

# MGNREGA AND SOCIAL PROTECTION : AN ANALYSIS OF EFFICIENCY, EQUITY AND ACCOUNTABILITY IN NORTH EASTERN STATES

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There is a growing consensus in development circles that Social Protection is an effective policy choice for addressing poverty and vulnerability in developing countries (Barrientos and Hulme 2008). As a consequence, in recent years Social Protection has featured prominently on the development policy agendas of developing countries. In India MGNREG Act, a right based programme, enacted in 2005 has been playing an instrumental role in restructuring local governance and transforming social protection into social justice. Social protection programmes must incorporate rights based approach in its design. It must provide a policy framework to the poor to exercise their rights and hold the implementing agencies accountable. MGNREGA has a design which provides for all these which has to be translated into action. This paper makes a humble attempt to explore the potential of MGNREGA as a social protection policy. The objective of the paper is to throw light on the social protection aspect of MGNREGA by analyzing the efficiency, equity and accountability perspective of the programme in the North-Eastern states of India by using secondary sources of data.

**Key Words:** *Social Rights, Rural Employment, Safety Net Programme*

## INTRODUCTION

Social Protection is once again high on the national and international policy agenda, wherein huge funds have been invested by the countries to promote social security programmes. Across the global south, Social Protection policy is increasingly taking centre stage with social protection transfers consolidated, scaled up or even introduced as a new policy measures to address poverty and vulnerability. Some authors have therefore spoken of Social Protection as a 'global challenge', in terms of policy making (Leisering et al. 2006: 24), a 'quiet revolution' (Barrientos and Hulme 2009: 452) or a 'startling', process (Devereux and Sabates-Wheeler 2007: 1). There is also a growing consensus around the view that social protection constitutes an effective response to poverty and vulnerability in developing countries and an essential component of economic and social development strategies. Broadly speaking, Social Protection provisions have either been programmes of transfers (conditional cash or unconditional cash, food, fuel, agricultural inputs) public works or access to resources and services.

India has a long history of Social Protection/Safety Net Programs, still one fourth of its population lives in poverty, which is chronic in nature. Their vulnerability to economic crisis is endemic to their situation which is a product of their position within unequal relations of caste, class, ethnicity and gender. The economic condition of a poor is inextricably intertwined with the social dimension of his well being, equity and social rights (Sabates-Wheeler and Devereux, 2007). Women are often marginalized from participation (Sabates-Wheeler and Kabeer 2003). The backward classes and castes are often discriminated from working with the rest of the community. There is lack of attention paid to chronic poverty in standard approaches to social protection. In their analysis of

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chronic poverty and social protection, Barrientos and Sheperd(2003:7) state that, ‘Although risk and vulnerability are key factors in explaining the descent into poverty, it is not clear ...how important they are in maintaining people in poverty , transmitting poverty from one generation to the next and in preventing the interruption of poverty’. Importantly, Barrientos and shepherd(2003:3) highlight structural reasons related to ‘Social, Political and Economic structures and relationships’ that prevent some of the chronic poor from benefitting from development policies and market changes. A social Protection policy must address to these structural inequalities within its design. It should not only help the poor to escape poverty but also should also promote their participation in social and political life and contribute to growth and development. ( Kabeer and Cook 2010 ). The Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act 2005 holds and looks into all these in its design, format and implementation process. It has been designed as a Social Protection instrument that goes beyond addressing fluctuations in income and have long term impacts on livelihood and security. MGNREGA as a social protection policy has a transformative potential as it aims at integrating all sections of the society and reap benefits of growth while enabling vulnerable groups to claim their rights and seek social justice towards a more egalitarian society.

“Social Protection describes all public and private initiatives that transfer income or assets to the poor, protect the vulnerable against the livelihood risks and enhance the social status and rights of the marginalized ; with the overall objectives of extending the benefits of economic growth and reducing the vulnerability of the poor, vulnerable and marginalized people”.( Devereux and Sabatese-Wheeler, (2004) & Sabatese-wheeler and Devereux (2007).

