

Asset Creation Under Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act: A Study of Selected States of India

Shadab Hashmi 

Department of Economics, Rajendra College, Chapra, Bihar, India

E-mail: shadabhashmi1@gmail.com

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Abstract - MGNREGA Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act was initiated to improve employment in the rural areas and alleviate poverty in India. It has broader goals of fortifying livelihoods, establishing sustainable and efficient assets, encouraging environmental preservation, women empowerment, and enhancing social inclusion. Nevertheless, available research findings give a mixed picture especially on the quality and sustainability of assets that are developed under the programme. This paper will look at the scale and efficiency of rural assets created by MGNREGA in selected state of India. It aims at filling the gaps that exist in the literature by comparing the performance as well as distributional results of assets creation under the scheme. The data under analysis is based on secondary data according to the official database on MGNREGA that is preserved by the Ministry of Rural Development. The research is centered on the Kerala, Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, Maharashtra, and Rajasthan-states that were selected as that of divergent developmental trends, population and histories of the institutional development of the local governance. It is revealed that in the majority of the surveyed states, the rates of project completion are less than 50 percent, and in Kerala, the performance is relatively higher due to its relatively high implemented rates. The main employment indicators such as the average person-days of work generated per household and the share of households that do 100 days of work, are significantly lower in Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, and Rajasthan. Despite the high rates of fund utilisation in both Bihar and Uttar Pradesh, the financial outlay has not been associated with equal amounts of employment creation, and this implies that there exist inefficiencies in the implementation of the programmes. In Kerala, agricultural asset creation has recorded a completion rate of approximately 40 percent as opposed to approximately 20 percent in the rest of the states. Also, new projects have been largely focused on irrigation and land development of Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribe households, Bihar, Maharashtra and Rajasthan states have allocated almost 90 percent of such works in private SC/ST lands. MGNREGA is still significant in generating employment in the rural areas, but the results of asset-focused interventions, especially associated with water and soil conservation, are still small. The small number of projects completed, along with low employment rates in various states, has limited the ability of the scheme to reinforce the rural infrastructure because of its limited focus. These results demonstrate the necessity to plan more strategically, control technically and diversify works so that the long-term developmental objectives of MGNREGA could be realised successfully.

Keywords: MGNREGA, Rural Employment, Asset Creation, Rural Livelihoods

I. INTRODUCTION

Since its inception, The Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) has remained at the centre of policy discussions surrounding rural employment generation and the alleviation of agrarian distress. It is widely recognised that employment opportunities in rural India fluctuate throughout the year due to the seasonal nature of agriculture, which constitutes the primary source of livelihood for most rural workers. National-level research has highlighted that cultivators face several persistent constraints, such as erratic climatic conditions, inadequate irrigation, limited access to inputs and credit, low and unstable market prices, and insufficient institutional support (Bhoi & Dadhich, 2019; Posani, 2009). Additionally, increased mechanisation has altered the relationship between land and labour, leading to reduced demand for agricultural labour (Singh, 2006).

Against this backdrop of agrarian uncertainty and distress, MGNREGA was introduced as a rights-based programme designed to stabilise rural incomes, strengthen agricultural productivity, and moderate migration flows from villages to cities. The broader objectives of the Act include: (a) improving rural livelihoods, (b) creating durable and productive community assets, (c) conserving and protecting natural resources, (d) empowering women, and (e) promoting social inclusion. Beyond affirming the ‘right to work,’ MGNREGA also seeks to ensure participatory decision-making so that the assets created contribute meaningfully to local development and welfare (McCord & Farrington, 2008). The scheme’s growing financial outlay—from ₹11,000 crore in 2006–07 to ₹98,000 crore in 2021–22 (Ministry of Finance, Government of India)—underscores its centrality in the country’s rural development agenda.

A key stated goal of MGNREGA is to generate productive and durable assets in rural areas to support sustainable livelihoods. However, empirical studies assessing the quality, type, and long-term impact of these assets remain limited (Sen & Dreze, 2013; Roul, 2010). This study contributes to the literature by examining the nature and scope of assets generated under MGNREGA in selected Indian states.

