

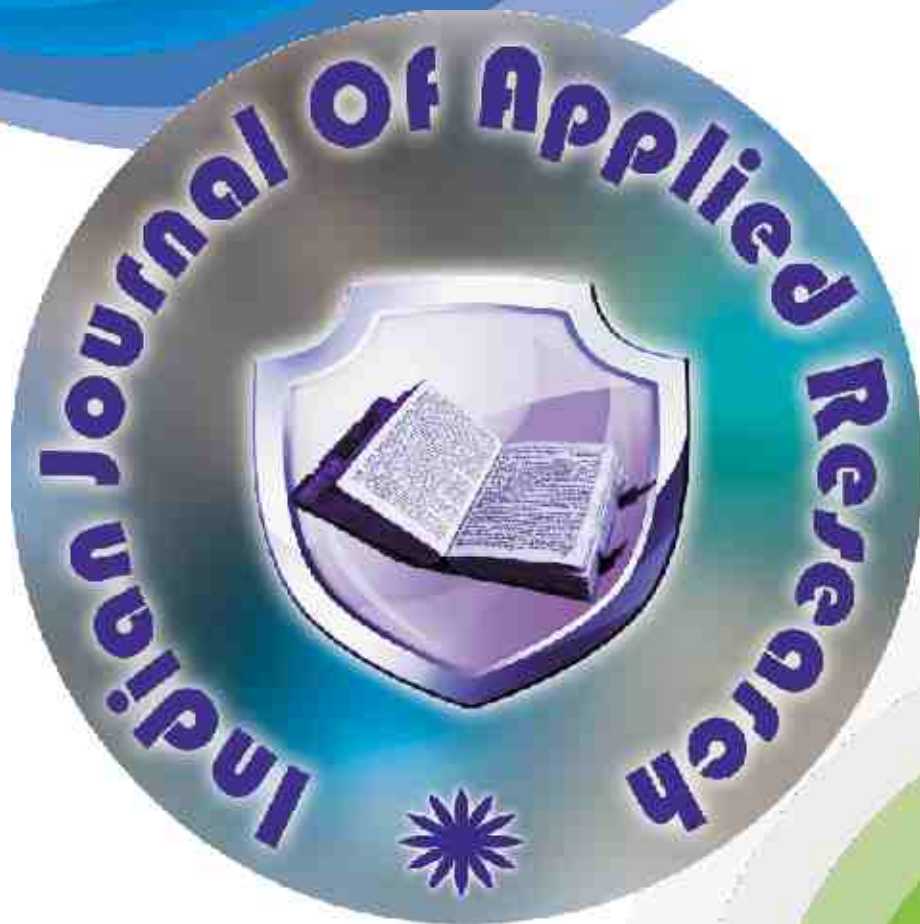
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Index