We know that,

Devereux and Sabatese- Wheeler ( 2004), Sabatese- wheeler and Devereux ( 2007 ) has classified transformative social protection interventions fall under four headings :

**Protective:** Providing relief from deprivation.

**Preventive:** Averting deprivation.

**Promotive :** Enhancing real incomes and capabilities.

**Transformative:** Which seeks to address concerns of social equity and exclusion.

Present papers aims to examine the efficiency of the scheme in the North-Eastern States of India and study the issues of equity on the basis of the participation of the marginalized section under MGNREGS in North Eastern states of India.

## METHODOLOGY

The paper is exploratory in nature. To fulfill the stated objectives secondary sources of data are used. Secondary data on employment, equity, efficiency and accountability are collected from the official website of the programme, [www.nrega.nic.in](http://www.nrega.nic.in). Various research papers, journals, official reports on MGNREGA have been used to supplement the above data.

## SOCIAL PROTECTION IN INDIA : WAGE EMPLOYMENT PROGRAMMES

Since independence wage employment programmes have been an integral part of India’s Social security policies. Some of the earliest programs in early 1970s were pilot projects like the Cash Scheme for Rural Employment (CRSE), Pilot Intensive Rural Employment

Programme(PIREP). Some of these sought to promote self-employment. Training of Youth for Self-Employment(TRYSEM) was subsequently attached as a sub programme to IRDP, introduced in 1979. These gave way to full-fledged Food for Work in 1977 and other employment policies like Jawahar Rozgar Yojana(JRY) in 1993-94 and Employment Assurance Scheme (EAS) to generate waged employment in times of crisis or to address seasonal unemployment. The Maharashtra Employment Guarantee Scheme(MEGS), which was started during the major drought in 1977-78 and ‘stands out among rural public works programmes in developing countries for its size, longevity, the generosity of its funding arrangements and political sophistication of its design(Moore and Jadhav, 2006). It has provided the basis for a right-based approach to employment generation at national level, the MGNREGA. Varying degrees of success and failures have been attributed to these programmes. These programmes have generated enormous number of employment days. Between its inception in 1989 and 1998, the JRY had generated 7596 million days of employment(Sharma and Mamgin, 2001). It is estimated to reach around 30-40%of potential beneficiaries. Limitations of these programmes include ineffective design, poor targeting, low awareness about the program or its provisions, little involvement of local community in selection and implementation, centralized character, absence of social monitoring, pilferage of resources, leakages and widespread corruption. Notwithstanding these limitations, these programmes have made a contribution in smoothening income flows and tightening of the rural labour markets. The existence of large scale programmes of this kind helped in mitigating to some extent the adverse impacts of liberalization in the early years(Sharma, 2004). MGNREG Act was notified on September 7, 2005 and its implementation began on 2<sup>nd</sup> February 2006. It aims at “ enhancing livelihood security 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( NREG Act, 2005). All previous programmes of wage employment through public works are now merged into the MGNREGA. It includes National Rural Employment Programme(NREP), Rural Landless Employment Guarantee Programme (RLEGP), Jawahar Rozgar Yojana(JRY), Employment Assurance Scheme(EAS), Jawahar Gram Samridhi Yojana(JGSY), Sampoorna Grameen Rozgar Yojna(SGRY), National Food for Work Programme and the Maharashtra Employment Guarantee Scheme(MEGS).

**Table: 1, The Timeline of MGNREGA Whereby the Scheme Got its Modifications During the Years of its Running.**

<b>Sept. 2005</b>	<b>2<sup>nd</sup>Feb. 2006</b>	<b>1<sup>st</sup>April 2007</b>	<b>April 2008</b>	<b>Oct. 2008</b>	<b>Oct. 2009</b>
NREGA Legalised	Came into force in 200 most backward districts.	113 more districts included and 17 districts in U.P were notified from May 15 2007	Universalisation of the scheme to all rural districts of the country.	Wage transaction through bank/post office.	Name changed from NREGA to MGNREGA

Source : [www.nrega.nic.in](http://www.nrega.nic.in)

Table 1 depicts, at the first instance the act was introduced in 200 most backward districts of the country. It was proposed to extend to the remaining districts after 5yrs. but after seeing the popularity of the Act, it was further extended to another 130 districts in the next year itself and the Act got universalized by bringing the entire country under its Umbrella with the exception of districts that have a hundred percent urban population and on 2<sup>nd</sup> Oct 2009, to make the programme popular and more reachable to the masses, it was rechristened as Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act.

