Analysing The Performance Of Mgnrega In Achieving Sustainable Development Goals In Assam

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Abstract
Since gaining its independence, the government of India has been implementing numerous poverty and unemployment reduction programmes in the rural areas of the nation. One of the most indigenous programmes in the area of rural development is the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA), which was introduced in 2005. In addition to creating job opportunities, it revitalises the rural sector by enhancing infrastructure, increasing agricultural output, and promoting sustainable development, environmental preservation, water conservation, and economic sustainability. This article examines MGNREGA’s contribution in achieving Sustainable Development Goals in Assam.

Introduction
India is the largest democracy and the most populated country in the world. Most of the population resides in rural areas and depends on agriculture and allied activities for survival. India’s rural population has been facing poverty, unemployment, illiteracy and other problems for ages, and they are on the threshold of subsistence. After independence, the Government of India has considered rural development one of its priorities and adopted numerous policies and programmes for developing rural areas. Economic growth is essential to all kinds of development. Henceforth, the central and state governments have adopted several schemes to provide wage employment to the poor in rural India.

In India, numerous schemes have been promulgated over the years for poverty alleviation, employment generation and rural development. A few of them are – the National Rural Employment Programme (NREP), Rural Landless Employment Guarantee Programme (RLEGP), Jawahar Rozgar Yojana (JRY), Integrated Rural Development Programme (IRDP) Training of Rural Youth for Self-Employment (TRYSEM), Jawahar Gram Samridhi Yojana. All these programmes failed to attain desired goals for some reason or other.

The National Rural Employment Guarantee Act, 2005, was published in the Gazette of India on 7th September 2005 and was renamed MGNREGA on 2nd October 2009. MGNREGA is the most significant employment-providing scheme in the world. The Act was notified in 200 districts in the first phase with effect from 2nd February 2006 and then extended to additional 130 districts in the financial year 2007-2008 (113 districts were notified with effect from 1st April 2007, and 17 districts in UP were notified with effect from 15th May 2007). The
remaining districts have been notified under the MGNREGA, effective from 1st April 2008 (Kumar and Chakraborty, 2016).

Mahatma Gandhi Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) aims to enhance the livelihood security of households in rural areas by providing at least one hundred days of guaranteed wage employment in a financial year to every household whose adult members volunteer to do unskilled manual work. The MGNREGA has become a powerful instrument for inclusive growth in rural India through its impact on social protection, livelihood security and democratic governance. MGNREGA is the ever law internationally that guarantees wage employment at an unprecedented scale (Ashthos, 2018).

The Act also emphasises the need to build enduring assets in rural regions, such as roads, canals, ponds, and wells. Within 5 kilometres of the applicant’s home, employment must be available, and the minimum wage must be paid. The candidates are entitled to unemployment benefits if employment is not given within 15 days. Gram Panchayats are in charge of implementing it. The importance is placed on labour-intensive tasks, including building infrastructure for water harvesting, drought relief, and flood control. Protecting the environment, empowering rural women, limiting rural-urban migration, and promoting social security among the poor are other areas on which this programme focuses (Deb, 2017).

The mandate of the Act is to provide 100 days of guaranteed wage employment in a financial year (FY) to every rural household whose adult members volunteer to do unskilled manual work.

The objectives of the programme include:

• Ensuring livelihood security for the poor through the development of long-lasting assets, enhanced water security, soil conservation, and increased land productivity;

• Ensuring social protection for the most vulnerable people living in rural India by giving employment possibilities;

• Enhancing rural India’s ability to withstand droughts and manage floods;

• Supporting the empowerment of marginalised groups, particularly women and members of Scheduled Castes (SCs) and Scheduled Tribes (STs), through the implementation of rights-based legislation;

• Stabilising decentralised, participatory planning by combining numerous anti-poverty and livelihoods projects,

• Increasing openness and accountability in government;

