

Implementation of NREGS in Tripura: An Evaluation

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Introduction

The National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA) is a landmark legislation in Indian history. On 2 February 2006, NREGA was first introduced in 200 most backward districts of the country and by 1 April 2008 it has become ubiquitous in all districts of the country. The National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (NREGS) under this Act aims at enhancing the livelihood security of people in rural areas by guaranteeing 100 days of wage employment in a financial year to each rural household whose members volunteer to do unskilled work. It is called an innovative scheme because it is demand-based supported by some extraordinary guidelines, which emphasize on planning of works and ensure transparency and accountability through the mechanism of social audit. Remarkable feature of the NREGS is a ban on the use of contractors and it stands as a wage employment programme.

Objective and Methodology

The present paper aims to evaluate the performance of the NREGS in Tripura. To this end emphases are given on the outcomes of the NREGS, status of performance of NREGS, participation of women, and creation of community assets, particularly physical infrastructure in the rural areas. The study also encompasses the impact of NREGS on the villages, causes of success as well as the main challenges of the scheme faced in Tripura. The whole account is based on secondary data published by the Government of India and Government of Tripura from time to time as well as primary data collected by the author from 100 NREGS workers engaged in different work sites, 12 Panchayat Secretaries, 12 Gram Rozgar Sevaks, 10 Gram Panchayat Pradhan/his representatives etc through interviews. The observations of 4 key panchayat functionaries, mainly 2 Block Development Officers and 2 Panchayat Samity Chairpersons, are also collected and included in the study. 10 Gram Panchayats (GP) out of 513 spread over 4 administrative blocks in

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West and South Tripura districts have been visited by the author to supplement data collected from the website and other documents published by the governments and Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) in Tripura.

Findings

In Tripura, the NREGS was introduced in Dhalai District along with 200 most backward districts of the country and gradually by 2008, the remaining three districts were brought under this scheme. The introduction of the NREGS in Tripura is worth mentioning for many reasons. Tripura is a small state inhabited by only 32 lakh people comprising 31 percent Scheduled Tribe (ST) population and 17 percent Scheduled Caste population. About 83 percent of the total population live in the rural areas and 55 percent¹ of the total population are below poverty line. The economy of the state is agrarian with a low average landholding size of 0.97 hectare.² Geographical isolation, poor transportation network, dearth of industries, soaring unemployment problem, and porous border with Bangladesh have inhibited economic growth and consequently hindered the economic development of the state.

Table 1. Profile of NREGS in Tripura

Particulars	Tripura	Dhalai	South Tripura	West Tripura	North Tripura
Employment provided to household (in lakh)	5.49002	0.76875	1.3794	2.29	1.05207
Person days (in lakh)	351.12	75.77	87.55	140.35	47.45
Total Fund (in crore)	514.00	104.41	128.56	222.23	58.8
Expenditure incurred (in crore)	490.77	101.53	121.43	209.62	58.2
Total works	59258	9267	12917	33626	3448
Works completed	54478(92)	7058(76)	11080(86)	33196(99)	3144(91)
Work in progress	4780(08)	2209(24)	1837(14)	430(01)	304(09)

Source: Source: Ministry of Rural Development, Government of India. (Figures in the brackets show percentages)

Given the circumstances, NREGS has been introduced in the state with an expectation that it will give a new lease of life to the rural poor by bringing dynamism in rural livelihood and energizing the state's economy in particular. Its implementation has given a reason to the people in Tripura to smile, especially the poor in its rural areas. According to tribal beneficiaries of the State, it has brought a new dawn for them³ and they foresee an improvement in their livelihood. Earlier most of them had to go to forest to collect firewood and bamboo and sell the same in distant rural markets for earning their bread.^{3A} Available data shows that the poor are happy to work for NREGS and they

are getting employment in various projects. The agony of income uncertainty of poor people is reduced. It is also helping the women, as more and more women are participating in the scheme ensuring its success.⁴ According to one informant, construction of road under NREGS has brought immense satisfaction to the villagers. The villagers now need not walk long distance to reach the market and it has given them opportunity to earn.^{4A} Table 1 above clearly shows the achievements of the NREGS in Tripura during 2008-09 regarding employment generation, completion of work and allocation of fund.

