

Implementation, Beneficiary Awareness and Institutional Challenges of MGNREGA in Imphal East District of Manipur

¹Dr. R. K. Brajananda Singh, ²Dr. Chanambam Sarajubala Devi

¹Asst. Professor, Department of Political Science, Liberal College, Luwangsangbam, Imphal East (India)

²Associate Professor, Department of Linguistics NERIE, Shillong (India)

ARTICLE INFO

Received: 02 Nov 2024

Revised: 17 Dec 2024

Accepted: 28 Dec 2024

ABSTRACT

The Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) is a rights-based social protection programme designed to enhance rural livelihood security through guaranteed wage employment, income support, asset creation and participatory development. The present study evaluates the implementation and performance of MGNREGA in Imphal-East district of Manipur during 2018-19 to 2019-20, with particular emphasis on beneficiary awareness, job-card management, wage payment, worksite facilities, social-audit participation, economic benefits and institutional constraints. An exploratory and evaluative research design was adopted using both primary and secondary data. Primary information was collected from job-card holders and local functionaries across Sawombung, Porompat, Keirao-Bitra and Jiribam, while secondary information was obtained from government records and MGNREGA Management Information System records. Descriptive and comparative analyses were employed to assess variations in programme implementation. The findings reveal a substantial gap between basic awareness and effective knowledge of MGNREGA entitlements. Although 75-99% of respondents knew about job cards, only 9-40% were aware of detailed programme guidelines, while 85-92% reported that their job cards were held by Panchayat members. Wage-payment practices varied considerably, with pronounced delays in Keirao-Bitra, where 96% reported receiving wages beyond 15 days. Drinking-water facilities were relatively widespread, but crèches, shade for lactating mothers and first-aid facilities were largely absent. Economic benefits were perceived more positively in Sawombung and Porompat than in Keirao-Bitra and Jiribam. The study concludes that MGNREGA has contributed to livelihood support but its effectiveness is constrained by inadequate awareness, intermediary control, delayed payments, weak worksite facilities and institutional constraints. Strengthening transparency, beneficiary ownership, social audits and timely wage delivery is essential for improving programme outcomes.

Keywords: MGNREGA; Rural Employment; Livelihood Security; Social Protection; Manipur

INTRODUCTION

The Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA), originally enacted as the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act in 2005, represents one of India's most significant rights-based interventions for strengthening livelihood security, reducing rural poverty and promoting inclusive development. Implemented initially in selected districts from February 2006 and subsequently extended nationwide, the programme guarantees demand-based wage employment to rural households whose adult members volunteer to undertake unskilled manual work. Beyond employment generation, MGNREGA seeks to create durable community assets through activities such as water conservation, rainwater harvesting, irrigation, land development, flood control, afforestation and rural connectivity. Its institutional design incorporates several safeguards, including registration through job cards, provision of employment within the prescribed period, payment of statutory wages, equal

remuneration for men and women, unemployment allowance in cases of delayed employment, prohibition of contractors, social audits, transparency in record keeping and community participation in planning and implementation. These provisions make MGNREGA not merely an employment programme but also an important instrument of social protection, participatory governance and rural asset creation. Its potential contribution to women's empowerment is particularly important because the Act provides for equal wages, women's participation and worksite facilities such as childcare. Similarly, investments in water harvesting and soil conservation can strengthen environmental sustainability and agricultural livelihoods. Nevertheless, the effectiveness of the programme depends substantially on institutional capacity, timely wage payments, proper utilisation of funds, transparency, awareness among beneficiaries and effective local-level monitoring. Problems such as administrative delays, corruption, inadequate technical personnel, weak grievance redressal and limited awareness among workers can therefore reduce the intended benefits of the programme. The significance of examining actual implementation becomes particularly pronounced in geographically and socio-economically vulnerable regions where rural households depend heavily on wage employment and public interventions for livelihood security.