Evidence from different case studies presents a mixed picture. In some contexts, MGNREGA assets have enhanced

agricultural productivity and improved local infrastructure, while in others, the focus on wage provision has overshadowed asset quality (Sen & Dreze, 2013). Successful instances include the desilting of canals, construction of ponds and wells, soil conservation, roadside plantations, and land levelling-activities that directly support natural resource regeneration and agricultural resilience. Conversely, reports of incomplete or poorly executed works persist, pointing to the need for stronger technical oversight and accountability mechanisms (Ambasta *et al.*, 2008). Strengthening operational processes, ensuring technical inputs, and promoting collective organisation among workers are therefore crucial for achieving MGNREGA's long-term objectives.

Empirical assessments reveal that when the emphasis leans excessively towards short-term employment rather than the creation of durable, productive assets, the outcomes often involve poor workmanship, unfinished projects, and limited maintenance. Inadequate technical planning and flawed design frameworks have further constrained the programme's capacity to generate sustainable outcomes (Ambasta *et al.*, 2008). Nonetheless, evidence from field studies in Odisha and Madhya Pradesh conducted by the Centre for Science and Environment (CSE) suggests that MGNREGA works can be both ecologically and economically beneficial when well implemented. Respondents in these studies reported increased water availability, improved irrigation, crop diversification, and an expansion of net irrigated area-indicating tangible improvements in agrarian productivity. The Act envisions the creation of assets that not only provide immediate employment but also catalyse long-term income generation through a multiplier effect. These assets-typically associated with local natural resources such as water, land, and forests-form the foundation for future employment growth. Infrastructure improvements, particularly rural roads, also play a significant role in this regard. Various implementing agencies have been tasked with converging resources and technical expertise to enhance productivity and natural resource management, recognising the interdependence of these ecological components (Datta *et al.*, 2009). This convergence approach reflects a recognition that effective coordination among different agencies can amplify the employment and developmental impact of MGNREGA.

Furthermore, the scheme allows for the development of private land belonging to economically weaker communities, including Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes, thereby generating both direct and indirect livelihood benefits. Such works promote social infrastructure that enhances labour productivity and encourages the sustainable use of natural resources. Evidence from West Bengal indicates that districts with higher potential for utilising fallow, community, or forest land under MGNREGA witness statistically significant gains in rural employment (Datta *et al.*, 2009). Drawing on these insights, the present study seeks to explore the scope and effectiveness of MGNREGA in creating productive assets that contribute to sustainable rural livelihoods. The

paper is structured as follows: Section I presents the conceptual background and rationale for the study; Section II reviews the literature and outlines the data sources; Section III defines the study's objectives; Section IV examines programme performance in selected states; Section V analyses the nature and scope of asset creation; and Section VI summarises the key findings and conclusions.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Sen and Dreze (2013) observe that between 1990 and 2005, the benefits of economic development largely bypassed rural workers. During this period, agricultural output grew only marginally in per capita terms, the rise in real agricultural wages stagnated, and employment generation ceased to be a central policy concern. The enactment of MGNREGA in 2005 marked a significant policy shift, reorienting government priorities toward employment creation while simultaneously enhancing the bargaining position of the rural poor. Evidence suggests that MGNREGA implementation has led to an increase in rural household expenditure on essential needs, such as food, health, and savings (Ravi & Engler, 2009). The scheme's contribution is further reflected in improved consumption of energy and protein (Deininger & Liu, 2010), higher spending on consumer goods like clothing, footwear, and bedding (Samarthan, 2010), and the ability of households to repay debts. Given the vulnerability of agricultural labourers in rural India, such state-supported interventions have been pivotal in sustaining livelihoods. Field-level evidence from several Tamil Nadu villages confirms that MGNREGA has been particularly beneficial for landless households, helping them maintain a minimum standard of living (Vijaykumar & Murugesan, 2018; Janifar & Chandrasekaran, 2019; Jayasakaran & Murugesan, 2018). Similarly, a study from Himachal Pradesh's Hamirpur district highlights those key provisions of the Act-such as demand-based work, guaranteed workdays, and social audits-have strengthened local governance and community participation in programme implementation.