Table 1 further shows that during 2008-09 average employment per household in Tripura was 64 days, which is better than the scenario of other northeastern states. National average employment provided per household in 2008-09 was 48 while it was 31 for Nagaland, 32 for Meghalaya, 44 for Arunchal Pradesh, 47 for Manipur and 35 for Assam as on 11 March 2009. District-wise classification of the average employment per rural household in Tripura shows that it was 98 for Dhalai District, South Tripura District 63, West Tripura District 61 and North Tripura District 45. It may be mentioned that Dhalai, which is the most backward district in the state as per Tripura Human Development Report 2007,⁵ tops the list in average employment per rural household. Available records establish that the participation of tribal people is particularly noteworthy. In 2008-09, the percentage of tribal participation was more than 45⁶ and it was the highest in Dhalai District with more than 61 percent.⁷ The percentage of tribal participation in North Tripura District was 39,⁸ 43⁹ in South Tripura District and 40¹⁰ in West Tripura District.

Field data further show that average employment provided per household is 68 days. In West Tripura District, it is the highest in West Gandhigram Gram Panchayat (GP) with 72 days' work while Sarasima GP in South Tripura District is found to be the highest provider of employment with 78 days' work. Maximum employment provided in West Tripura District is Lankamura GP with 83,221 person-days' work while Kanchannagar GP under Bokafa Block in South Tripura District was the highest with 61,319 person-days' work.

Table 1 further shows that 92 percent of total works are completed and remaining 8 percent are in progress. Work-in-progress is the highest in North Tripura District (24 percent) while it is the lowest in West Tripura District (1 percent). As regards allocation of fund, total allocation under NREGS in Tripura in 2008-09 has risen by more than three times reaching Rs. 514 crore from Rs 167 crore in 2007-08. Available records show that Tripura was

second to Assam regarding fund availability under NREGS among the northeastern states. Table 1 also shows that total allocation was the highest in West Tripura District (43 percent) followed by South Tripura (25 percent), Dhalai District (20 percent) with the least fund allocated to North Tripura District (12 percent). Table 2 below gives an insight into the state of rural household and allocation of fund.

Table 2. Fund Allocation under NREGS in Rural Tripura during 2008-09

Districts	No of villages	Total population as per census 2001 (in lakh)	Total rural Population (in lakh)	No of Rural Household (in lakh)	Allocation of fund in 2008-09 (Rs. in crore)
West	274 (32)	15.30 (48)	11.20 (73)	2.29 (42)	209.62(43)
North	163 (19)	5.90 (18)	5.26 (89)	1.02 (19)	58.29(12)
South	263 (31)	7.70 (24)	7.11 (93)	1.50 (28)	121.43(25)
Dhalai	156 (18)	3.10 (10)	2.87 (94)	0.58 (11)	101.41(20)
Total	856	32.00	26.44 (83)	5.39 (100)	490.77

Source: Some Basic Statistics of Tripura 2001 & 2006 and Census of India 2001 and Ministry of Rural Development, Government of India.

(Figures in the brackets indicate percentages.)

Table 2 shows that per village allocation of fund for West Tripura District was Rs.76.64 lakh while for North, South and Dhalai districts it was Rs.35.70 lakh, Rs.46.17 lakh and Rs.65.30 lakh respectively. It may be noted that there are 527¹¹ village committees under Tripura Tribal Area Autonomous District Council (ADC) and 513¹² Gram Panchayats (GP) in non-ADC area under the Panchayat Raj Institutions Act, 1993 establishing the fact that each GP or village committee spent Rs.47.21 lakh on an average in 2008-09 on NREGS. Allocation of fund per rural household in Tripura was Rs.9360 while it was Rs.9704 for West Tripura District, Rs.5600 for North Tripura District, Rs.9550 for South Tripura District and Rs.13,200 for Dhalai District in 2008-09. It can be gauged from Table 2 that Dhalai District could allot 100 days' work to all the households that applied for job in 2008-09. Table 2 further shows that although 11 percent of the total population have been residing in Dhalai District, allocation of fund for the same is 21 percent only. 99 and 86 per cent of the registered households in four GP each at Salema and Ambassa blocks respectively under Dhalai District applied and were provided with jobs under the scheme.¹³

Status of Performance

The parameters used in performance appraisal are transparency, accountability, monitoring, evaluation, physical performance indicator, financial performance indicator, staffing, training etc. as per NREGS guidelines. NREGS gives a central role to “social audit” as a means of continuous public vigilance. Social audit may be defined as “an in-depth scrutiny and analysis of the working of any public utility vis-à-vis its social relevance. Social audit gained significance especially after the 73rd Amendment of the Constitution relating to Panchayat Raj Institutions”.¹⁴ “A social audit is a process in which the people work with the government to monitor and evaluate the planning and implementation of a scheme or programme or indeed of a policy or law. It can be conducted by the government and the people specially by those people who are affected by or the intended beneficiaries of, the scheme being intended. A social audit is conducted over the life span of a scheme or programme and not just in one go or at one stage.”¹⁵ It audits the process, the output, planning, implementation, monitoring and evaluation. As a result of social audit “updated data on demand received, registration, number of job cards issued, list of people who demanded and had been given/not given employment, funds received and spent, payments made, works sanctioned and works started, cost of works and details of expenditure on it, duration of work, person-days generated, reports of local communities and copies of muster roll need to be made available in a pre-designed format outside offices of all agencies involved in implementing NREGS.”¹⁶