Sr. No	Title	Author	Subject	Page. No.
1.	Assay Of Triphenylmethane Reductase Enzyme And PCR-Based Identification Of TMR Gene In Enterobacter Asbriae Strain XJUHX-4TM	Tina Mukherjee, Mounita Bhandari, Manas Das	Biotechnology	1-2
2.	An Analysis Of Growth Of Credit Card Industry	Dr. A. Vinayagamoorthy, K. Senthikumar	Commerce	3-5
3.	Impact Of Pre-Merger And Post Merger On Financial Performance (With Reference To Private Sector Banks)	Dr. Shital Vekariya	Commerce	6-8
4.	Relativity On Climate And Competencies In Human Resource Development With Reference To Neyveli Lignite Corporation Ltd,	S. Jayakumar. Dr. R. Ramachandran	Commerce	9-11
5.	Human Resource Outsourcing: A Strategy For Gaining Competitive Advantage	Dr. Santosh M. Singh	Commerce	12-13
6.	Relationship Between EVA And ROI And MVA (A Case Study Of Ten Manufacturing Industries In India)	Dr. Shivani Gupta	Commerce	14-15
7.	Modeling The Traits Of An Effective Teacher At Higher Education	Dr. Haridayal Sharma	Commerce	16-17
8.	Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (Mgnrega): Issues And Challenges	Dr. Mohd. Ashraf Ali, Mushtaq Ahmad	Commerce	18-20
9.	Standardisation And Grading	Viram. J. Vala, Dr. Vijay Kumar Soni	Commerce	21-22
10.	Profitability Of Selected Information Technology Companies In India	Dr. M. Jegadeeshwaran, C. Udaya	Commerce	23-25
11.	Emerging Trends In The Indian Media And Entertainment Industry	Dr Mahalaxmi Krishnan	Commerce	26-27
12.	Inventory Management Strategies And Control Techniques: An Empirical Investigation Of Small Scale Industries	Vipul Chalotra, Neetu Andotra	Commerce	28-30
13.	A Study On Performance Indicators Of Commercial Banks	Dr. G. Ganesan, P. Parthasarathy	Commerce	31-33
14.	Improved Approaches To Coreference Resolution In Machine Learning	Kuldeep Singh Raghuwanshi, Ashwini Kumar Verma	Computer Science	34-37
15.	Security Issues & Controls In Cloud Computing	V. Naga Lakshmi	Computer Science	38-40
16.	Human Development Index Of De-Notified Nomadic Castes In Maharashtra Division: A Study Of Jalna And Aurangabad Districts	Dr. Ashok Pawar	Economics	41-43
17.	Public Private Partnership In Rural & Urban Projects In India	Dr. Ashok S. Pawar, Dr. Shankar B. Ambhore	Economics	44-45
18.	Populace Insight On Development In Public Health Sector Of India Subsequent To Functioning Of National Rural Health Mission	Krishnakant Sharma	Economics	46-49
19.	Problems Of Rural Women Entrepreneurs In India: A Conceptual Overview	C. Jeyasri Usha N Devi, Dr. A. Sankaran	Economics	50-52
20.	Poverty Of Banjara And Vanjari Communities In India	Tidke Atish S., Dr. Pawar Ashok S.	Economics	53-54
21.	India And China: Economic Reforms And WTO	Dr. Surinder Kumar Singla, Dr. Kulwinder Singh	Economics	55- 56
22.	Implementing Life Skill Education Strategies In Teaching – Learning Process	R. Kalaiselvi, Dr. A. Palanisamy, Dr. A R. Saravanakumar	Education	57-59

23.	Utilisation Of Modern Technology By The Teachers In Pupil Processing Organisation	Dr. P.Paul Devanesan, Dr A. Selvan	Education	60-61
24.	Impact Of Vocational Training On Students	K.Sudha Rani, G.Umapathi, Dr. T. Ananda,	Education	62-63
25.	A Study On Emotional Intelligence Of Secondary School Teachers	Dr. Umme Kulsum, Prathima H.P.	Education	64-66
26.	The Efficiency Of Feedback Strategy Of Homework On The Development Of 10th Grade EFL Writing Skill In Al-Karak Educational Directorate	Majid Al- Khataybeh, Areej Al-Shourafa`	noitacudE	67-74
27.	Perspectives Of Stress Management In Education System	M. Meenakshisundaram, G. P. Raja, Dr. A R. Saravanakumar	Education	75-76
28.	Attention Regulation Of Meditators And Non-Meditators Of Class IX	G. Madhavi Kanakadurga, Dr. D. Vasanta Kumari,	Education	77-78
29.	Role Of Psychoeducation In Teaching – Learning Process	Dr. A R. Saravanakumar, Dr. A. Balu, Dr. S. Subbiah	Education	79-80
30.	Microcontroller Driven RGB Led System For Tristimulus Surface Colorimetry	T. N. Ghorude, A. D. Shaligram	Electronics	81-83
31.	Pmgsy And Rural Roads Development In India: Economic, Financial And Maintenance Issues	K.C. Manjunath	Engineering	84-86
32.	Routing Packets On A Chip.	Naren V Tikare	Engineering	87-89
33.	Finding The Nearest Neighbors In Biological Databases	Er. Pankaj Bhambri, Dr. O.P. Gupta, Er. Franky Goyal	Engineering	90-92
34.	Factors Affecting The Sustainability Of The Asphalt Roads: A Case Study Of Irbid Inner Ring Road, Jordan	Eng. Nasr Ahmad Dr. Mihai Iliescu	Engineering	93-94
35.	Physical And Chemical Testing Of Compounded PVC	Sapna Dabade, Dr. Dheeraj Mandloi, Deepak Khare	Engineering	95-96
36.	Impact Of Organic Farming On Yield Of Some Common Crops- A Case Study.	Namrata D. Awandekar	Environmental Science	97
37.	Hydrogeologic Settings Of The North And South Brahmaputra Plains In Upper Assam: A Comparative Study	Dr. Uttam Goswami	Geology	98-100
38.	To Study Staffing Pattern In Rajasthan Public Healthcare Delivery System.	Dr. Ashwin G. Modi, Sushman Sharma	Healthcare	101-105
39.	Work And Health: A Situational Analysis Of Factory Workers	Dr. S. S. Vijayanchali, Dr. E. Arumuga Gandhi	Home Science	106-108
40.	Performance Of Camel Kid Hair: Acrylic Blended Yarn And Knitted Fabric	Suman Pant, Anjali Sharma	Home Science	109-110
41.	Impact Of Holistic Nutrition Education Package On Diabetes Mellitus Control In Middle Aged Women	Dr. Anjali Rajwade	Home Science	111-112
42.	Assessment Of Relationship Between Ida And Personal Hygiene, Nutritional Knowledge And Dietary Practices In Adolescent Girls	Dr. Anjali Rajwade	Home Science	113-114
43.	Employee Attrition And Retention In Private Insurance Sector– A HRM Challenge	Dr. J. Senthil Vel Murugan, S.Bala Murugan	Human Resource Management	115-117
44.	A Study On Impact Of Unionism On Industrial Relations In Manufacturing Sector	Jaya Ahuja	Industrial Relations	118-120