Manipur provides an important context for evaluating the functioning of MGNREGA because of its distinctive geographical, socio-economic and administrative characteristics. A predominantly hilly and landlocked state in North-East India, Manipur has a large rural population and considerable livelihood vulnerability, with poverty historically remaining substantially higher than the national level. MGNREGA was introduced in Tamenglong district in 2006 and subsequently extended to other districts, with the programme eventually covering the state as a whole. The scheme was expected to generate employment, supplement household income, reduce distress migration, create village-level infrastructure and strengthen community participation. However, its implementation in Manipur has also encountered challenges relating to delayed wage payments, administrative inefficiency, weak awareness of statutory provisions, control of job cards by local functionaries, irregularities in payment mechanisms, inadequate worksite facilities, fund utilisation and allegations of interference by extra-constitutional forces. These issues raise important questions concerning the extent to which the statutory rights guaranteed under MGNREGA are translated into actual benefits for rural workers. Against this background, the present study evaluates the implementation and performance of MGNREGA in Imphal-East district, with particular attention to the period 2018-19 to 2019-2020. The study examines awareness among job-card holders, patterns and timeliness of wage payments, employment generation, work completion, fund utilisation, economic effects on beneficiaries, access to worksite facilities, participation in social audits and the influence of extra-constitutional forces on programme implementation. By combining field-level information from beneficiaries and local functionaries with official records, the study seeks to identify the gap between the legal provisions of MGNREGA and their practical implementation. Such an assessment is essential for understanding whether the programme has effectively contributed to livelihood security, income enhancement, social inclusion and participatory rural development in Imphal-East, while also identifying institutional and operational constraints that need to be addressed for more effective implementation in Manipur.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature on the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) broadly recognises the programme as a major rights-based intervention for rural employment, livelihood security and poverty reduction, while also drawing attention to substantial differences in its implementation across regions. Ghose (2012) viewed MGNREGA as an important component of India's emerging social-protection framework, emphasising its potential to improve employment, wages and incomes among rural households. Gaiha et al. (2010), however, pointed to the continuing gap between the demand for and supply of employment under the programme and argued that the effectiveness of MGNREGA should be assessed in relation to poverty and wage dynamics rather than merely the number of employment opportunities generated. Reddy, Reddy and Bantilan (2014) similarly highlighted considerable inter-state and village-level variation in implementation. Their review suggested that where MGNREGA activities were effectively integrated with local development planning, the programme generated greater employment and productive assets and strengthened agricultural potential. They also observed that the programme benefited disadvantaged groups, including Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes and women, while improving the bargaining position of rural labourers and contributing to higher wages and reduced exploitation. Khawlneikim and Mital (2013), examining implementation from a beneficiary perspective in Churachandpur

district of Manipur, treated MGNREGA as an important rights-based social-protection mechanism intended to provide rural households with assured employment and income. Stina et al. (2015), in their study of MGNREGA performance in Manipur, examined employment generation, work completion and fund utilisation over seven years and reinforced the importance of evaluating programme performance through both employment outcomes and administrative efficiency. Collectively, these studies indicate that the formal entitlement created by MGNREGA does not automatically translate into effective livelihood security; rather, outcomes depend upon local administrative capacity, demand for employment, implementation quality, asset creation and the accessibility of programme benefits.

Another important strand of the literature examines the effects of MGNREGA on labour markets, women's participation, social equity and the practical limitations of implementation. Imbert and Papp (2015) found that the employment guarantee programme not only generated public employment but also increased private-sector wages, suggesting that its labour-market effects extended beyond direct beneficiaries. Their findings are complemented by evidence from public-works research showing that NREGS increased real agricultural wage growth by approximately 4.3% annually in the average district, with particularly strong effects for unskilled labour. The International Labour Organization (2015) recognised MGNREGA as a central element of India's social-protection floor, noting its contribution to rural income, higher wages, female participation, durable asset creation and Panchayati Raj involvement, while simultaneously identifying delayed wage payments, rationing of employment, inadequate unemployment allowances and weaknesses in asset quality and maintenance as important shortcomings. Breitzkreuz et al. (2017) further demonstrated that outcomes differed according to local labour-market conditions and implementation practices. Their findings suggested that MGNREGA provided meaningful employment opportunities to women and marginalised groups but did not always substantially assist the most vulnerable because of inadequate employment, insufficient wages and limitations in recognising women's caregiving responsibilities. Thus, the previous findings highlighted MGNREGA as simultaneously an important instrument of employment protection and a programme constrained by implementation deficits. Although national and state-level studies have examined employment, wages, poverty, women's participation and asset creation, comparatively less attention has been devoted to the combined assessment of beneficiary awareness, wage-payment practices, worksite facilities, social audits, fund utilisation and extra-constitutional interference at the sub-divisional level in Manipur. The present study addresses this gap by evaluating these interconnected dimensions of MGNREGA implementation in Imphal-East district during 2018-19 to 2019-20.

