 1) in the rural agricultural workers, the proportion of female labourers is quite high. Amongst all, the 126 workers 24.6 per cent male and 16.7 per cent female are in the age group of 18-35 years. The proportion of males in total workers in this age group is 59.6 per cent. In the age group of 36-65 years, 32.5 per cent are males and 19.8 per cent are females. The proportion of males within this age group is 62.1 per cent. It is significant to note that all the workers in the age group of above 65 years are male. It is clear from the foregoing discussion that the proportion of female workers goes on declining with the advancing of age.

Table 5 also highlights that all the ten sampled panchayats could generate employment for 4587 days during 2006-07 and for 1644 days during 2007-08. This means 73.6 per cent mandays of employment were generated in the first year of the implementation of the Act and only 26.4 per cent in the following year. On an average every person who was called for work could get work, worked for 49.45 days in a period of two years. At this rate, per person work availability comes out to be 24.73 man days in a year. Thus, on an average the panchayats could achieve nearly one-fourth of the stipulated target of employment generation under NREGA. The official statistics, however, say that 37 days employment was given to each

household, who applied for work, in the entire district during 2006-07 (Mathur, Lalit, 2008).

Even this has a catch in the sense that the number of workers called for work may be far less than the number of workers willing to work. Our field inquiry and observations revealed that there was no mechanism to call the workers for work. The Panchayat head used to call the workers for work as and when desired. This had an element of pick and choose from among the workers having job cards. No public notice was displayed for the kind and availability of work. Besides, there was no mechanism for the workers to inform about the availability for work.

In fact, the level of awareness about NREGA and rights of workers was very very low. Not even a single among the sampled job card holders, was aware about the unemployment allowance in the absence of non-availability of work within the stipulated period. At the same time, no worker knew what the statutory minimum wage rate was. The job card holders also did not know that they are to apply for work. They simply knew that once they have job card, they would be called for work by the Panchayat head. No sampled worker even declined the work offer. At the same time they denied any bribe for getting the job card or work.

As regards wage rate, it varied between Rs. 90 to Rs. 95 per day across the sampled villages, which comes out to be Rs. 92.50 on an average. The annual average earnings per household, from employment under NREGA, thus came out to be Rs. 2287.53 (92.50×24.73). In some of the sampled villages, the amount of annual earnings of a household under NREGA is far below than this overall average as generation of employment was very very scanty. Besides, the average numbers of workers called for work are just 12.6 workers per village in two years. Computing it to the yearly average, it comes out to be just 6.3 workers per village. On this count, the performance of NREGA seems to be far below its stipulated performance. At the top of it, not even a single worker was given any unemployment allowance. In fact workers were not even aware about such provision in the Act.

National Rural Employment Guarantee Act, 2005, largely binds the State to provide 100 days guaranteed employment to all those unskilled rural workers who are willing to work at the statutory minimum wage rate. In the absence of work there is a legal provision for unemployment allowance. In view of this, we have tried to work out how many workers, who were actually called for work, have been able to get work for statutory 100 days in a year.

Table 6 presents the generation of employment under NREGA, in the sampled villages, during 2006-07 and 2007-08. Only 17 households, who were called for work, could complete 100 days employment, as is evident from table 7, and that too, during 2006-07. No household could complete 100 days employment during 2007-08. Only two households could get employment between 91-99 days in 2006-07 and no one in 2007-08 could have work in this bracket. Similarly, no sampled household could get employment between 51-60 and 71-80 days during 2007-08.

However, 21 households could get work between 51-60 days and 10 households between 71-80 days in 2006-07. Further, five households could get employment between 41-50 days in 2006-07, whereas only one household could get employment in 2007-08. As regards employment between 31-40 days only two and eight households could get employment during 2006-07 and 2007-08, respectively. There were, however, 24 households who could get work between 21-30 days during

2006-07. Compared to it, only two households could get work for this bracket during 2007-08. The number of households, who could get work between 11-20 days, was 13 and 27 during 2006-07 and 2007-08, respectively. As regards work availability between 1-10 days, 10 to 11 households could get employment during 2006-07 and 2007-08, respectively.

It is, thus, clear that only 17 per cent households from amongst the sampled households could get work for 100 days in 2006-07 and another 2 per cent for 91 to 99 days. The 54 per cent households could get work up to 50 days during the same year. The performance of NREGA, during 2007-08, was quite disappointing. It was revealed by the concerned panchayats that the problem of finance and generation of work are the most serious limitations of NREGA. It is important to note that six households in 2006-07 and 51 households in 2007-08 could not get work even for a single day.

Table 6: Number of work days completed by the households under NREGA in the sampled villages in district Hoshiarpur during 2006-07 and 2007-08

Name of the village	Workdays completed: Number of households													
	1-10		11-20		21-30		31-40		41-50		51-60	71-80	91-99	100
	2006-07	2007-08	2006-07	2007-08	2006-07	2007-08	2006-07	2007-08	2006-07	2007-08	2006-07	2006-07	2006-07	2006-07
Hasipind	08	09	02	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Beh Fatto	-	-	02	03	03	-	01	-	01	-	01	-	01	04
Fathuwal	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	10	10	-	-
Passi Kandi	-	-	02	07	07	01	01	08	-	-	-	-	-	-
Bassi Maruf Hussainpur	-	-	-	-	01	01	-	-	01	-	09	-	-	-
Bhawanipur	-	-	02	03	07	-	-	-	01	-	-	-	-	-
Bassi Hasatkhan	-	-	01	04	02	-	-	-	01	-	01	-	01	04
Muggowal	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	01	01	-	-	-	09
Johal	02	02	04	08	03	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Dagan	-	-	-	02	01	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Total	10	11	13	27	24	02	02	08	05	01	21	10	02	17

Source: Field survey.