45.	Augmentation Of India's Foreign Exchange Reserve: An Analysis	Dr.S P.Mathiraj, Ar.Annadurai	International Business	121-123
46.	Films – A Techno Literary Art Form	Dr. Dipti Mehta	Literature	124-125
47.	Indirect Models Of Reading To Develop Descriptive Writing	Dr. K. Madhavi	Literature	126-128
48.	Ramkrishna Mishra Ke Upanaso Me Rajnetaik Chetavni	Dr. Sanjay Rathod, Dilip Jhadav	Literature	129
49.	Hindi Kavita Me Nari Jivan Ka Badla Swarup	Dr. Sanjay Rathod	Literature	130
50.	Impact Of IPL Sponsorship On Consumer Buying Behavior With Reference To Nagpur City	Chandrima Das	Management	131-135
51.	Crowd Sourcing –A New Management Mantra	Devi Premnath, Dr. C. Nateson	Management	136-137
52.	Small Scale Industries In India: An Evaluation Of Productivity In The Post-Liberalized Scenario	Dr. Gaurav Lodha,	Management	138-139
53.	Comparative Analysis Of Milk Products With Respect To Its Competitors With Special Reference To Karnataka Milk Federation (KMF) – At Dharwada City, Karnataka, India	Dr. N. Ramanjaneyalu	Management	140-143
54.	A Study On Work Stress In Women Employees In Coimbatore District	R. Maheswari, N. Brindha	Management	144-145
55.	Accounting For Carbon Credits	Dr. Gaurav Lodha	Management	146-148
56.	A Literature Review On The Relationship Between Training (As A Core Responsibility Of HRM) And Firm Performance.	Priya Sharma, Dr. S. L. Gupta	Management	149-152
57.	A Study On Agricultural Marketing Practices And Constraints With Special Reference To Paddy / Rice.	CM Maran, Dr Raja Pranmalai	Management	153-156
58.	Performance Of Share Price Of Indian Public Sector Banks And Private Sector Banks - Comparative Study	V. Prabakaran, D. Lakshmi Prabha	Management	157-158
59.	Intuitionistic Fuzzy Primary And Semiprimary Ideal	Dr. M.Palanivelrajan, S.Nandakumar	Mathematics	159-160
60.	Significance Of Umbilical Artery Velocimetry In Perinatal Outcome Of Fetuses With Intrauterine Growth Retardation.	Dr G S Shekhawat	Medical Science	161-163
61.	Large Adult Sacrococcygeal Teratoma: A Case Report And Review Of Literature.	Dr.Yavalkar Pa, Dr. Naik Am.	Medical Science	164-165
62.	Epidural Steroid In Low Back Ache	Dr. B. L. Khajotia, Dr. Neelam Meena	Medical Science	166-167
63.	A Comparative Study Of Second Trimester MTP With Use Of Vaginal Misoprostol And Extra Amniotic Instillation Of Ethacridine Lactate.	Dr. Ketaki Junnare, Dr. Sameer Darawade, Dr. Priyamvada Shah, Dr. Swati Mali.	Medical Science	168-169
64.	A Novel Surgical Approach For Treatment Of Sui –TVT Obturator Tape	Dr. Ketaki Junnare, Dr. Durga Karne, Dr Neelesh Risbud.	Medical Science	170-171
65.	Advantage Of Fallopian Tube Sperm Perfusion Over Intra-Uterine Insemination When Used In Combination With Ovarian Stimulation For The Treatment Of Unexplained Infertility.	Dr G S Shekhawat, Dr Pushpalata Naphade	Medical Science	172-175