As regards performance of NREGS, Tripura ranks second in the country. The records of other northeastern states show that Mizoram is 5th,¹⁷ Arunachal Pradesh 19th,¹⁸ and Nagaland 20th.¹⁹ It may be mentioned that the Union Ministry of Rural Development has also applauded Tripura government for its performance in NREGS in the last fiscal year.²⁰ Besides Tripura, Rajasthan implemented the scheme effectively. For instance, it is reported: “Rajasthan districts bag award for best NREGS application. The tribal-dominated Dungarpur, Sirohi and Jalore districts of Rajasthan have bagged the prize instituted by the Union Ministry of Rural Development for outstanding performance in implementation of the NREGS.”²¹

District-wise performance shows that West Tripura tops among four districts in Tripura regarding total allocation of fund, total person-days’ work, number of works undertaken as well as their completion. North

Tripura District lies at the bottom in respect of total person-days’ work, average person-days’ work etc. Dhalai District is the first as regards average person-days’ work, involvement of highest number of tribal people but its achievement regarding the completion of work is not good. About 24 percent of the works undertaken are ‘work in progress’. Performance of South Tripura District is noteworthy. Though it does not rank top in respect of allocation of fund, average person-days’ work and work completion, yet it runs close to the average value of parameters indicating better implementation of NREGS.

Social audit in all GPs (182 for North Tripura and 320 for South Tripura districts, 408 in West Tripura District and 130 for Dhalai District) are completed. Available records show that 46,499 out of 58,886 muster rolls used are verified in North Tripura District as on March 10, 2009,²² and 70,451 out of 96,611 muster rolls used in South Tripura District are verified till March 11, 2009.²³ In West Tripura District out of 82,284 muster rolls 74,245 are verified.²⁴ Number of complaints received is insignificant and about 81 percent of the total 42 complaints received in two districts are disposed of while there were only 28 complaints in West Tripura District and 2 complaints in Dhalai District and all the complaints are disposed of. Field study conducted by the author shows that all GPs included in the sample have completed social audit and 90 percent of the sample have organized such audits twice a year and all such audits had been attended by one or two representatives from either sub-divisional office or reputed non-governmental organization. Another major achievement of NREGS in Tripura is the payment of wages through either banks or post offices. This is done with a view to ensuring that the payment reaches real beneficiaries with no involvement of middlemen, which is also mandatory as per the guidelines of NREGS. However such a work does not come without problems. The major problem was to find out banking institutions at the doorsteps of workers. Though payment of wages through banks develops banking as well as thrift habits, opening of large number of accounts is a stupendous task given the poor penetration of banking institutions in the rural areas of Tripura. In 2001, only about 12.2 per cent of the villages in Tripura had a commercial bank branch. Of the remaining villages, only 15.1 per cent had a branch operating within 5 km. In other words, the people of 72 per cent of Tripura’s villages had to travel more than 5 km to reach a bank branch.²⁵ Given this backdrop, as many as 3.29²⁶ accounts are opened under NREGS in 2008-09, which

is really worth commending. Field study conducted by the author further shows that except 3 GPs under Mohanpur Block under West Tripura District all GPs could arrange wage payments through bank accounts or post offices in 2008-09. The details of accounts opened in bank and post offices are given below:

Table 3. Details of Accounts opened under NREGS in Tripura in 2008-09

Districts	No of Bank Accounts		No of Accounts in Post Offices		Total no of accounts opened
	Individual	Joint	Individual	Joint	
Dhalai	0	19894	0	4206	24100
South	26047	43407	18390	12774	100618
North	23044	27419	28312	25352	104127
West	0	66351	0	34153	100504
Total	49091	157071	46702	76485	329349

Source: Ministry of Rural Development, Government of India.