Note:

1. No household got employment between 61-70 days during any of the year.
2. During 2007-08, no household got employment between 51-60 days, 71-80 days, 91-99 days and 100 days.
3. Total number of households who got work during 2006-07 and 2007-08, was 94 and 49, respectively.

The official data of Block Development and Panchayat Officer Dasuya, however, revealed that in 19 of the 142 villages in the block, 125 households did work for 100 or more days, from April 2006 to 31 December 2007. This seems to be a good performance. However, in view of the total number of villages, total job card holders and the time period of 21 months, this does not seem to be a very good performance. By converting these days to 12 months average, one finds out of 125 households 24 households could complete one hundred or more days. These households are located in four villages. Another 19 households, located in six villages worked between 80 to 99 days in a year.

The above achievement of the panchayats of these villages needs an appreciation, when compared to other panchayats. However, in terms of villages it comes out to be 13.38 per cent and out of the job card holders (55.51). Only 0.43 per

cent households could complete one hundred or more days of work in a year. The share of those who could complete works days between 80 to 99 in the total job card holders is 0.34 per cent. If this is the performance of one of the best performing blocks then one could easily guess the performance of other blocks. Results of our study of 100 households in 10 villages (Table 6) have amply displayed the scenario.

Perspective of the beneficiary households in the sampled villages

NREGA is a good scheme for providing manual employment to the unskilled adult member in the rural households. If implemented properly, it would certainly help the unskilled unemployed rural people and would improve their economic condition. In stead of providing 100 days employment to one adult member in the household, in a financial year, all the eligible adults in a household should be given employment and that too for the whole year. In the absence of work, the workers should be given unemployment allowance as provided in the Act. Due to ignorance of the people the government officials and panchayats did not give any unemployment allowance to the eligible workers.

There should a proper system to give information about the work, wage rate and other such things. Every worker should be informed about the work once he/she puts an application for his/her availability for work. The practice of calling workers for work by the panchayat head should be stopped with. There should be absolute transparency. Monitoring and social audit of the workers under NREGA are must. Almost, all the sampled households were, however, satisfied with NREGA as they were getting a higher wage rate than they were getting from the contractors. At the same time they were of the view, that something is better than nothing.

Perspective of the Panchayats

Almost every panchayat suggested that there is a need to include more works in the list of works provided by the Union Government. The nature and type of such works should be as per the requirements of the village/region. Some of the panchayats suggested some works such as school buildings, panchayat ghars and village library building, etc. Panchayats were also of the view that it is difficult to employ skilled workers at government approved rates, as they are much below the market rates. As such there is a need to revise the wage rate of such workers to make it comparable with the market rates in the region/state.

Nearly all the panchayats were also of the view that 60:40 ratio for labour and material cost should be reversed as the material cost component is getting higher and higher due to rising prices. Some of the panchayat heads were of the view that the nature and quality of the work under NREGA is not up to the expectations and aspirations of the labourers in a rich state like Punjab. Some of them were also having the apprehension that how would they create work for all these job card holders who are willing to work under NREGA? At the same time, they were of the view that provision and supply of financial resources should be evenly spread over the whole year rather than confined to certain specific months of the year. A good number of panchayat heads were of the view that they should be given some monetary allowance for shouldering responsibility of NREGA. The official machinery should be more cooperative to the panchayat heads and to the people.

Concluding Remarks

The performance of NREGA in district Hoshiarpur has not been very encouraging during the first two years of its implementation. Most of the employment was generated in 2006-07. The achievement of the Act in terms of annual average days of employment per household has been nearly 1/4th of the minimum 100 days employment. Out of 126 workers who were called for work only 17 could complete the 100 days norms of employment in two years period.

While commenting on the failure of NREGA in Maharashtra, Datar (2007) pointed out that the scheme could not get momentum because government machinery is paralyzed. Such schemes can only work if there is organized social and political pressure from the rural poor on the executing machinery. The people need to be educated in the new ethos and built their capacity to manage funds, build assets with an opportunity to create livelihood for themselves. In fact for NREGA to be able to realize its potential, the role of civil society organizations is critical. But this calls for a new self-critical politics, balance and restraint (Shah, 2007).

Amongst the 100 sampled households 93 were below poverty line and 75 were scheduled caste. Clearly, the resource poor households in the rural area are the most targeted group under NREGA.

As regards the wage rate given to workers under NREGA employment it was not less than the statutory minimum wage rate in the District. On an average, a worker was given Rs. 92.50 per day. Assuming that every household, willing to work under NREGA, is able to get 100 days employment in a year even then the monthly per capita income from NREGA comes out to be Rs. 148.24. It is to be noted that the poverty line in India was Rs. 327.50 per month per capita for rural India in 1999-2000 (Manna, 2007). In view of the current poverty line even the 100 days employment under NREGA does not help the households to cross the poverty line.

Nevertheless, the programme can be a great agent for socio-economic upliftment and providing livelihood security to the poorest of the poor in rural India, if implemented earnestly. The employment and earnings under NREGA should be treated as additional avenues for such households. The existing rural employment should not be transferred under NREGA. The executing machinery and the beneficiaries under NREGA need to be sensitized about the fundamental objectives of NREGA. The state government must appoint whole time programme officers who must be dedicated, committed and honest persons.

Though the Act is historical policy intervention by the State, yet much needs to be done beyond that. There is a need to adopt a holistic approach to address the socio-economic problems of the rural people in India. Given the limited capacity of agriculture to absorb additional labour force, the development of rural non-farm sector is sine qua non for transforming the rural society and economy. The rural education and health must be the top most agenda of Indian democracy.

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