66.	"Bilateral Sertoli-Leydig Cell Tumor In Postmenopausal Female" A Case Report	Dr. Priyamvada Shah, Dr. Ketakijunnare, Dr. DurgaKarne	Medical Science	176-178
67.	Pretreatment With Ephedrine For Prevention Of Pain Associated With Propofol Injection.	Dr. Kavita U Adate, Dr. Jyoti A. Solanki	Medical Science	179-181
68.	Does The Structured Teaching Programme Influence The Knowledge About Physical Wellbeing Of School Children? A Quasi Experimental Study.	Dr. S. Valliammal, Dr. Ramachandra, Raja Sudhakar	Nursing	182-184
69.	An Approach For Information Retrieval For Bookstores Using Formal Ontology	Sumit Jain, C.S.Bhatia	Ontology	185-187
70.	Analgesic Activity Of Anacardium Occidentale	A. Devadoss, C. Aparna, K. Parimala, D. Sukumar	Organic Chemistry	188-190
71.	Behaviourism : Science Or Metaphysics	Dr. Jatinder Kumar Sharma	Philosophy	191-193
72.	Multi-Dimensional Perspectives Of Obesity And Its Management	S. Dhanaraj, Dr. A. Palanisamy	Physical Education	194-196
73.	Refractive Index, Density, Excess Molar Volume, Excess Molar Refraction For Liquid Mixtures (Ethyl Ethanoate + Benzene Derivatives) At Different Temperatures	Sheeraz Akbar, Mahendra Kumar	Physics	197-199
74.	Refractive Indices, Densities And Excess Properties For Liquid Mixtures (Cetane + Alkanols) At Different Temperatures	Sheeraz Akbar, Mahendra Kumar	Physics	200-202
75.	Capacity Building For Effective Local Governance: Indian Perspectives	Dr. Pralhad Chengte	Political Science	203-205
76.	Psychological Well-Being: A Study Of Non-Institutionalized Aged	Dr. Pankaj S. Suvera	Psychology	206-208
77.	Women Empowerment Through N R E G S (With Reference To State Of West Bengal)	Dilip Kumar Karak	Social Sciences	209-211
78.	Effect Of Selected Yogic, Aerobic And Laughter Exercises On Blood Pressure Of High School Boys	Dr.Manjappa.P, Dr.Shivarama Reddy. M	Sports	212-216
79.	Association Study Between Lead And Copper Accumulation At Different Physiological Systems Of Goat By Application Of Canonical Correlation And Canonical Correspondence Analyses	Partha Karmakar, Debasis Mazumdar, Seema Sarkar (Mondal), Sougata Karmakar	Statistics	217-219
80.	Development Of Silver -Silica Nanocomposite For Novel Humidity Sensing Application	Surender Duhan	Technology	220-221



Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA): Issues and Challenges

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ABSTRACT

In 2005, India's parliament passed the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA), which is the central government's response to the constitutionally manifested right to work and a means to promote livelihood security in India's rural areas. To this end, the Act guarantees 100 days of annual employment at statutory minimum wage rates to any rural household whose adult members are willing to do unskilled manual work. The manual work needs to create sustainable assets that promote the economic and infrastructure development of villages. Implemented in three phases beginning in 2006, the Act extended to all of rural India in April 2008. NREGA is an innovative answer to the long-standing problem of providing social safety nets in rural areas.

The overall objective of this paper is to bring focus on Issues & challenges of MGNREGA and to evaluate the performance since its enactment. Apart from academic perspective on the need, relevance and justification for the MGNREGA, it also seeks to establish a dialogue between academics and policy makers with those who are working at grass root level to monitor the functioning of the MGNREGA. Another objective of the paper is to bring together all these diverse experiences on a common platform to arrive at some common understandings on the problems faced in implementation of MGNREGA and also to learn from the successes in implementing MGNREGA.