Women's Participation

NREGS is a highly gender-sensitive scheme. It is mandatory that at least one third of workers should be women. A state progress report of the NREGS activities shows that women's participation which was 44.51 percent in 2007-08 rose to 51 percent²⁷ in 2008-09, which is higher than the national average of 48 percent.²⁸ Tripura held the highest record in terms of employing women in NREGS among the northeastern states. In some of the tribal states of the region like Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland, Mizoram and Meghalaya, the percentage of women's participation in 2007-08 was 29.58²⁹, 29.36³⁰, 36.62³¹ and 30.87³² respectively while it was 30.85³³ and 32.80³⁴ for Assam and Manipur respectively. On district-wise participation of women in Tripura it may be mentioned that women in Dhalai and West Tripura districts are front-runners in the execution of NREGS and about 60 and 55 percent of person-days generated have gone to women followed by 42 percent in South Tripura and 38 percent in North Tripura districts. As per THDR 2007, work participation rate for female was the lowest in North Tripura District. On the other hand, the participation of tribal women in Tripura was 46 percent.³⁵ Available data show that efforts of tribal women in Khedarnal Village of Amarpur Block, South Tripura District have enabled the village to become the first village in the country to generate 100 person-days' work for all the 321 Below Poverty Level families under NREGS during the year 2007-08.³⁶

The study shows that NREGS has substantially improved female workforce participation rate in Tripura, which as per Census of 2001 was 21 percent³⁷ while it was 51 percent³⁸ for male. "The work participation rates for women are similar to those of Assam and eastern India (West Bengal), and much lower than those of the other North Eastern States and also the Indian average. Interestingly, even among the ST population, female work participation rates in Tripura were the second lowest (after Assam) in the North East. For women the highest work participation was in Dhalai and lowest in North Tripura District".³⁹ The work participation for women in NREGS is substantially higher and better than what THDR 2007 demonstrates. My field study makes it evident that the participation of women in West Tripura District is high. In Anaganagar, Singerbill, West Gandhigram, and Lankamura GPs the participation of women is as high as 80 percent while it is the lowest in Banshpada GP under South Tripura District with 48 person-days' work only. Further, the participation of women is exceedingly high in city/town adjacent GP while it is low and moderate in interior and minority-dominated areas. To sum up, NREGS has become popular among women, as it has enabled many women to come out of their social barriers and traditional and religious inhibitions leading to some kind of emancipation.

Creation of Assets

While the basic principle of NREGS is provision of guaranteed employment to the people willing to do manual work, it also envisages creation of sustainable assets in the long run to improve the overall economy of the village.⁴⁰

In Tripura during 2007-08, major emphasis of NREGS was on road connectivity, but in 2008-09, the works under NREGS got diversified. In 2008-09, major emphasis was on water conservation, drought proofing, micro irrigation, provision of irrigation, renovation of traditional water bodies on which total allocation of fund was 34 percent followed by 27 percent allocation on road connectivity, land development 15 percent, flood control 7 percent and other activities 11 percent.⁴¹ The volume of community assets created during 2008-09 is shown in Table 4 below.

Table 4. Creation of Community Assets under NREGS in 2008-09

Nature of Works	Expenditure	No of works	Volume of works (units)
	Rs. in lakh (%)		
Rural connectivity	11067 (27.3)	8129	3104 (Km)
Flood control and protection	2968 (7.3)	2154	157 (Km)
Water conservation and harvesting	5437 (13.4)	5305	904 (Cu.mt)
Drought proofing	2552 (6.3)	2296	321 (Hect)
Micro irrigation	3308 (8.0)	5341	687 (Km)
Provision of irrigation to ST/SC etc.	2196 (5.4)	4057	130 (Hect)
Renovation of traditional water bodies	2541 (6.3)	5697	300 (cu.mt)
Land development	6053 (15.0)	11243	242 (Hect)
Any other works	4544 (11.0)	10256	466 (Hect/cumt)
Total	40466	54478	

Source: Ministry of Rural Development, Government of India.