Jean and Khara's (2011) field study across six northern Indian states-including Bihar, Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan, and Uttar Pradesh-found that nearly half of the surveyed households observed noticeable improvements in their living standards after the implementation of NREGA. Approximately 69 percent reported that the scheme helped them avoid hunger, while others noted that it curtailed migration (59 percent), supported their children's education (38 percent), reduced medical burdens (47 percent), and facilitated debt repayment (32 percent). About 35 percent also indicated that participation in NREGA protected them from degrading or unsafe forms of employment. Evidence from a broad spectrum of state-level studies-spanning regions such as the east (Tripura, Odisha), west (Maharashtra, Gujarat), north (Himachal Pradesh, Rajasthan, Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh), and south (Kerala, Tamil Nadu)-further confirms that MGNREGA has been pivotal in advancing women's empowerment and promoting socio-economic inclusion,

particularly by creating more employment opportunities during non-agricultural seasons (Bedi & Dey, 2010; Sudarshan, 2011; Babu & Rao, 2010; Holmes *et al.*, 2011; Hirway & Batabyal, 2012). A substantial body of literature also highlights MGNREGA's contribution to curtailing distress migration by ensuring the availability of employment within or near workers' own villages. Empirical investigations by CSE (2008), Babu *et al.*, (2011), Mistry and Jaswal (2009), CRRID (2009), and Kumar and Prasanna (2010) document this pattern across several regions, including Gujarat, Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra, Rajasthan, Himachal Pradesh, Punjab, Haryana, and Chhattisgarh. Verma's (2011) findings from Rajasthan reveal that the scheme enabled many elderly men and women to refrain from seasonal migration, particularly in households that had earlier relocated completely in search of livelihoods (Mistry & Jaswal, 2009).

Overall, the literature demonstrates that MGNREGA has produced wide-ranging positive impacts on rural economies. By guaranteeing employment and income, it has raised consumption levels, improved food security, enhanced school enrolment, and contributed to women's empowerment and social inclusion. Despite these gains, one of the Act's important but less explored objectives-the creation of durable, productive assets-has received limited empirical attention. Few studies have systematically documented the type and quality of assets generated under the programme. The present research seeks to fill this gap by assessing the nature and scope of asset creation across selected Indian states. To capture diverse regional dynamics, the study examines the performance of MGNREGA in Kerala, Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, Maharashtra, and Rajasthan. Kerala, with its advanced development indicators, serves as a benchmark for comparison. Bihar and Uttar Pradesh, characterised by lower socio-economic outcomes, offer insights into the programme's performance in lagging regions. Maharashtra represents a large western state with comparable demographic and economic features to Uttar Pradesh, while Rajasthan's longstanding tradition of decentralised governance and grassroots participation makes it a valuable case for understanding local-level implementation. The study relies primarily on secondary data obtained from the official MGNREGA portal maintained by the Ministry of Rural Development, Government of India. This dataset provides comprehensive information on programme performance and expenditure across states and districts for multiple years, enabling a detailed assessment of both physical and financial progress.

III. METHODOLOGY AND OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The research adopts a descriptive-analytical approach to assess the implementation efficiency and developmental outcomes of MGNREGA across selected Indian states. The analysis is based exclusively on secondary information sourced from the official MGNREGA database. This comprehensive dataset includes state- and district-level

details on key performance indicators such as employment generation, utilisation of financial resources, creation of durable assets, and rates of project completion during the financial years covered by the study. Five states-Kerala, Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, Maharashtra, and Rajasthan-were purposively selected to represent diverse levels of economic development, demographic characteristics, and institutional capacity in programme implementation. Kerala was chosen for its comparatively advanced socio-economic indicators and effective governance record, serving as a benchmark for performance comparison. Bihar and Uttar Pradesh, representing less-developed states, were included to assess challenges in lagging regions. Maharashtra was selected for its geographical and economic similarity to Uttar Pradesh, while Rajasthan was incorporated due to its long-standing experience with decentralised governance and community-based rural employment initiatives.