## MGNREGA and Social Protection

India's premier centrally Sponsored act, The Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) is supposed to be a 'strong safety net' for the vulnerable groups by providing a fall-back employment source, when other employment alternatives are scarce or inadequate (MoRD, 2008). It has a potential to protect rural households from poverty and hunger, reduce distress migration, increase opportunities for employment of rural women as well as be instrumental in creating useful assets in rural areas (Dreze, 2004). The scheme since its early days has been making positive inroads to the life of rural people with particular focus on the sections with poorer socio-economic characters (Jha, et al., 2008).

The above mentioned four measures of social protection (Devereux and Sabates-Wheeler, 2007) can be elaborated in analyzing the Mahatma Gandhi Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA), a social protection programme enacted in 2005. It was implemented initially in 2006 in 200 districts. The coverage was increased to 130 and 285 more districts in 2007 and 2008 respectively.

**Table: 2, Elaborates Upon the Different Provisions in MGNREGA that Fit into the Conceptual Framework of Social Protection as Suggested by Sabates-Wheeler and Devereux (2007)**

Interventions for Social Protection	Provisions in MGNREGA
Provision- Relief from deprivation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ 100 days of guaranteed employment for all needy.</li> <li>➤ Labour-intensive unskilled work available on demand.</li> <li>➤ Supplementing income during lean season.</li> </ul>
Prevention- Prevent deprivation and alleviate poverty.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ 60% of expenditure of the scheme on wages of the beneficiaries.</li> <li>➤ Guaranteed employment.</li> <li>➤ Unemployment allowance.</li> <li>➤ Wage payment through banks to ensure financial inclusion of the poor and to encourage thrift.</li> <li>➤ Giving priority to irrigation, rural connectivity and land development works.</li> </ul>
Promotion- Economic activities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ National minimum wage rate.</li> <li>➤ Priority to water-conservation works leading to crop diversification.</li> <li>➤ Public infrastructure works and livelihood projects undertaken</li> <li>➤ Convergence with other departments.</li> </ul>
Transformation- Social justice	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ Women workforce reservation</li> <li>➤ Disabled and elderly included</li> <li>➤ Social equity by giving due representation to SC, ST.</li> <li>➤ Proactive Information Disclosure</li> <li>➤ Mandatory social Audits.</li> <li>➤ Right to Information</li> <li>➤ Transparency rules.</li> </ul>

MGNREGA can be much appreciated as a social protection program as it has the potential to reach out to the most needy economic and social groups of rural India (Reddy, Rukmini Tankha and C. Upendranath, 2010). As a policy design for Social Protection it is very different from the earlier wage programs in India. What is unique about MGNREGA is that it tries to fulfill constitutional directives (Art. 39: right to means of livelihood and Art. 41: provision for securing right to work) which is their in its entitlements. Thus it is neither a program nor a scheme but an Act which tries or rather promises to provide for 100 days guaranteed employment in a year to the rural poor.

MGNREGA is different from other social protection programme in terms of its entitlements, approach, implementation mechanism, outreach and intended impact as it is :

- i. Rights based : The act enables the workers the entitlement to work as a right.
- ii. Has a legal guarantee: The legal guarantee is binding on the state and it ensures that the scheme is not ad hoc in its implementation (being less prone to withdrawal from the centre).
- iii. Has universal coverage in rural areas : Universality eliminates errors of targeting and ensures only the most needy come forth and claim employment.
- iv. Without any limited time frame work : Is a continuous programme.
- v. Transparency and Accountability through the provision of social audits and right to information.
- vi. Legal sanction is intended to have the effect of strengthening the confidence and bargaining capacity of the workers. (Dhavsse, 2004 , Mehrotra, 2008, Reddy et al. 2010).