OBJECTIVES

The present study aims to critically assess the implementation and performance of the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) in Imphal-East district of Manipur during the study period. Specifically, it seeks to examine the level of awareness of MGNREGA provisions among job-card holders and assess the extent to which the programme has generated employment and contributed to the economic well-being of rural households. The study further evaluates the timeliness and mode of wage payments, availability of essential worksite facilities, participation in social audits, efficiency of work completion and utilisation of programme funds. It also investigates reported administrative irregularities, grievances and the influence of extra-constitutional forces on programme implementation. Finally, the study assesses the extent to which MGNREGA has fulfilled its objectives of livelihood security, social inclusion, transparency, accountability and participatory rural development in Imphal-East district.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The study adopted an exploratory and evaluative research design to assess the implementation and performance of the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) in Imphal-East district of Manipur. The analysis covered the period from 2018-19 to 2019-20 and focused on selected dimensions of programme implementation, including employment generation, awareness of beneficiaries, wage payments, worksite facilities, social audits, economic effects, work completion and fund utilisation. Both primary and secondary data were utilised. Primary information was collected from MGNREGA job-card holders, Panchayat members and Pradhans through structured questionnaires, interview schedules and field observations. The study covered the sub-divisions of Sawombung, Porompat, Keirao-Bitra and Jiribam. Secondary information was obtained from official records of

the Department of Rural Development and Panchayati Raj, Government of Manipur, and relevant MGNREGA Management Information System (MIS) records. Data were organised and analysed mainly through descriptive and comparative tabular techniques to identify variations across the selected sub-divisions and assess the extent of compliance with MGNREGA provisions.

ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

The socio-demographic characteristics and basic MGNREGA awareness of job-card holders across Sawombung, Porompat, Keirao-Bitra and Jiribam is manifested in Table 1. The gender composition varies considerably between the sub-divisions. Sawombung, Keirao-Bitra and Jiribam are predominantly male among the respondents, accounting for 68%, 62% and 60%, respectively, whereas Porompat has a clear female majority of 71%. This variation suggests that participation in MGNREGA is influenced by local household and labour-market conditions. The age distribution indicates a comparatively older beneficiary profile in Sawombung, where 66% of respondents are aged 48 years and above. In contrast, Keirao-Bitra has a relatively younger composition, with 31% in the 18-33 age group and 47% in the 33-48 age group. Porompat and Jiribam are concentrated more strongly in the middle-age category, accounting for 39% and 55%, respectively. Educational attainment is generally modest across all four areas. Those educated up to Class X constitute the largest group, ranging from 53% in Porompat to 72% in Keirao-Bitra, while graduates constitute only 2-10%. Illiteracy remains evident in Sawombung and Jiribam at 10% each, although it is absent in Porompat. Most importantly, basic awareness of the job card is relatively high, ranging from 75% in Sawombung to 99% in Keirao-Bitra. However, this awareness does not necessarily imply knowledge of the detailed rights and procedures under MGNREGA. A particularly important finding is that 92-100% of respondents reported paying a charge for preparation of the job card, with the highest proportion in Porompat (100%). This indicates a substantial divergence between the formal provisions of a rights-based employment programme and beneficiaries' actual experiences and suggests the persistence of informal practices at the grassroots level.

Table 1: Percentage distribution of Socio-Demographic Characteristics and Basic MGNREGA Awareness among Job Card Holders

Indicators	Category / Response	Sawombung	Porompat	Keirao-Bitra	Jiribam
Gender	Male	68	29	62	60
	Female	32	71	38	40
Age (in yr)	18–33	14	17	31	16
	33–48	20	39	47	55
	48+	66	34	22	29
Educational level	Illiterate	10	0	6	10
	Up to Class X	60	53	72	65
	Up to Class XII	27	37	20	23
	Graduate	3	10	2	2
	Post-Graduate	0	0	0	0
Basic awareness of Job Card	Know what a Job Card is – Yes	75	97	99	94
	Know what a Job Card is – No	25	3	1	6
Job Card preparation	Paid charge for making Job Card – Yes	92	100	95	98