Keywords : Mahatma Gandhi, Rural, Employment

Objectives

This impact assessment comes as an important intervention in the wake of Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act, 2005 (MGNREGA) which is being implemented all over India from 1st April 2008. The idea of the assessment is also premised on the widely held belief that NREGA is foundationally capable of transforming the rural lives by improving living conditions, increasing sustainable agrarian activities and wholesome economic support. The Act stipulates that wages will be equal for men and women. It is also committed to ensuring that at least 33% of the workers shall be women.

- Strengthening grassroots processes of democracy
- Increase in the wage employment in rural areas.
- strengthening the management of natural resource through works that address causes of poverty like drought, deforestation and soil erosion and so encourage sustainable development.
- Infusing accountability and transparency and in governance.
- Strengthening decentralization and deepening processes of democracy by giving a crucial role to the Panchayati Raj Institutions in planning, monitoring and implementation

Issues Of MGNREGA:

- 1 Issues Related to Job Cards: Job card verifications done on the spot against an existing data base and reducing the time lag between application and issue of job cards

to eliminate the possibility of rent seeking, and creating greater transparency etc.

- 2 Issues related to Applications: To ascertain choices and perceptions of households regarding lean season employment to ensure exercise of the right to employment within the time specified of fifteen days.
- 3 Issues Related to Selection of Works: Selection of works by gram sabha in villages and display after approval of shelf of projects, to ensure public choice, transparency and accountability.
- 4 Issues related to Execution of Works: At least half the works should be run by gram panchayats.
- 5 Issues related to measurement of work done: Regular measurement of work done according to a schedule of rural rate sensitive Supervision of Works by qualified technical personnel on time.
- 6 Issues related to Payments: Payment of wages through banks and post offices to close avenues for use of contractors, short payment and corruption.
- 7 Audit of MGNREGA: Creation and maintenance of durable assets adequate audit and evaluation mechanisms widespread institution of social audit and use of findings.

Challenges:

1. Low awareness and accessibility to the common person.
2. Delayed payment of wages from the concerned authority.
3. A poor worksite facility is prevalent all over the

4. Asset creation has not been so evident because in many cases the works are left incomplete due to lack of awareness and proper management of available funds.
5. The workers continue to face difficulties in having proper job cards and in several cases they had to pay for processing job applications.
6. There is a sizable growth in the women workers' economic contribution and decision making power. Nevertheless, there is a demand for more number of working days among women too.
7. Shortage of staff and delay in appointments due to lack of management.
8. Disruption due to imposition of election code of conduct.
9. Unsolicited fees being charged for work application forms.
10. Denial of registration to the uneducated people.

Performance And Achievements:

Over the past 4 years or so, MGNREGA's performance according to key aggregate indicators has been quite impressive, particularly when compared with previous employment programmes. For one, budgetary allocation for MGNREGA has expanded steadily from its base of about Rs.113, 000 million in 2006-07 to Rs.401, 000 million in 2009-10. Since its launch, the benefit of MGNREGA has reached women, SC/ST families and the poor. Over the last four years, the share of SC/ST families in the work provided under MGNREGA has ranged between 50-60%. The share of women in the employment provided has risen steadily from 41% in 2006-07 to 50% in 2010-11. With nearly 100 million bank/post office accounts opened for MGNREGA workers, and about 85% of NREGA payments being made through them, MGNREGA has also moved financial inclusion of the poor several steps forward. Finally, average female wages in MGNREGA were slightly higher than average male wages, whereas they were lower in non-MGNREGA public works and even lower in non-public works.

Provision Under Mgnrega:

- Adult members of a rural household, willing to do unskilled manual work, are required to make registration in writing or orally to the local Gram Panchayat
- The Gram Panchayat after due verification will issue a Job Card. The Job Card will bear the photograph of all adult members of the household willing to work under NREGA and is free of cost.
- The Job Card should be issued within 15 days of application.
- Employment will be given within 15 days of application for work, if it is not then daily unemployment allowance as per the Act, has to be paid liability of payment of unemployment allowance is of the States.
- Work should ordinarily be provided within 5 km radius of the village. Wages are to be paid according to the Minimum Wages Act 1948.
- At least one-third beneficiaries shall be women who have registered and requested work under the scheme.
- Work site facilities such as crèche, drinking water, shade have to be provided
- The shelf of projects for a village will be recommended by the gram sabha and approved by the zilla panchayat.
- At least 50% of works will be allotted to Gram Panchayats for execution
- A 60:40 wage and material ratio has to be maintained. No contractors and machinery is allowed
- The Central Govt. bears the 100 percent wage cost of unskilled manual labor and 75 percent of the material cost including the wages of skilled and semi skilled workers
- Social Audit has to be done by the Gram Sabha
- Grievance redressal mechanisms have to be put in place