In a nutshell, this legal mandate has been the catalyst for a state government across the country to innovate with different tools to strengthen accountability (Aiyar and Samji : 2009) and as a statutory law, MGNREGA is a powerful instrument in the hands of poor who can hold the government accountable for falling short of its promises.

As an act of Parliament, MGNREGA is a programme that is aimed at meeting the vulnerabilities of the households through creation of unskilled wage work as supplementary employment for a period of 100 days per family in rural areas of the country. It is also universal in a limited sense that it bestows the right to seek work on all individuals ( with a norm of one person per household) (Reddy, et al., 2010). The programme is also different from earlier 'food for work' programmes that were implemented during the periods of droughts in some parts of India as they were time bound and also meant for identified target groups of population. It is for these reasons that some scholars identify it as a work based social protection programme within the rights and citizenship framework of development.

Though unskilled manual work is a prime form of employment, Schedule I of the Act lists eight categories of work that are designed to be 'Focus of the scheme' which envisages augmenting and regeneration of vast, untapped natural resources of the country viz., land and water. Water conservation, rural connectivity, irrigation works, afforestation, land development and conservation etc. are the identified works aimed at rejuvenating the rural base. The programme is also implemented through elaborate processes of grass roots level stakeholder participation including that of workers, with guaranteed provisions for wages, transparency and accountability and grievance redressal mechanisms at different levels (Reddy et al., 2010). All these features essentially reflect the intended development focus of this social protection programme, which has a transformative potential. Shah (2009) identifies the 'Multiplier-Accelerator' synergy in this programme through the rise in purchasing power of workers that stimulates production. Again for example, if most of the MGNREGA works allow for resource development and asset creation, it would lead to increase in productivity of lands owned by small and marginal farmers, inducing them to invest further. MGNREGA has a 'Promotional' social protection objective of creating 'Productive assets', which could potentially become a source of income for the labour force. When productive assets are created, this has many different forms of impact on the rural economy, which augment and build on one another, working together to promote livelihoods- the 'promotive goal' of social protection- by creating new opportunities in the labour market (Hirway et al. 2006). Thus it can be fairly concluded that as a design, the programme confirms with the notions of developmental and poverty reduction potential of a social protection programme ( Reddy et al., 2010).

The entitlements incorporated in MGNREG Act gives it a status of a full fledged social protection policy( as summarized in table:1). The implementation process of the programme is expected to unleash a transformative potential in social relations and rural governance (Reddy et al., 2010). At the center of implementation are three-tier Panchayat Raj institutions and the Gram Sabha (the village community), which play an important role in identifying and ratifying types of works to be undertaken in a village. Elected representatives of a panchayat, its official (panchayat secretary) and Rozgar sevak, a field worker appointed for each panchayat have important roles in registering job seeker households, issuance of job cards, receiving job requests from workers, proposing suitable works for the approval of the gram sabha, monitoring of works and timely payments. Works at this level are scrutinized through a process of social audits, which again encompasses participation of the entire village community, the Gram Sabha.

## IMPLEMENTATION OF MGNREGA IN NORTH EASTERN STATES

North Eastern region of India is a unique region with different diversities both demographically as well as geographically. It occupies an area of 263,139 sq. km and comprises of about 8.06% of India's total land area. The region consisting of eight states of Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Tripura and Sikkim has common borders with five South-Asian countries namely, Nepal, Bhutan, Bangladesh, Myanmar and China.