The analysis focuses on quantitative indicators, including:

1. Percentage of work completion,
2. Proportion of households attaining 100 days of guaranteed employment,
3. Expenditure patterns and fund utilisation, and
4. Nature and type of assets created (e.g., water conservation, irrigation, drought proofing, and rural connectivity).

Descriptive statistics and comparative evaluation were used to assess inter-state variations in programme performance. The findings are presented through comparative tables and figures to highlight spatial disparities and implementation gaps. The study also interprets the results in the context of existing literature to provide a deeper understanding of the policy implications and the developmental role of MGNREGA in rural India.

The present research seeks to achieve the following objectives:

1. To examine the scope and characteristics of rural assets generated through MGNREGA.
2. To assess the variety and composition of assets created across the selected Indian states.
3. To fill the existing research gap concerning the assessment and systematic documentation of asset creation under MGNREGA in rural areas.
4. To evaluate the overall implementation and performance of MGNREGA in the chosen states.
5. To analyse recent trends in the distribution and typology of assets developed under the programme.

IV. PERFORMANCE OF MGNREGA: AN OVERVIEW

MGNREGA is recognised as one of India's largest initiatives for public employment and social protection. Although the Act has been relatively successful in providing wage employment and reducing rural job insecurity, the effectiveness of the projects implemented-particularly those related to soil and water conservation-has often been questioned (Mishra, 2018). Over time, several studies have

also pointed to a decline in the overall efficiency and impact of MGNREGA, indicating that the programme's initial momentum has not been fully sustained (Jha & Gaiha, 2012). Nevertheless, the scheme's implementation has yielded varied results across different states (Mishra & Mishra,

2015). As Table I illustrates, in all selected states, less than fifty per cent of projects were completed among the planned works, with the exception of Kerala, where more than fifty per cent of works were completed.

TABLE I PERFORMANCE OF MGNREGA IN SOME SELECTED STATES IN 2023-2024

Performance of MGNREGA	Kerala	Bihar	UP	Maharashtra	Rajasthan	India
1. Total expenditure (In cr)	3,968.70	5355.3	11,395.93	4,462.33	9,293.50	1,05,229
2. Total person days of employment generated (In Lakh)	979.6	2205.2	3452.7	968.96	3751.61	3087200
3. Expenditure incurred per unit lakh person days of employment generated	377.2	323.38	309.18	388.94	265.52	315.96
4. Actual expenditure against total available fund (%)	119.38	98.84	104.24	111.29	92.15	102.3
5. Share in country's total expenditure (%)	3.77	5.09	10.83	4.24	8.83	-
6. Average person days of employment per household	67.7	45.77	50.37	47.42	58.75	50.08
8. Percentage of households getting 100 days employment	38.74	0.69	7.7	11.44	7.9	7.4
9. Completed work against planned work (%)	54.97	43.93	35.29	26.37	28.31	39.6

Source Official Website of MGREGS, Ministry of Rural Development (MoRD), Govt of India. https://nrega.dord.gov.in/MGNREGA_new/Nrega_home.aspx

The analysis reveals that both the average person-days of employment per household and the proportion of households completing 100 days of work are markedly lower in Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, and Rajasthan, even though Bihar and Uttar Pradesh report comparatively high levels of fund utilisation. The disparity is most striking in Bihar, where nearly 99 percent of allocated funds are spent, yet fewer than one percent of households achieve the full 100 days of guaranteed employment. Overall, work completion rates remain weak in Uttar Pradesh and Rajasthan. Nevertheless, Bihar performs somewhat better in this respect, having completed around 44 percent of sanctioned projects, outperforming both Uttar Pradesh and Rajasthan. Conversely, more than half of all initiated works remain unfinished in Uttar Pradesh, Maharashtra, and Rajasthan. Kerala stands out as an exception, showing consistently superior performance across all indicators. Approximately 38.7 percent of households in