Table 4 amply shows that present activities of NREGS are very much diversified and they aim at creating such infrastructure which has lasting impact on income generation and conservation of natural resources. Tripura is ahead of some other leading states of northeastern states in diversity of works. Though Mizoram is fifth in the country as regards performance, “92% of the NREGS works are for road connectivity, 5% for land development, 1% for flood control, remaining 2% for water conservation and drought proofing activities”.⁴² Available records show that there exist differences in the expenditure pattern of NREGS fund among different districts causing variation in creation of community assets. The study further shows that West Tripura District earmarked 17% fund⁴³ on activities like rubber nursery, flower nursery, development of mango, cashew and banana orchards, construction of market sheds, crematorium, community latrine, children’s park and even assisting the cultivators undertaking systematic rice intensification method “followed by land development (15%), rural connectivity(12%), flood control (11%), water conservation (10%), micro irrigation (10%) drought proofing (9.5%), renovation of traditional water bodies (8.5) and 8% on provision of irrigation to ST/SC”⁴⁴ and while South Tripura District emphasized more on rural connectivity earmarking “49% fund followed by land development (21%) and water conservation (7%), micro irrigation (7%), renovation of traditional bodies (5%) etc”.⁴⁵ The allocation of fund by Dhalai and North Tripura districts are almost similar with minor variation. Dhalai District allocated “37% on rural roads, 25% on water conservation, 10% on land development, 7% on micro irrigation, 6% on others and 5% on renovation of traditional bodies etc”⁴⁶ while North Tripura District allocated “39% on rural roads, 19% on water conservation, 14% on land development, 10% on other activities,

6% on micro irrigation, 5% on renovation of traditional water bodies, 4% each on drought proofing and on flood control etc”⁴⁷. The volume of assets created district-wise from such fund are shown in Table 5.

Table 5. District-wise Position of Community Assets under NREGS in 2008-09

Assets Created	Dhalai	South Tripura	West Tripura	North Tripura
Rural roads (Km)	1473	2083	19808	1076
Flood control and protection (Km)	99	177	42137	116
Water conservation and harvesting (Cu.mt)	3269945	383517	33188	440.97
Drought proofing (Hect)	2183	260	12456	980
Micro irrigation (Km)	378	1154	27536	505
Provision of irrigation to ST/SC etc.	130	628	15117	109
Renovation of traditional water bodies (Cu.mt)	506314	474438	22334	32
Land development (Hect)	1083	834	26586	279
Any other works (cu.mt/ hect./ Km.)			253	250

Source: Ministry of Rural Development, Government of India.

Table 5 shows that volume of assets created in West Tripura District is noteworthy and it is diversified as well. The allocation of fund in West Tripura District was also the highest. Barring West Tripura District, other three districts emphasized on rural roads, water conservation, land development and other activities.

Field data collected by the author shows that land development and reclamation works top the list in GPs under Mohanpur Block. Out of 262 works undertaken by four GPs in Mohanpur Block, 211 works relate to land development while rural connectivity, excavation of tanks, irrigation channel and land development are preferred in South Tripura District. Field data further show that out of 221 works under two GPs in Bokafa Block of South Tripura District in 2008-09, 88 works relate to construction and maintenance of rural roads, 59 relate to water conservation and harvesting, 43 are related to land development, 25 relate to irrigation channel, 4 are related to flood control and 2 works are related to rural market development. It is further seen that during 2008-09, 778 km rural roads, 25 km brick soling road, 876 water tanks and mini barrages covering 40 hectares of land, 348 irrigation channels comprising 332 hectares of land have been created under Rajnagar Block of South Tripura District. As many as 23 brick soling roads and 77 playgrounds are developed in different schools by Hrishyamukh Block in South Tripura District besides the construction of 114 irrigation canals, 32

slab culverts and 13 spun pipe culverts. Furthermore, Kanchannagar GP under Bokafa Block in South Tripura District constructed and maintained 62 km rural roads, dug and renovated 20,250 mtr. fishery tanks, constructed and maintained 14 km irrigation channel and reclaimed 45,551 sq.mt land and leveled about 7 hectares of land. All these indicate that NREGS has been creating and developing a lot of community assets as rural infrastructure in Tripura.

Impact of NREGS on Villagers

The impact of NREGS on villagers of Tripura is immense and multi-dimensional. On the one hand, it has lessened the incidence of poverty among the villagers and, on the other hand, it has emboldened the confidence of rural unskilled men and women, most particularly the aged women and widows who can hardly go out of villages for work. In true sense NREGS is a means of survival for this section of hapless old, aged unskilled labourers in rural areas. NREGS regenerated some self-belief amongst this section of people. “An impact assessment study on NREGS in Dukli Block, West Tripura District shows that the scheme has provided economic independence to rural people. Lives of rural people have been changed as a result of introduction of this scheme. The benefits of the scheme include economic emancipation of women, wage security for impoverished family and creation of public assets.”⁴⁸

NREGS instilled self-confidence in rural women. They learnt digging water tanks, carrying head loads and doing such other works that a man traditionally did. They are more assertive while they talk and are able to make eye contact while they interact with implementing agencies. Instead of looking at their husbands for meeting their unavoidable expenses, share the family expenses and lend money to their husbands in crises. Women earning money from NREGS spend it on the education of children and on their petty jewels and household necessities. Field study shows that 10 percent of women participating in NREGS have been subscribing to LIC policies/recurring deposits. A majority of women has reported that NREGS has enabled them to be health conscious. They are no longer a passive listener but a compelling force both at home and at work place. The additional income of women is a booster to the family income. Their income has not only brought some economic solvency to the concerned families but has also caused changes in attitude of men towards women.