• Strengthening the Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) would deepen democracy at the grassroots level (Sameeksha, 2012).
Along with creating job opportunities, MGNREGA revitalises the rural economy by boosting agricultural output and enhancing infrastructure. Due to legal procedures and the fact that it is an Act, this programme for decreasing rural poverty and addressing natural resources is robust. This Act led to the strengthening of grassroots democratic processes and the infusion of openness and accountability in rural governance, both of which are established in the Indian Constitution. Due to the fact that poverty exacerbates the issues of hunger and malnutrition and is further exacerbated by inequalities and inequitable access, a very high investment has been made under MGNREGA in order to create employment and give equal chances in employment, wages, and decision-making. As a result, MGNREGA can achieve many of these SDGs in rural India (Azmat, 2013).

Sustainable development

The term Sustainable Development has become a buzzword in the present world, and its importance has grown in the modern world. Every citizen of every country has acknowledged its importance as a critical component of each nation’s public policy and the global agenda.

The 1987 Brundtland Report clarified the meaning of sustainable development: “Sustainable Development is a development that will meet the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to own needs”(Bhat and Yada, 2015).

Further Ban Ki Moon has also emphasised that —We hold the future in our hands together we must ensure that our grandchildren will not have to ask we failed to do the right things and let them suffer the consequences. (UN Secretary-General Moon, 2007).

The National Sustainable Development Strategy defines sustainable development as a targeted, long-term, comprehensive and synergic process that (i) affects the conditions and all aspects of life at all levels, (ii) satisfies the biological, material, spiritual and social needs and interests of people, (iii) eliminates or significantly reduces interference that endangers, damages or destroys conditions and forms of life, (iv) does not burden the country, (v) preserves resources, and (vi) protects cultural and natural heritage. In the academic literature, sustainable development is defined as the process of improving the quality of human life while living within the carrying capacity of supporting ecosystems (Willers, 1994).

In order to end poverty, safeguard the environment, and guarantee that everyone lives in peace and prosperity, the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) were unanimously agreed upon in January 2016. Through a global consultative process, the 17 Goals, which must be accomplished by 2030, were developed based on the lessons learned from the Millennium Development Goals to include many more new areas of focus, including climate change, sustainable consumption, peace and justice, and innovation, among many other essential areas. The SDGs are founded on establishing partnerships and outlining precise rules for accomplishing these goals following the requirements of each region. The 17 Sustainable development goals are-

- Eliminate Poverty
The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development has been ratified by India. The National Coordinating agency for the SDGs is the National Institute of Transforming India (NITI Aayog). The Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation (MOSPI) created the national SDG indicators to reflect India’s needs and circumstances better. The NITI Aayog has assigned the SDGs and targets to various nodal Ministries and Flagship Programs. The designated nodal organisation for accomplishing this is the Ministry of Rural Development.

In order to advance the SDGs in Assam, the government of Assam created the Center for Sustainable Development Goals (CSDGs) in January 2016 at the Assam Administrative Staff College, Khanapara, Guwahati. The CSDGs, as an organisation, is a think tank that aids all Assam government departments in achieving their SDG goals by researching and offering technical assistance. Since January 2016, the Transformation & Development Department (T&D) has served as the central hub for organising all departmental efforts to meet the SDGs. The T&D Department created an SDG Cell to advance SDG-related initiatives. It answers directly to the T & D Department’s Additional Chief Secretary. The CSDGs are assisting the Departments in creating the framework for planning to achieve the SDGs and creating a monitoring mechanism in partnership with the T&D Department. The Center also organises training and capacity-building programmes for various State SDG initiative stakeholders.

Based on the GO published on 4th March, 2017, the Chief Secretary has established a semi-formal entity, the SDGs Strategy Support Group (SSSG). Officers who are passionate about
implementing the SDGs, spanning Departments and their official responsibilities, make up this group of volunteers. This Group supports the Chief Secretary and the Departments in various ways to spur SDG implementation as a Single Synergized Holistic Undertaking (SSHI) and to build and maintain momentum for this massive initiative (transdev.assam.govt.in).

The Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) India Index, which was introduced in 2018, is a crucial indicator to track the development of various states and UTs on an annual basis. It is a tool to assist states in reflecting on their current plans if they are not working and developing new plans to meet their goals by 2030. The index rates each state according to how well it is performing in relation to the SDGs. All the states are categorised into 4 groups by the index based on how they performed. First, there is the aspirant category, with a composite score of less than 50; second, there is the performer category, which includes all states and UTs with a composite score of between 50 and 64; third, there is the front-runner category, which includes all states and UTs with a composite score of between 65 and 99; and fourth, there is the achiever category, with a composite score of more than 100. (NITI Aayog, 2018)

Assam has created a time-bound strategy with several short-, medium-, and long-term goals that must be accomplished between the years (2019-2030) in order to meet the required level of targets by 2030. The state must therefore achieve the performer category by the end of 2022, the third category by the end of 2026, the "achiever category" by the end of 2030, and continue to sustain it after 2030. To sustain the state's consistent advancement, this time-limited plan has been designed. However, as shown by the SDG India Index Baseline Report created by NITI Aayog in 2018, Assam's performance in the SDGs has been comparatively subpar when compared to other states like Kerala, Andhra Pradesh, etc. With a score of 49 compared to the national average of 57, the index noted that Assam is practically at the bottom of the list, just ahead of Bihar (48) and Uttar Pradesh (42). While the majority of states, including those in the northeast, have scores above 50, it is of worry that Assam, the first state to embrace the SDG in 2016, has not been able to achieve the score of 50. (NITI Aayog, 2018)

Assam’s performance in Goals 3, 5, 6, 7, 9, and 11 was further noted in the report as being appalling. Despite the state has scored 100 in the goal 15 but the final score of Assam scored less than the nation's average (The Sentinel, 2019). SDG India's 2019 index, however, the 2019 SDG India index reported that the national average has gone up to 60 from 57 in 2018, and Assam along with Bihar and Uttar Pradesh has also reached the Performers category with a score of 55, 50 and 55 respectively (The Sentinel, 2019). Assam has improved in Goals 6 and 7, moving up from the aspirant category to the front-runner category and the state is still in the aspirant category in Goal 13 along with Goals 3, 5, 9 and 11 (N.I.T.I. Aayog, 2019)

Performance of MGNREGA in achieving sustainable development goals in Assam

The MGNREGA programme focuses on enhancing natural resource management and development through afforestation, drought-proofing flood control, water conservation, renovation of traditional water bodies, land development, etc. to lessen environmental degradation and to develop infrastructure in rural areas. Independent research, such as that done by the Indian Institution of Science in Bangalore, has shown that the MGNREGA programme
has various positive environmental effects that boost water availability, soil fertility, and agricultural productivity (Patgiri, 2018).

The Ministry of Rural Development of India stressed that MGNREGA helps accomplish three Millennium Development Goals as part of efforts to reduce poverty, i.e. Goal-1: Eradicate extreme poverty and hunger, Goal-3: Promote gender equality and empower women, Goal-7: Ensure environmental sustainability.

SDG-1-No Poverty and MGNREGAs has been recognised as “Core of the Core” Scheme for achieving SDG; SDG Goal-5-Gender Equality, SDG-8-Decent work and Economic Growth and SDG-10-Reduced inequalities (mgnregaweb4.nic.in).

MGNREGA is the most significant poverty alleviation policy implemented for the upliftment and betterment of economically and socially disadvantaged people. It has been working to achieve sustainable development goals, and the scheme’s aims align with them. It has been playing a significant role in achieving sustainable development goals.

Assam is situated in the North-Eastern part of India. In Assam, MGNREGA was introduced in the state in 2006-07 in 7 districts as the first phase. The coverage was extended to 6 more districts in the 2nd phase, that is, in 2007-08, and since 2008-09 all 27 have been covered under the programme (mgnrega.nic.in).