	Paid charge for making Job Card – No	8	0	5	2
--	--------------------------------------	---	---	---	---

Table 2 provides deeper evidence concerning job-card management, wage payments, worksite facilities, detailed awareness and social-audit participation. The most striking finding is that job cards are rarely retained by the actual beneficiaries. Only 2% of respondents in Sawombung, 13% in Porompat, 20% in Keirao-Bitra and 26% in Jiribam reported having their job cards with themselves. In contrast, 85-92% reported that the cards were with Panchayat members. Such concentration of job-card custody in the hands of local functionaries potentially restricts workers' direct control over an important instrument of entitlement and may weaken transparency and accountability. Wage payment patterns similarly demonstrate considerable dependence on Panchayat-level intermediaries, with 70% in Sawombung and as high as 94% in Jiribam receiving wages through Panchayat members. The timeliness of payment is also highly uneven. Sawombung records the most favourable pattern, with 42% receiving wages immediately and another 39% within one week. Porompat records 60% receiving payment within one week, but 27% experience delays beyond 15 days. The situation is particularly problematic in Keirao-Bitra, where 96% report payment beyond 15 days. Jiribam presents a different pattern, with 94% reporting payment within 15 days. Worksite facilities show a major imbalance: drinking water is relatively widely available, reported by 87-95% of respondents, but crèches, shaded facilities for lactating mothers and first-aid boxes are almost universally absent. This is especially significant from the perspective of women's participation and occupational welfare. Furthermore, only 9-40% of respondents are aware of detailed MGNREGA guidelines, while 60-91% are unaware. Thus, the high basic awareness reported in Table 1 contrasts sharply with the low awareness of substantive programme rights and procedures. Social-audit participation is comparatively stronger in Keirao-Bitra (82%) and Jiribam (79%), followed by Porompat (63%) and Sawombung (41%), but the substantial non-participation in Sawombung and Porompat indicates continuing limitations in participatory accountability.

Table 2: Percentage distribution of Job Card Management, Wage Payment, Worksite Facilities and Institutional Awareness of MGNREGA

Dimension	Indicator / Response	Sawombung	Porompat	Keirao-Bitra	Jiribam
Job Card Custody	With job-card holder	2	13	20	26
	With local Pradhan	10	16	27	17
	With Panchayat member	90	87	92	85
	In Post Office	2	7	2	1
	In D.C. Office	0	0	0	0
Mode of wage payment	Through Post Office	21	4	4	3
	Through D.C. Office	6	0	0	0
	Through Panchayat members	70	90	89	94
	Through Pradhan	3	6	7	3
Timeliness of Wage Payment	Immediately after work	42	12	0	0
	Within one week	39	48	5	0
	Within 15 days	6	11	4	94
	Beyond 15 days	12	27	96	6

Worksite facilities	Drinking water available	87	93	95	94
	Crèche facility available	0	1	2	0
	Shade for lactating mothers	0	9	1	0
	First-aid box available	9	0	0	6
Awareness of MGNREGA Guidelines	Aware of detailed guidelines	40	28	20	9
	Not aware of detailed guidelines	60	72	80	91
Social Audit Participation	Attended social audit	41	63	82	79
	Did not attend social audit	59	37	18	21

Also, Table 3 demonstrates that the economic benefits perceived by respondents vary sharply across the four sub-divisions. Sawombung and Porompat show comparatively positive assessments of MGNREGA. In Sawombung, 77% consider wages and benefits appropriate, 74% report regular MGNREGA income, 75% state that the income helps them obtain a square meal, 56% associate the programme with household asset creation and 72% prefer MGNREGA work over other employment. The corresponding figures in Porompat are 74%, 61%, 63%, 62% and 32%, respectively. In marked contrast, Keirao-Bitra reports almost no positive responses to these economic-impact indicators: only 1% consider wages and benefits appropriate, while none report regular income, improved food security or household asset creation, and none express a preference for MGNREGA work. Jiribam also records relatively weak economic perceptions, with only 25% considering wages and benefits appropriate and 7%, 1%, 4% and 2% reporting positive responses to the remaining indicators. These differences suggest substantial spatial variation in the effectiveness and perceived livelihood contribution of the programme. Nevertheless, 90-98% across all four areas report that job-card holders have no outstanding wage payments, which appears inconsistent with the substantial delays reported in Table 2, particularly in Keirao-Bitra. This discrepancy may indicate that respondents distinguish between eventual receipt of wages and timely payment, meaning that the absence of outstanding dues does not necessarily signify compliance with prescribed payment timelines. Similarly, only 14-35% regard Post Office payment as convenient, indicating limited preference for this mechanism. An exceptionally high 90-99% believe that work inputs are not proportionate to wages paid, suggesting dissatisfaction with the relationship between labour effort and remuneration. The extremely low reported adherence to MGNREGA guidelines among job-card holders (2-6%) further reinforces the finding of weak programme literacy.