the state completed the full quota of 100 workdays—significantly above both other states and the national average of 7.4 percent. The overall work completion rate of major asset creation projects related to agriculture undertaken during 2023–24 was not particularly satisfactory (Table II). Across most states, the completion rate of MGNREGA projects linked to agriculture—particularly those involving water conservation, drought-proofing, and irrigation canal development—remains considerably low. Uttar Pradesh, Maharashtra, Rajasthan, and Bihar recorded limited progress in these categories. Kerala, however, stands out as the only state with comparatively strong implementation, achieving an average work completion rate of over 40 percent. In contrast, the other states reported rates closer to 20 percent. Within Bihar, relatively better outcomes were observed in initiatives focused on agricultural land development for Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribe households.

TABLE II WORK COMPLETION RATE OF MAJOR ASSET CREATION PROJECTS IN SELECTED STATES, 2023-2024

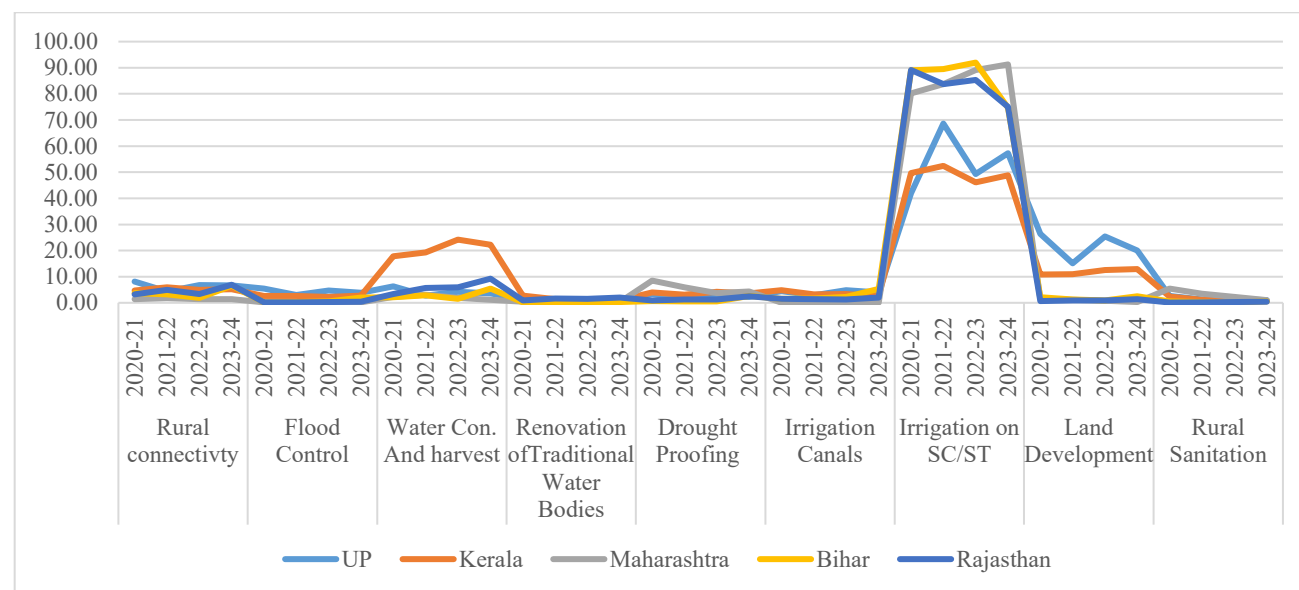
Asset Creation Projects	UP	Kerala	Maharashtra	Bihar	Rajasthan
Rural Connectivity	23.13	20.10	5.23	21.47	13.83
Flood Control	29.97	32.05	16.40	27.94	15.63
Water Conservation and Water Harvesting	20.97	43.74	5.64	20.68	20.07
Renovation of Traditional Water Bodies	22.41	21.26	7.40	25.97	19.57
Drought Proofing	7.17	29.87	10.23	9.29	18.46
Irrigation Canals	32.94	43.20	11.37	34.76	21.20
Irrigation Facilities To SC/ST/IAY/LR	29.11	27.52	14.07	37.71	29.92
Land development	29.42	42.42	9.35	31.13	18.61
Rural Drinking Water	1.08	6.17	0.49	6.47	10.00
Rural Sanitation	10.67	8.11	3.79	16.87	7.01
Other works	5.97	1.91	5.96	12.37	2.42
Total	26.07	30.62	12.91	31.45	25.20