Poverty and unemployment is widespread in this region. Lack of infrastructural development, geographical and economic bottlenecks are the important causes of poverty. The region occupies the lowest rung in the official infrastructure development index of the government of India. In most areas of the region there is no access to the basic amenities such as road, electricity, safe drinking water, sanitation, health care facilities, schools etc.. The NREGA programme has immense potential to improve the gap between urban and rural India and lead to rural development in terms of basic infrastructure like roads, in terms of agricultural productivity from irrigation works and it provides a stable income for the workers, their income graphs would be much smoother with the NREGA boosting up their earnings in the 100 days of guaranteed employment. The efforts made by the Villupuram authorities, though there still might be some irregularities in the implementation, should be used as a model in other regions to help realize the potential of this Act( Jacob, Naomi, 2008 : 2)

MGNREGA was implemented in North Eastern states in the year 2006 along with the other states of India. So far as the successful implementation of MGNREGA in North-Eastern states, particularly in Tripura, there have been dearth of literature about the impact and performance of the programme except a few. Borgohain(2005) highlighted that enactment of MGNREGA is a bold step addressed, especially to the problem of rural unemployment. It commands a position of an unparalleled significance in the eradication of unemployment in rural areas. Panda et al..(2009) found that MGNREGA empowered rural tribal women in Sikkim and Meghalaya by enhancing their confidence level and by ensuring some degree of financial independence. Ministry of Home Affairs (2011) reported that MGNREGA has ushered in a new era of hope for the downtrodden states of Manipur and Nagaland. It is slowly and steadily transforming the 'Geography of Poverty' in these states. Bhowmik (2013) put forward the argument that MGNREGA is of great importance in the state of Tripura. In terms of equity, the state appears to be doing pretty well, while from the point of efficiency, it is better than many states but there is scope for improvement. There are performance differentials among the states(Shariff,2009: Dreze and Khera, 2009) due to many factors including the preferential treatment accorded to the first of the two broad objectives of the scheme ie. generation of person days ahead of creation of assets(Shariff, 2009) stressing more on the equity perspective.



**Table: 3, Employment Generated in North Eastern States ( Till Dec. 2013)**

States	No. of H.H issued jobcards	No. of H.H provided employment	Percentage(%) of H.H provided employment
Assam	39,31 657	9,50118	24.16%
Arunachal Pradesh	1,52941	48,646	31.80%
Meghalaya	4,56283	2,55018	55.89%
Manipur	4,61248	3,54971	76.95%
Mizoram	2,10493	1,71519	81.48%
Nagaland	3,84162	2,31937	60.37%
Tripura	6,32585	5,87674	92.90%
Sikkim	80,694	33,855	41.95%

Source : <http://nrega.nic.in/netnrega/sthome.aspx> (accessed on 23.04.14)

Table 3 depicts a very gloomy picture of Assam as far as the percentage of households provided with employment under MGNREGA is concerned. There is a huge gap between the no. of households provided with jobcards and employment provided. It is mere 24.16 in Assam. The highest percentage of employment is provided in the state of Tripura (92.90%). Mizoram(81.48%) and Manipur(76.95%) are also good performer as far as employment generation under MGNREGA is concerned.

**Table: 4, Percentage of Expenditure Incurred on Different Heads of Works  
2012-13 (upto Dec. 2013)**

Major works under MGNREGA	Assam	North-Eastern region	India
Water conservation	11%	9%	60%
Provision of irrigation facility to land owned by SC/ST/ BPL and IAY beneficiaries.	32%	26%	12%
Rural connectivity	47%	52%	17%
Land development	1%	6%	8%
Any other activity including Bharat Nirman Rajiv Gandhi Seva Kendra, Rural drinking water, fisheries, Rural sanitation	9%	7%	3%

Source : Ministry of Rural Development.

The above table shows that the highest proportion of funds(52%) in North-Eastern states has been spent on rural connectivity , followed by irrigation works(26%) which conforms to the fact that MGNREGA has contributed to the development of rural infrastructure.