Table 3: Percentage distribution of Economic Benefits, Wage-Related Perceptions and Institutional Constraints in MGNREGA Implementation

Dimension	Statement/ Indicator	Sawombung	Porompat	Keirao-Bitra	Jiribam
Economic impact	Wages and benefits are appropriate – Agree/Strongly agree	77	74	1	25
	MGNREGA income is regular – Agree/Strongly agree	74	61	0	7
	MGNREGA income helps obtain a square meal – Agree/Strongly agree	75	63	0	1

	MGNREGA enables creation of household assets – Agree/Strongly agree	56	62	0	4
	Prefer MGNREGA work over other work – Agree/Strongly agree	72	32	0	2
Wage-related perceptions	No outstanding wage payment for job-card holders	90	92	98	90
	Wage payment through Post Office is convenient	30	35	20	14
	Work input is not proportionate to wages paid	98	99	92	90
	Job-card holders strictly adhere to MGNREGA guidelines	2	3	2	6
Institutional and Extra-Constitutional Constraints	Militant interference perceived to enhance work quality	90	92	89	40
	Local goons interfere in project implementation	11	3	5	2
	Money spent for clearing projects in office	99	97	96	95
	Protection tax paid to extremist elements	0	0	0	0
	Insurgent interference in MGNREGA implementation	99	97	90	80
Implementation Efficiency	Implementation of MGNREGA is slow	30	28	20	13

1-Strongly disagree, 2- Disagree, 3- Undecided, 4- Agree, 5- Strongly agree

The institutional and extra-constitutional dimensions in Table 3 reveal another important aspect of programme implementation in the study area. A very high proportion of respondents say 99% in Sawombung, 97% in Porompat, 90% in Keirao-Bitra and 80% in Jiribam report insurgent interference in MGNREGA implementation. Similarly, 99%, 97%, 96% and 95%, respectively, report that money is spent for clearing projects in offices. These findings indicate that beneficiaries perceive significant informal or non-statutory influences surrounding programme implementation. At the same time, 90% of respondents in Sawombung, 92% in Porompat, 89% in Keirao-Bitra and 40% in Jiribam perceive militant interference as enhancing work quality. This seemingly paradoxical finding should be interpreted cautiously: it reflects respondents' perceptions of local realities rather than evidence that such interference objectively improves programme performance. Reports of interference by local goons are comparatively lower, ranging from 2% to 11%, while none of the respondents report payment of protection tax to extremist elements. Regarding implementation speed, only 30% in Sawombung, 28% in

Porompat, 20% in Keirao-Bitra and 13% in Jiribam consider implementation slow, suggesting that perceived slowness is not universal despite substantial concerns regarding payment delays and institutional practices. The present findings reveal a clear distinction between basic awareness and effective empowerment: beneficiaries generally know about job cards, yet many do not possess their own cards, lack detailed knowledge of MGNREGA provisions, experience weak worksite facilities and have limited direct control over wage-payment processes. The findings therefore indicate that the principal challenge in Imphal-East is not simply the existence of MGNREGA institutions, but the translation of statutory entitlements into transparent, timely and beneficiary-controlled implementation. The considerable sub-divisional variation, particularly the weak economic outcomes reported in Keirao-Bitra and Jiribam, further demonstrates the need for stronger monitoring, direct beneficiary awareness, improved worksite facilities, timely wage payment and more effective social-audit mechanisms.