for ensuring a responsive implementation process

- All accounts and records relating to the Scheme should be available for public scrutiny

Suggestions For Implementing MGNREGA:

1. Deepening Decentralization beyond the Gram Panchayat to the village level - By creating village level structures below Gram Panchayat, the project is actually closer to the community. The project messages spread quickly to all sections in the village. There is greater awareness among the community that discourages any willful wrongdoing and manipulative disinformation. Planning and project implementation is done at the village or the habitation level. Gram Sabha resolution for the plans is mandatory.

2. Devolving financial, planning and project implementation function to village Sub committees - The village sub committees submit detailed microplans with technical estimated (technical support is provided by resource NGO) to the Gram Panchayat. Gram Panchayat release funds to the sub committees based on the fund requests and subsequent 60% utilization. Sub committees draw money after a resolution is passed in the meeting. Community appreciates the labour payments in open forums at the village level as it encourages greater transparency.

3. Creation of a cadre of village level resource persons for community organization, technical supervision and financial administration - Each subcommittee is assisted by two community resource persons who function as book writers, community extension, technical supervisors and administrative functionaries for the sub committees.

4. Involvement of resource NGO for Capacity building - The Gram Panchayat was encouraged to hire the services of a resource NGO for undertaking the capacity building for the different stakeholders, like community resource persons, subcommittee members, Gram Panchayat members and SHG members. The resource NGO also provided the technical support to the sub committees in preparing the net plans.

5. Gram Sabhas every six months to review the working - The sub committees report the project progress to the respective Gram/ward Sabha on a six monthly basis. Apart from the area treated and financial progress, the performance of the community resource persons and the subcommittee members is also reviewed.

6. Alternative for Review at Gram Panchayat level- the Project learning forum - In the absence of a full time secretary, the Gram Panchayat finds it difficult to meet on a monthly basis. It reviews the progress once in every two to three months. The Project learning forum, undertakes the monthly monitoring of the project. Two members from each subcommittee, share the progress, their learning as well as their difficulties with other sub committees.

7. Empowering Workers MNREGA is a right-based statute and its effectiveness lies eventually in the extent to which wage seekers can exercise their choice and assert their rights to claim entitlements under the Act. Opening savings accounts of workers' in banks and post offices that has been initiated needs to be supported on a larger scale so that thrift and small savings can be encouraged among workers. The inclusion of MNREGA workers under the cover of various life and health insurance schemes will also raise their security thresholds.

8. Linkages with Other Development Programmes Empowerment of workers and creation of durable assets depend to a great extent on the linkages between MNREGA and other development programmes. In that way, program-mes like Indira Awas Yojna, Swarnjayanti Gram Swarojgar Yojna, Total Sanitation Campaign etc. should be linked to MNREGA

Conclusion:

In this paper, we have tried to spell out a blueprint of reforms that are needed for MGNREGA to realize its true potential. This blueprint springs from a vision of deepening decentralization and grassroots democracy through devolution of funds, functions and functionaries to PRIs. Since funds are not so much of an issue after MGNREGA, functionaries are the real bottleneck, which must be taken care of by a re-visioning of the cutting edge of implementation of MGNREGA through the establishment of Gram Vikas below the block level. Even with these variations, the overall story is still positive. Many households have not yet been covered, but many have. 100 days of work have not yet been provided, but an average of 33 days has, which is clearly a step forward. And this will obviously increase over time. Obviously, these successes have to be sustained, replicated and expanded. And in other areas the weaknesses of the programme that have been identified by the CAG and other observers have to be addressed, including through local mobilization. The governance role of Panchayats needs to be strengthened including the accountability of officials at the Zila Panchayat and the line departments to the Gram Panchayat. Every stakeholder of MGNREGA is looking forward to achieve its desired goals and objectives in near future.

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