**Table: 5, Average Person Days Created under MGNREGA in North- Eastern states (2012-13)**

States	Average person days created	% of H.H completed 100 days of employment	% of H.H completed less than 15 days of employment
Assam	25.43	1%	43%
Arunachal Pradesh	33.71	3%	14%
Manipur	62.4	1%	3%
Meghalaya	52.43	16%	13%
Mizoram	87.81	20%	0%
Nagaland	63.47	14%	0%
Sikkim	64.12	21%	7%
Tripura	86.92	38%	1%
All India	46.2	10%	23%

Source : <http://nrega.nic.in/netnrega/sthome.aspx> (accessed on 23.04.14)

Table 5 confirms the fact that with an exception of Assam and Arunachal Pradesh, the average person days created in the North-Eastern states is higher than the national average(46.2). Mizoram tops the list with 87.81 person days of work created, followed by Tripura(86.92). Again, Tripura has the highest percentage(38%) of households which have completed 100 days of employment, which is higher than the national average and only 1% of the beneficiary households have worked for less than 15 days. The state has been awarded for being the best performer for two successive years 2009-10 and 2010-11 according to the state's Ministry of Rural Development([www.tripurainfo.com](http://www.tripurainfo.com), 2011) for efficiency in employment generation. The scheme provides great support to the state economy as it has been prioritized by the state government as a tool of employment generation and poverty eradication owing to the existence of large scale unemployment and underemployment in the state( Bhowmik 2013). Assam presents a very poor picture, wherein the average person days created is the least among the North-Eastern states. Not only this only 1% of its beneficiaries has completed 100 days of employment and has the highest percentage(43%) of worker who have worked for less than 15 days.

**Table 6: Expenditure Pattern under MGNREGA in North-Eastern States during 2011-12(in %)**

States	Wages	Material	Administrative
Arunachal Pradesh	58.48%	36.18%	5.34%
Assam	54.70%	40.52%	4.78%
Manipur	62.55%	32.89%	4.76%
Meghalaya	62.63%	33.37%	4.18%
Mizoram	56.82%	28.57%	5.80%
Nagaland	56.45%	37.50%	5.68%
Sikkim	60.85%	37.78%	5.76%
Tripura	59.72%	35.09%	5.20%
India	62.23%	30.20%	4.57%

Source : <http://nrega.nic.in/netnrega/sthome.aspx> (accessed on 24.04.14)

The above table gives enough evidence that most of the states spend a major(around 60%) proportion of their funds on wage disbursement. On an average the North-Eastern states spend around 5% on administration of the programme which is too less for remote hilly areas.



## Equity Perspective

Transformative aspect of Social Protection seeks to address the concerns of social equity and exclusion. The entitlements and provisions of MGNREG Act provides for equity:

- i. At least 1/3 of workers should be women.
- ii. Disadvantaged Groups( Scheduled Castes/ Scheduled Tribes/ BPL/ Land reform beneficiaries/ Small and Marginal Farmers) can work on their own land.

The MGNREGA, 'with its guarantee of 100 days of unskilled work for every household, has been envisaged as a gender sensitive scheme'( Sudarshan, 2009). A way of making a Social Protection scheme gender sensitive is to suggest that a certain percentage of beneficiaries must be women, which have been provided for in the Act: 'While providing employment, priority shall be given to women in such a way that at least one-third of the beneficiaries shall be women who have registered and requested for work under the scheme( NREGA, Schedule II, Section 6: 19). Along with this, the Act also provides for some explicit entitlements for women to facilitate their full participation such as, providing support for child care( p.18) equal wages for men and women(p.26), participation in management and monitoring of the programme(p.44) and participation in social audit(p.56).

The development of lands belonging to scheduled castes and scheduled tribe household and other households below the poverty line appears to have tremendous potential in unleashing productive capacities in rural areas. 16.2% of India's population consists of the scheduled castes. The tribal states of North-Eastern states such as Arunachal Pradesh, Meghalaya and Mizoram have smallest concentration of SCs, viz. 0%, 2.8% and 0.5% respectively. The Scheduled Tribes constitute 8.2% of India's total population. Highest concentration of STs is found in the North Eastern states of Mizoram, Nagaland and Meghalaya. The work Participation Rate at all India level is highest among the STs being 49% followed by SCs, 40.4% and general population being 30.3%.(Planning Commission.nic.in). The equity issue are considered on the basis of participation of Socially excluded sections of the society and women in MGNREGA.