DISCUSSION

The findings of the present study demonstrate that MGNREGA in Imphal-East has created a visible institutional framework for rural employment, but its effectiveness remains constrained by weaknesses in beneficiary control, programme awareness and implementation practices. The relatively high awareness of the existence of job cards, 75% in Sawombung, 97% in Porompat, 99% in Keirao-Bitra and 94% in Jiribam indicates that the basic identity and registration mechanism of MGNREGA has reached most beneficiaries. However, this basic awareness does not translate into substantive knowledge of statutory entitlements. Only 40%, 28%, 20% and 9% of respondents, respectively, reported awareness of detailed MGNREGA guidelines. This gap is particularly important because Ghose (2012) viewed MGNREGA as a rights-based social-protection mechanism whose effectiveness depends upon beneficiaries being able to exercise their legally guaranteed entitlements. The finding that 85-92% of job cards remain with Panchayat members rather than the workers themselves further suggests that formal registration has not necessarily resulted in effective beneficiary ownership. The widespread reporting of charges for job-card preparation, despite the rights-based character of the programme, reinforces the concern that institutional procedures may be mediated by informal local practices. These findings are consistent with Reddy, Reddy and Bantilan (2014), who emphasised that substantial inter-regional variation in MGNREGA outcomes arises from differences in local administrative capacity and implementation quality. The study also reveals inadequate worksite facilities, particularly the almost complete absence of crèches, shaded facilities for lactating mothers and first-aid provisions. This has particular implications for women's participation, since formal equality of access does not necessarily ensure substantive participation when care responsibilities and workplace constraints are inadequately addressed. In this respect, the findings support Breitzkreuz et al. (2017), who argued that the programme's benefits for women can be restricted when implementation fails to accommodate their practical and caregiving needs. Social-audit participation, although relatively high in Keirao-Bitra and Jiribam, remains limited in Sawombung and Porompat, indicating that participatory accountability has not developed uniformly across the study area.

The economic and institutional findings further indicate that MGNREGA's impact is highly differentiated across sub-divisions. Sawombung and Porompat respondents express comparatively favourable views regarding wage adequacy, regular income, food security and household asset creation, whereas the responses from Keirao-Bitra and Jiribam reveal markedly weaker perceived benefits. This spatial variation supports the argument of Gaiha et al. (2010) that programme performance should not be judged merely by employment generation but by its actual contribution to income security and poverty reduction. The finding that 96% of respondents in Keirao-Bitra experienced wage payment beyond 15 days is particularly significant because timely payment is central to the credibility of an employment guarantee. Although 90-98% of respondents across the four areas reported having no outstanding wage payments, this does not necessarily contradict the evidence of delayed payments: workers may eventually receive their full wages while still experiencing substantial delays. Imbert and Papp (2015) demonstrated that MGNREGA can influence wider rural labour markets and strengthen workers' bargaining positions, but such effects depend upon the programme functioning as a credible alternative source of employment. In Imphal-East, the high proportion of respondents stating that work input is not proportionate to wages, combined with the low preference for MGNREGA in Keirao-Bitra and Jiribam, suggests that this potential is not being realised equally. The reported perceptions of insurgent or extra-constitutional interference and informal payments for clearing projects point to an additional institutional challenge that distinguishes the Manipur context from many national-level assessments. These perceptions should be interpreted as respondents' reported experiences rather than

independently verified evidence of unlawful intervention. Nevertheless, they indicate that programme implementation operates within a complex local institutional environment. Stina et al. (2015) similarly emphasised the importance of examining MGNREGA performance in Manipur through employment generation, work completion and fund utilisation alongside administrative efficiency. Overall, the study supports the broader conclusion of the International Labour Organization (2015) that MGNREGA has considerable potential as a social-protection instrument but that delayed payments, weak awareness, inadequate facilities and implementation deficiencies can substantially reduce its effectiveness. The central implication is therefore that improving MGNREGA in Imphal-East requires moving beyond nominal coverage towards beneficiary-centred implementation, particularly by ensuring that workers retain their job cards, strengthening awareness of statutory rights, minimising intermediary control over payments, ensuring timely wages, improving women-friendly worksite facilities, strengthening social audits and establishing more accessible grievance mechanisms. Such measures would help narrow the gap between the legal promise of MGNREGA and its practical contribution to livelihood security and participatory rural development in Manipur.