Creation of durable community assets like rural roads, water bodies, tank, and market sheds for the unemployed youths have brought a momentous

shift in the livelihood of rural people. As Tripura is hilly state and geographically isolated, construction of various rural roads has facilitated easy marketing of agricultural and minor forest produces leading to increased flow of income. The study shows that the land-leveling activities undertaken in Lankamura GP under West Tripura District have brought more than 10 hectares of barren and unproductive lands to cultivable stage leading to the rise of agricultural productivity as well as rise in the family income. Land-leveling works under Narsingarh GP in West Tripura District have led to the establishment of a big banana orchard by some poor SC people. Such work undertaken by Banspadua GP in South Tripura District has enabled the establishment of 4-hectare mango plantation as well as guava plantation in those lands besides settling some minority families displaced during the construction of Indo-Bangladesh Border Road. Establishment of rubber nursery, floriculture and horticultural activities by Sarasima GP are income generating. Digging and renovation of water tanks and reservoirs are likely to increase the fish production in the state substantially, which happens to be a long-standing problem in the state.

Development of agricultural lands held by ST/SC and BPL families in Anaganagar and West Gandhigram GPs under Mohanpur Block of West Tripura District, reclamation of land of ST/SC people residing in Kanchannagar GP under Bakafa Block of South Tripura District have helped many poor cultivators to see their barren land converted to fertile land and enabled them to cultivate vegetables on such land in large scale enabling them to enhance their income. Micro irrigation projects have helped the rice cultivators under Gardhang GP avail of irrigation facility intensively and improve rice production manifold. In Garhang and Kanchannagar GPs land reclamation, excavation of tank and construction of rural roads were done by tribals and non-tribals irrespective of location of work and density of tribal or non-tribal population. Construction of market sheds by Motai GP and Banshpada GP in South Tripura District, most of which are distributed to the unemployed youths in rural market, have given a sigh of relief to the prolonged unemployment problem in the local areas.

To sum up, the participation of rural people in NREGS has led to increased income levels of households, food security, health consciousness, empowerment of women, access to productive assets and savings, improved livelihood, access to leadership position in gram panchayats etc while afforestation, construction of dams, tanks and water bodies have not only assuaged the prolonged water scarcity problem in rural areas but have also made positive environmental impacts on the society as a whole.

Reasons for Success

Available data show that NREGS in Tripura is successful. “An important reason for Tripura’s better performance in this respect is that rural employment programmes were implemented more seriously in this state than elsewhere”.⁴⁹ According to the present author, performance of NREGS is good mainly because of the workings of the three-tier Panchayat Raj Institutions (PRIs) in the state. The devolution of powers and functions to the PRIs particularly in respect of 12 administrative departments like rural development, food, forest, agriculture, fisheries and education led to the enhancement of people’s participation as well as better performance. The PRIs did a commendable job right from the registration of households, door-to-door survey, and issue of job card to distribution of work and payment of wages. This can be gauged from the Performance Audit Report No 42 of 2008 of Government of India which, *inter alia*, states: “Despite the fact that there was no shortage of funds for implementation of the NREGA, audit scrutiny revealed that except in Tripura, none of the test checked GPs were able to take up all the works proposed in their Annual Plan for 2006-07”.⁵⁰ The report clearly states that there was no use of contractors or machines in NREGS works in Tripura; there was no irregular execution of work and abandoned or unfruitful work in the state.⁵¹

Another reason for the success of NREGS is the policy of People’s Plan introduced in Tripura, which is an attempt to formulate village development plans through participatory resource mapping called *Gramoday* introduced in 1999-2000 in West Tripura District first and later extended to the entire state by 2001-02.⁵² *Gramoday* is a kind of decentralized planning. It has two components. One component is to be formulated and implemented by Gram Panchayat and other component, which requires resources and technical inputs from outside the village, is to be submitted to the panchayat samity and zilla parishad for incorporation in the consolidated district plan and the state plan. “The resource mapping exercise generated considerable enthusiasm and popular participation and helped people’s perceptions on development needs and priority into area based development programmes.”⁵³

The other key factors for good performance of NREGS are the efforts of state government in complying with the guidelines regarding the appointment of (1) Gram Rozgar Sevak (GRS) in each GP, on whom the pivotal role of implementation of NREGS rests, and (2) one technical assistant for every 10 GP for assisting the estimation and measurement of works, planning,

designing, monitoring, evaluation and quality audit of various initiatives and also to assist in training and handholding with a view to improving the quality and cost-effectiveness of the scheme. Field study shows that hundred per cent of the gram panchayats formulated their work plan through gram sansad (through a meeting of villagers) and 80 percent of the panchayats sent proposal estimates etc in time, which led to all round planning effective.