**Table: 7, Percentage(%) of SC, ST and Women person days in MGNREGA in North-Eastern states(2012-13) (upto Dec 2013)**

States	SC Persondays	ST Persondays	Women Persondays
Assam	6%	21%	26%
Arunachal Pradesh	0%	89%	30%
Manipur	1%	64%	34%
Meghalaya	1%	93%	41%
Mizoram	0%	100%	26%
Nagaland	1%	93%	26%
Tripura	18%	43%	41%
Sikkim	4%	40%	44%
All India	22%	18%	51%

Source : <http://nrega.nic.in/netnrega/sthome.aspx> (accessed on 23.04.14)

The equity perspective of MGNREGA is depicted in the above table wherein the states with higher concentration of ST population such as Arunachal Pradesh, Meghalaya, Mizoram and Nagaland have very high percentage of ST Persondays. Meghalaya, Sikkim and Tripura have maintained the desirable stipulation as far as gender equity is concerned. Other states like Assam, Mizoram and Nagaland have women persondays less than the stipulated requirement (1/3) as mentioned in the Act.

## **Mechanism For Accountability**

The Act and subsequent notifications provide elaborate grievance redressal mechanisms and ombudsmen at different levels to provide remedial measures for any grievances from workers. Another accountability mechanism, built into the MGNREGA programme is the provision of Social Audit to be conducted by the village assembly (Gram Sabha). Section 17(2) of the MGNREGA mandates that, “the Gram Sabha shall conduct regular Social Audits of all the projects under the scheme taken up within the Gram Panchayat”. It is an important means to achieve good governance by promoting transparency, accountability and participation. At one hand, it empowers people in general and marginalized people in particular, on the other hand it provides opportunity to implementing authorities to consult stakeholders, to improve service delivery and effectiveness of this Social Protection programme. Social Audits as designed in MGNREGA are intended to serve as a platform for the redressal of grievances. The audit exercise involves public hearings which act as a forum for exposing discrepancies in government records or programme implementation. Here, people are given an opportunity to question officials, seek and obtain information, verify financial expenditure, examine the provisions of entitlements, discuss the priorities reflected in choices made and critically evaluate the quality of work as well as the functioning of the programme. This occurs through the testimonies of workers and opportunities given to officials to publicly defend their actions (Aiyar and Samji, 2009). The demand for proactive disclosure of MGNREG- related documents through display boards and Right to Information also act as instruments for transparency and accountability. While MGNREGA is appreciated as the largest Social Protection programme in the developing world, Social Audits have also been nothing less than a revolution in the sphere of public administration. The provision of Social Audits in MGNREGA programme (NREGA, section 17), infuse life into the local Panchayat Raj institutions and invigorate community activism with a sense of collective accountability and responsibility (Nidhi Vij, 2011). The basic objective of Social Audit as a mandatory post-implementation exercise is to monitor all projects under MGNREGA at least once in six months. However, it can be understood in a broader sense, as a continuous process of public vigilance to ensure public accountability. The District Programme Coordinator at the District level and the Programme Officer at the Block level are responsible for ensuring the smooth functioning of social audits in their Gram Panchayats every six months. The act also necessitates setting up of a Social Audit Committee elected from NREGA workers from Gram Panchayat with at least one third representation of women in the committee.

If followed in a systematic, regular, effective and efficient manner, Social Audit can become an important transformative measure in ensuring and protecting the rights of the poor and the disadvantaged groups. It can raise the yardsticks of transparency, accountability and community participation to a whole new level (Nidhi Vij, 2011).

A World Bank study, that investigated the effect of Social Audit in Andhra Pradesh found that the public awareness about MGNREGA increased from about 30% before Social Audits to about 99%. After the Social Audit, efficacy of NREGA implementation has increased from average of about 60% to 97%. Finally, the effectiveness of the Social Audit as a grievance redressal mechanism

was measured to be around 80%,. Social Audit mechanism, as instituted in Andhra Pradesh, can be replicated in North-Eastern states, though attention is needed to ensure that such an exercise may be adapted to local contexts so that the MGNREGA workers can voice their grievances without fear.