As of 2020 MGNREGA data, Assam comprises 32 districts, 239 Blocks and 2673 Gram Panchayats. The total number of Job Card issued in the state is 53.16 lakh, among whom 30.37 Lakh job Cards are active. 45.77 lakh active workers are earning their livelihood from MGNREGA. The total number of person-days generated by MGNREGA in Assam was 480.86 Lakh in 2017-18 and 205.30 lakhs in 2020-21.. The total number of households that completed 100 days of work under MGNREGA was 10,928 in 2017-18; in 2018-19, it was 18,360; in 2020-21 the number was 71,268. The total number of the household worked from the financial year 2017-18 to 2020-21 were 16.85, 17.42, 19.31 and 10.42 (in lakhs).

Since its inception, MGNREGA has given the vast majority of the country’s uneducated and unskilled rural residents a stable source of income. It lessened the severity of the problem of disguised and seasonal unemployment and converted a sizeable portion of rural residents from farming activities to non-farm occupations. However, Assam is underperforming in terms of the program’s effective execution and has not been as successful as it should be. Because of the flawed implementation procedure, the flawed salary payment technique, the significant contractor intervention, the inconsistency in the issuance of job cards, etc., the Assam programme could not provide employment opportunities to the state’s unemployed on a broad scale. The potential programme recipients have incomplete knowledge of its goals and methods, which hurts the state’s employment outcomes.

For bringing equality between men and women and reducing inequalities in work, MGNREGA has made a special provision for women. The Act stated that at least 33% of the total beneficiaries must be women. MGNREGA has a vital role in the country’s development and
has played a significant role in women’s empowerment. Women are now more capable of making household decisions than men and using their earnings to develop the house. The participation of women beneficiaries has increased in Assam (Barman and Debnath, 2020). Out of the total person-days generated in 2017-18, 38.5% were women, which increased over time and in 2020-21, the percentage is 42.17.

The scheme also provides decent work conditions and provisions for safe drinking water, shade, childcare facilities for women, etc. Many studies found that all these provisions were not fulfilled on the work site.

As per schedule 1 of the Act, the focus of the MGNREGA shall be on the following works:

1. Water Conservation and water harvesting
2. Afforestation and tea plantation
3. Irrigation canals related works
4. Renovation of traditional water bodies
5. Land development to land owned by households belonging to SCs/STs
6. Rural Connectivity (Purohit, 2014)

Under MGNREGA, the asset creation in Assam was not at all well. MGNREGA works got affected by the flood in Assam. The progress of works under the scheme was sluggish and showed a grim picture of implementation. Projects were either not approved or completed correctly. The performance of the scheme is not satisfactory in the state (Saikia, 2017).

Conclusion
MGNREGA creates dignified jobs which are decent and ensure productive and secure employment, social protection, rights, and participation in planning and are green in that they contribute to environmental sustainability, such as protection of the ecosystem, reliance on renewable sources of energy and thus they are directly related to climate change mitigation and adaptation activities. Among the eight aims of MGNREGA, the most popular goals for MGNREGA to work towards in order to achieve sustainable goals in Assam are securing livelihoods, providing wage employment, empowering women, and creating assets. The performance of the MGNREGA in the state of Assam is not nearly as satisfactory as one would want. When the figure for the state is compared to the figure for the country, the scheme might not work correctly in several dimensions. Ensuring hundred days of employment to each household, accountability and transparency, proper conduction of Social Audit, awareness about sustainable development are some of many things needed to do for the better implementation of the scheme. The Assam state administration ought to look for weaknesses in its plans. Considering that the state is made up of various tribes, the government may be able to promote holistic economic development sustainably and meet SDG targets within the allotted time if it
can incorporate some of the strategies employed by these people and create a distinctive strategy by fusing traditional and modern elements.

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