Limitations of NREGS in Tripura

While implementation of NREGS has gained significant achievement, it is not free from criticism. Some such limitations in the implementation of NREGS are discussed below: One, many job cardholders have alleged that wage payment against their work is irregular and it takes some period to get the wages after the work is completed. However, according to Gram Pradhan, Gram Panchayat Secretary, formality compliances regarding transparency and other mandatory procedures cause the unwanted delays in the disbursement of wages. As per the existing norms, 50 per cent of total cost is disbursed by the local GP and the Block and District Level PRIs disburse the remaining 50 percent. But the reality is that the share of the total cost of projects likely to be borne by Block and District level PRIs are released only after the receipt of the completion report from every GP. According to the Panchayat Samity chairpersons, Gram Pradhan, GRSs and BDO, the above process takes only 15 days from the date of completion of work and they refer to banking delays as prime cause for the deferral of wage payments. But the bank officials refute this and instead allege that implementing agencies are responsible for such delay citing examples of incorrect or incomplete filling up schedules and forms. Two, men are generally found reluctant to join this flagship programme. In West Tripura District, women share 60 percent of the total person-days while overall participation of women in Tripura is 51 percent. According to Block Development Officer (BDO) and panchayat functionaries, men are not interested in NREGS because it offers relatively lower wage. In Tripura the wage as fixed for NREGS works is Rs.85 per day (increased to Rs.100 from March 1, 2009) while the daily wage, even for an unskilled worker in construction work is not less than Rs.130 per day, which, in some cases, goes up to Rs.200 per day depending on the nature of work. “This is the reason why the participation of women in some adjoining areas of Agartala like Jirania Block, Mohanpur Block and Dukli Block goes up to 70% to 80% per cent.”⁵⁴ Women participating in NREGS activities also endorse this view. According to women, men of the village move to the nearby town in search of job earning a wage @ Rs150 per day leaving job

opportunities for women in the village. Field study conducted in town/city adjoining gram panchayats like West Gandhigram, Lankamura GP under West Tripura District and Sarasima GP in South Tripura District shows that the share of participation of women in such areas is about 80 percent of total person-days' work. Three, the study also shows that both wage and participation of women have risen. NREGS has restricted the movement of labour from one area to another to a great extent. This has been substantiated by contractors, engineers, panchayat functionaries, rubber cultivators, etc. in Agartala. The non-availability of labours has already been impacting rice production in the state causing the cost per hectare to rise leading to economic loss to cultivators.⁵⁵ It is apprehended that ultimately it may change the cropping pattern of Tripura.⁵⁶ A classic example of such problem is the recent crisis of labourers in the tea gardens of Tripura. Tea gardens in Tripura have started facing the shortage of labours following the expansion of NREGS in all the four districts of the state. "According to Tea Association of India, about 40-42% of the workers have deserted tea estates and joined the NREGS and another 12% of the tea workers have obtained job cards for NREGS"⁵⁷ implying a bleak future for the tea industry. "More than 5,000 tea garden workers in Tripura have switched jobs in the past six months. They have found better option in the works under the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA), 2005 leaving tea industry in crisis in their trail"⁵⁸. It may be mentioned that tea workers in Tripura are allured to join NREGS because they receive a wage of Rs.38 per day excluding ration, accommodation and other benefits being provided by the employer.