Source Official Website of MGREGS, MoRD, Govt of India

V. ASSET CREATION UNDER MGNREGA

Figure 1 presents the distribution of assets generated between 2021–22 and 2023–24, highlighting recent trends in MGNREGA-related work. The data indicate that asset creation during this period has been largely concentrated on irrigation infrastructure and land development projects undertaken on Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribe (SC/ST) lands. In Bihar, Maharashtra, and Rajasthan, nearly 90 percent of total works were associated with the development of private plots belonging to SC/ST households. In Uttar Pradesh, this share was comparatively lower but still substantial, with around 60 percent of works focused on

SC/ST land development activities. Kerala ranks lowest in this regard, with only 50 percent of works related to the development of SC/ST land—a proportion that has declined in recent years. The majority of these works on SC/ST land are associated with irrigation projects, conversion of fallow land into cultivable land, and afforestation efforts for small and marginal farmers or land beneficiaries from SC/ST households. The second category with significant asset creation was land development activities. A substantial proportion of activities in Uttar Pradesh (approximately 20 percent) and Kerala (15 percent) are categorised as land development. These activities primarily involve the creation of farm ponds, tree plantations, and horticulture.

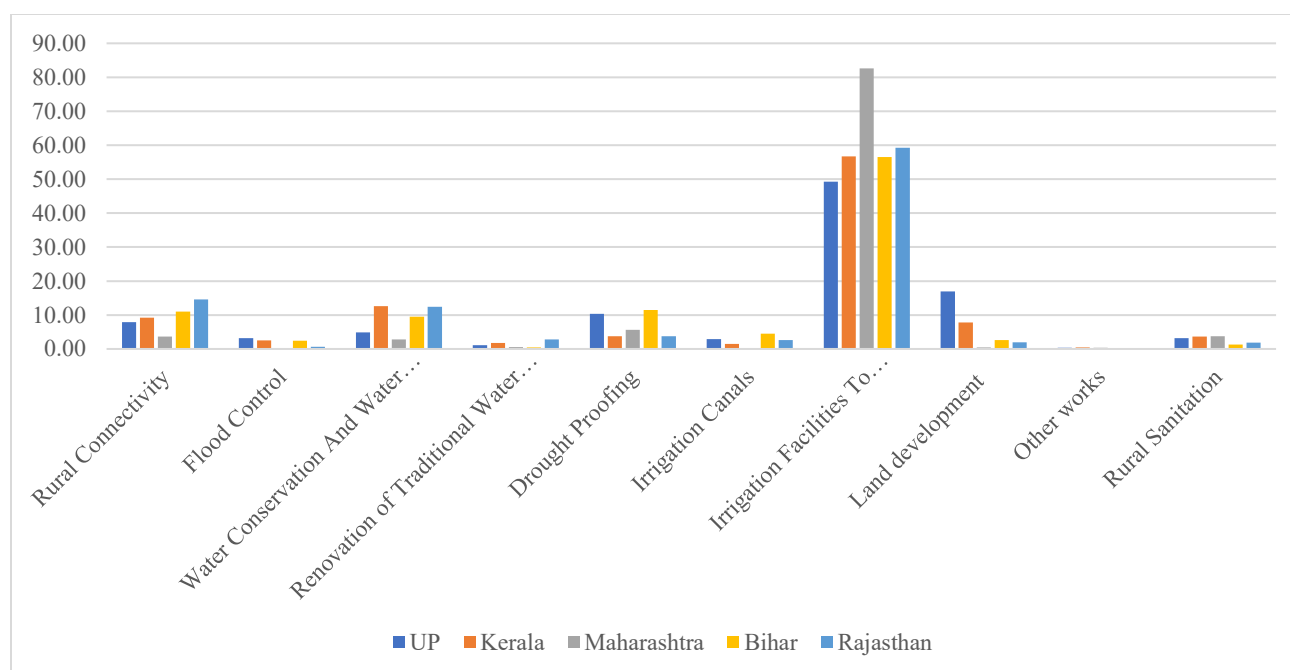


Source Official Website of MGREGS, MoRD, Govt of India

Fig.1 Distribution of Various Assets Created in Selected States of India Between 2020-2021 to 2023-2024