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

The present study concludes that MGNREGA has emerged as an important instrument of livelihood support and rural social protection in Imphal-East district, but its implementation during 2018-19 to 2019-20 remained uneven across Sawombung, Porompat, Keirao-Bitra and Jiribam. The findings reveal a clear distinction between basic awareness and effective awareness: although a large majority of job-card holders knew about the existence of job cards, only a relatively small proportion possessed adequate knowledge of detailed MGNREGA provisions. The fact that most job cards were reportedly retained by Panchayat members rather than beneficiaries raises concerns about transparency, ownership and workers' control over their statutory entitlements. Wage-payment practices also varied substantially, with particularly serious delays in Keirao-Bitra. While drinking-water facilities were available at most worksites, essential facilities such as crèches, shade for lactating mothers and first-aid boxes were largely absent. The perceived economic benefits were relatively favourable in Sawombung and Porompat but considerably weaker in Keirao-Bitra and Jiribam, demonstrating significant spatial variation in programme performance. The study further identifies concerns relating to limited adherence to programme guidelines, informal institutional practices and reported extra-constitutional interference. These findings reinforce the argument that the effectiveness of a rights-based employment programme depends not merely on formal coverage but on the actual capacity of beneficiaries to exercise their rights.

The implications of the study are both administrative and developmental. First, systematic awareness programmes should be undertaken so that beneficiaries understand their rights concerning registration, employment demand, wages, worksite facilities, social audits and grievance redressal. Second, job cards should remain in the custody of the actual workers, and direct and transparent payment mechanisms should be strengthened to reduce unnecessary dependence on intermediaries. Third, wage payments should be made within the prescribed period, with effective monitoring of delays and appropriate accountability for responsible agencies. Fourth, worksite facilities should be improved, particularly crèches, shade for women with young children, drinking water and first-aid arrangements, so that MGNREGA can provide genuinely inclusive employment opportunities. Fifth, social audits should be strengthened through wider beneficiary participation and independent monitoring, particularly in areas where participation remains low. Finally, reported administrative irregularities and extra-constitutional influences require careful institutional scrutiny, stronger grievance-redressal mechanisms and improved coordination among Panchayati Raj institutions and district authorities. Overall, the study suggests that MGNREGA in Manipur should move from nominal programme coverage towards rights-based, transparent and beneficiary-centred implementation. Such reforms would enhance livelihood security, strengthen rural participation, improve accountability and enable the programme to contribute more effectively to inclusive and sustainable rural development in Imphal-East and the wider state of Manipur.

REFERENCES

- [1] Breitzkreuz, R., Stanton, C.-J., Saminathan, E., & Grenier, F. (2017). The Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme: A policy solution to rural poverty in India? *Development Policy Review*, 35(3), 397-417.

- [2] Ehmke, E. (2015). National experiences in building social protection floors: India's Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (Extension of Social Security Paper No. 49). International Labour Organization.
- [3] Gaiha, R., Kulkarni, V. S., Pandey, M. K., & Imai, K. (2010). National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme, poverty and prices in rural India. *Journal of Asian and African Studies*, 45(6), 645-669.
- [4] Ghose, A. K. (2012). Social protection in India: An overview. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 47(23).
- [5] Imbert, C., & Papp, J. (2015). Labor market effects of social programs: Evidence from India's employment guarantee. *American Economic Journal: Applied Economics*, 7(2), 233-263.
- [6] International Labour Organization. (2015). National experiences in building social protection floors: India's Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (Extension of Social Security Paper No. 49). International Labour Office.
- [7] Khawlneikim, S., & Mital, M. (2015). Socio-economic impact of Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme in Churachandpur district, Manipur: A beneficiary perspective. *International Journal of Scientific Research*, 4(12).
- [8] Ministry of Rural Development, Government of India. (2005). The Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act, 2005. India Code.
- [9] Ministry of Rural Development, Government of India. (2011). Rules for social audit under Mahatma Gandhi NREGA. Press Information Bureau.
- [10] Ministry of Rural Development, Government of India. (n.d.). Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act: Frequently asked questions.
- [11] Reddy, D. N., Reddy, A. A., & Bantilan, M. C. S. (2014). The impact of Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) on rural labor markets and agriculture. *India Review*, 13(3), 251-273.
- [12] Stina, Khumukcham, A. Sarkar, Ram Singh, & R. Josmee Singh. (2015). A Study on the Performance of MGNREGA in Manipur. *International Journal of Social Science*, 4(4), 297-305.