**Table: 8, Percentage of G.Ps where Social Audit held in North-Eastern states.(Till Dec 2012)**

States	Total no. of Gram Panchayats	No. of Gram Panchayats where Social Audit held	Percentage of Gram Panchayats where Social Audit held
Assam	1037	1037	100%
Arunachal Pradesh	259	138	53.28%
Meghalaya	788	563	71.44%
Manipur	1045	636	60.86%
Mizoram	454	91	20.04%
Nagaland	123	123	100%
Tripura	1038	783	75.43%
Sikkim	165	165	100%

Source : <http://nrega.nic.in/netnrega/sthome.aspx> (accessed on 25.04.14)

Table shows that accountability through Social Audit is maintained in all the Gaon Panchayats of Assam, Nagaland and Sikkim. Social Audit is held in only 20% of the Gaon Panchayats in the state of Mizoram. Tripura is the best performing state in MGNREGA among the North-Eastern states but is lagging behind in conducting Social Audits where it is conducted only in 75.43% of the total Gaon Panchayats.

**Table: 9, Complaints Received and Disposed in North-Eastern states.  
(Till 31.03.12)**

States	Complaints received	Complaints disposed
Assam	39	35
Arunachal Pradesh	1	0
Meghalaya	4	3
Manipur	38	29
Mizoram	1	1
Nagaland	4	2
Tripura	3	2
Sikkim	0	0
All India	2557	1222

Source : <http://nrega.nic.in/netnrega/sthome.aspx> (accessed on 23.04.14)

The table above shows that out of 39 complaints made in Assam 35 have been disposed off. Except Assam and Manipur the mechanism of grievance redressal under MGNREGA seems to be not working properly.

### **Suggestions To Improve The Efficiency of MGNREGA**

- i. Capacity building of staff by identifying the relevant inputs and then providing them intense training on issues of implementation would help in increasing the efficiency of the programme. On and Off field training to the G.P officials is crucial to understand as to how to plan, execute and monitor viable projects under MGNREGA.
- ii. Social mobilization, creation of awareness among workers and sensitization of the officials and elected representatives of rural local-self Government are vital for making the scheme demand driven.
- iii. Setting up of separate MGNREGS cells at district and block level for effective implementation. An independent Programme officer for MGNREGA implementation would be a better choice to execute the project, along with essential support staff of the MGNREGA cell at the block level.

There is an absence of effective redressal system. Accountability is very important if transparency has to become a reality. 6% of the MGNREGA budget has been allotted for administered costs in every state. It has been worked out that if just 1% is spent on transparency and social audit mechanisms including the setting up of a social audit cell and training people, corruption can be controlled and many of the loopholes can be plugged in the states in implementing this social protection programme (Aruna Roy: 2010)

To make Social Audit more effective and efficient is necessary that :

- i. The purpose should be clearly defined while conducting a social audit.
- ii. The stakeholders should be properly identified in order to make Social Audit effective.
- iii. The performance indicators adopted by the society at large should be taken as standards in order to judge the performance.
- iv. The auditor must obtain information from reliable sources.
- v. To ensure continuity and effectiveness of audits, regular meetings and follow ups must take place.
- vi. Hierarchy should to be defined for conducting Social Audits.
- vii. External Parties such as NGOs, should be involved in conducting Social Audit for transparency and impartiality.

### **CONCLUSION**

As a rights-based Social Protection Programme MGNREGA envisages certain prerequisites in terms of enhanced awareness and understanding of the nuances of rights and entitlements. Scope for the simplification of procedures and processes may be explored. Punitive actions for addressing deficits in entitlements may need to be established in earnest. Such measures will enhance transparency as well as responsiveness among officials. Participation, transparency and accountability are three important elements which need to be adhered to in order to enhance effective implementation of this Social Protection Programme.

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