One of the central goals of MGNREGA is to enhance agricultural productivity. However, available data suggest that only a limited number of projects have been undertaken to directly support this objective. Among the works completed under the programme, a relatively small share pertains to water conservation, renovation of traditional water bodies, and irrigation canal construction across the selected states. Kerala stands as an exception, where approximately 25 percent of total works fall within the category of water conservation and harvesting. An important trend emerging from the analysis is that, during the initial years of MGNREGA, projects related to rural connectivity were highly prominent, significantly improving accessibility in remote regions. Over time, however, the focus on such works has declined markedly, with current data showing that all selected states have allocated only a minimal proportion of total works to rural road connectivity. Figure 2 illustrates the proportion of approved and ongoing works under MGNREGA. It is evident from the figure that the majority of works were related to developing irrigation facilities on SC/ST land, with varying degrees across different states. For instance, in Maharashtra, nearly 83 percent of total approved or ongoing works were related to irrigation facilities on

SC/ST land, whereas the figures were 49 percent in Uttar Pradesh, 56.7 percent in Kerala, 56.6 percent in Bihar, and 59 percent in Rajasthan. Other works, albeit in smaller proportions, were related to rural connectivity, water conservation, drought-proofing, and land development. As most of the works on SC/ST land were private in nature, the impact of such works and their implications for increasing agricultural productivity have yet to be examined. On the one hand, works on SC/ST land are expected to have a positive impact on households that were purportedly disadvantaged, having limited access to resources and opportunities. Such works are likely to improve their livelihoods through income generation and enhanced food security. On the other hand, limiting the works to specific activities hampers the diversity of asset creation and constrains the overall development of rural infrastructure, potentially adversely affecting agricultural productivity and the sustainability of rural livelihoods. As demonstrated above, most of the works were concentrated on particular items, while other public goods that might have had a significant effect on enhancing rural livelihoods were given less emphasis. This indicates poor planning and implementation under the MGNREGA Act.



Source Official Website of MGREGS, MoRD, Govt of India

Fig.2 Distribution of Various Assets Approved/Ongoing in Selected States of India During 2023-2024

VI. CONCLUSION

MGNREGA has demonstrated moderate success in expanding employment opportunities in rural India. Nevertheless, the outcomes of the programme's interventions-especially those targeting soil and water conservation-have been uneven and often limited in their long-term impact. Considerable variation is observed across states, with most regions reporting that less than half of the sanctioned projects have reached completion, Kerala being the notable exception. Key employment indicators, including the average number of person-days generated per household and the share of households attaining the full quota of 100 workdays, remain notably low in Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, and Rajasthan. Similarly, during the 2023–24 period, the overall progress of agricultural asset-creation initiatives was modest, whereas Kerala once again outperformed other states, displaying comparatively stronger efficiency in implementation. Recent asset creation has predominantly focused on irrigation on SC/ST land and land development. The majority of approved or ongoing works were related to developing irrigation facilities on SC/ST land, with varying degrees across different states. SCs and STs frequently encounter systemic disadvantages, including restricted access to resources and opportunities. By prioritising works on their lands, MGNREGA aims to elevate these communities, ensuring they derive benefits from employment and asset creation directly related to their livelihoods. Limiting the works to specific activities hampers the diversity of asset creation and constrains the overall development of rural infrastructure, potentially adversely affecting agricultural productivity and the sustainability of rural livelihoods. This pattern indicates poor planning and implementation under the MGNREGA Act.

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ORCID

Shadab Hashmi  <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-1436-2435>

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