Four, field study also shows that approved wage rate of NREGS is directly regulating and impacting minimum wages of labourers under unorganized sector in the state. When wages under NREGS was fixed at Rs 60 per day, the market rate was Rs.80 per day; when the wages under NREGS rose to Rs.71 the minimum rate in the local market shot up to Rs.100 per day; when the wages under NREGS increased to Rs 85 per day, the market rate went up to Rs.120 per day and now with the latest revision of NREGS wages to Rs.100, the minimum wage rate reaches Rs150 per day. Five, according to the present author the shortage of adequate number of labourers is a key factor in the continuation of NREGS in the coming days. There is acute shortage of both skilled and unskilled workers in the state today. Some of the workers under NREGS need to be semi-skilled but they may not remain in NREGS given the existing *modus operandi* of wage payment. Field study shows that the recently introduced wage payments are

to some extent contractual and directly proportional with the volume of work to be performed by a group of workers. Thus NREGS may face acute availability of workers. The available records also show that since 2001 number of unskilled workers registering in employment exchanges has been steadily declining and it reached 145,974 in 2006⁵⁹ from 195,895 in 2001⁶⁰ to 161,095 in 2003⁶¹ while number of skilled workers did not go up. Thus the non-availability of workers may be a real problem in fear future. According to the present author absence of differential wage rate system is also a factor that restricts the movement of labour from one sub-division to another and thus scarcity persists. The study shows that Tripura along with other 15 states did not prepare separate District-wise Schedules of Rates (DSRs) specifically for NREGS works after listing tasks for NREGS works in different geo-morphological conditions, and undertaking time and motion studies for observing out-turn and fixing rates.⁶² Field study shows that male worker is hardly available on demand as they are being hired for various development activities like Pradhan Mantri Sadak Yojana, Indo-Bangladesh Fencing Work, Bharat Nirman Project, and in rubber cultivation.⁶³ Besides organizations like Oil and Natural Gas Company and State Public Works Department prefer men to women workers for implementing their projects.

Six, another problem is the unspent fund allocated to NREGS. Available records indicate that the size of unspent fund is Rs.24 crore, which according to media report, is as high as Rs.141.35 crore in 2008-09 in the state.⁶⁴ The present author observed during the field study that the size of unspent fund at the end of March 2009 was not meagre. Delayed receipt of the fund in March 2009 has been cited as the reason for the unspent amount as well as spending the fund after the financial year. Absence of proper planning, lack of adequate staff and improper training to those newly recruited are reasons for such fund remaining unspent. The BDO is already vested with diverse works and the implementation of NREGS through the BDO proves to be additional burden resulting in under achievement of NREGS. "Non-appointment of a full-time dedicated Programme Officers (PO), pivotal to the successful implementation of the NREGA and giving the additional charge of PO to BDOs, who were responsible for other developmental schemes at the Block level, strikes at the root of effective implementation of NREGA."⁶⁵ Engagement of one GRS in each panchayat where the number of households is more than 800 is also a factor to reckon and it is hardly possible for one GRS to get all works done smoothly, including supervision and generating better performance from workers. Under the present system time lag between decision taken to introduce a new scheme and subsequent

implementation through project formulation, processing and approval of projects at different levels is high. This is one of the reasons for poor progress in taking up works proposed in the Annual Plans, and thus affecting the implementation of NREGS.

Seven, lastly, a great deal of responsibility has been vested on GP for implementation of NREGS. The Gram Pradhan is particularly responsible for some tasks of NREGS like distribution of job cards, receipt of work application, selection of works, allotment of works, implementation and supervision of work and even for the disbursement of wages in time, etc. This implies that Gram Pradhan has to actively devote his time, attention and energy to the programme. But, unlike other functionaries, he is not paid any remuneration for these tasks. This may be the reason for the involvement of some of these people in the corruption, malpractices and misappropriation of the NREGS fund. A section of the media already reported about mismanagement of NREGS fund by GP level leaders in collusion with other concerned employees. There are reports that NREGS fund is misappropriated in some blocks under Amarpur, Ambassa, Teliamura, Khowai, Sonamura, Sabroom and Dharmanagar sub-divisions of the state and most of reports are related to book adjustments shown against wages paid to workers and issue of fake job cards.

Conclusion

The study shows that average person-days per household is higher, creation of assets is more voluminous and diversified, women's participation is noteworthy and tribal participation is resplendent. Social audit is conducted in all GPs and payment of wages is made through bank accounts and most blocks are equipped with technical assistants and all GPs have one GRS each. According to the present researcher, some of the limitations mentioned above will be solved within a short period of time as the implementing machinery is able to identify them. However, the reluctance of men to join NREGS, shortage of labour and its multiplier effects may take some time to be solved.

In fine, the implementation of NREGS in Tripura is in right direction. If implemented properly, some of the present pitfalls like poor irrigation system, ill connectivity, and undeveloped agriculture and allied activities can be removed and income generating assets like development of nursery and orchard, and silk rearing can be developed along with social infrastructure

like playgrounds in the hinterland schools. The state government is expected to take appropriate measures against such challenges confronting its smooth implementation and make Tripura a model state in the country in NREGS implementation.

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