

MGNREAG and Garib Kalyan Rojgar Abhiyaan

What is the issue?

- With the lockdown in place, the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) is proving to be a lifeline for the working poor in rural India.
- In this regard, the attempt at diluting it in the name of the Garib Kalyan Rojgar Abhiyaan should be reconsidered.

What is the post-lockdown role of MGNREGA?

- In April and part of May 2020, it was the absence of MGNREGA which accentuated rural distress.
- The Central government revised lockdown guidelines to allow MGNREGA work only from April 20, 2020.
- This was nearly a month after the nationwide lockdown was imposed.
- The governments released funds for it belatedly.
- But once the money reached the States, the results became evident.
- The number of households who got work under MGNREGA in April 2020 was the lowest in several years at 95 lakh.
- However, in May 2020, the number went up to 3.05 crore.
- Till the third week of June 2020, 2.84 crore households had got work.
- This is much higher when compared to the same months last year.
- With an average 23 days of work and a daily wage of Rs. 200, households who got work earned an average of Rs. 1,500 a month.
- Even though this is meagre, it shows the potential of MGNREGA to bring work and relief, provided it is further expanded.

How will the future of MGNREGA utilisation be?

- The Central government released Rs. 38,000 crore for MGNREGA work, of which 70% has already been utilised.
- Most of the migrant workers have returned to their home States.
- Also, substantial numbers among them have completed the quarantine period.
- So, the demand for work under MGNREGA is bound to increase.

Is enough work being provided?

- In the post-lockdown phase, as many as 1.82 crore workers who demanded work were turned back.
- Of the 8.07 crore workers who demanded work, work was provided only to 6.25 crore workers.
- In particular, in U.P., one third of the over 1 crore workers who had applied for work under MGNREGA were turned back.
- Bihar is another state that also has a large number of returning migrant workers.
- There, 12 lakh workers of the 41 lakh workers who applied were turned back.
- In spite of a legal provision of unemployment allowance, not a single rupee in compensation has been paid.
- Now that the summer monsoons have set in, this issue becomes all the more relevant.
- During the rainy season, even though demand is high, work provision is low.
- It is thus essential for the Centre to ensure that States are provided with the funds to pay unemployment allowance to all workers demanding work.

What is Garib Kalyan Rojgar Abhiyaan and what are the concerns with it?

- In the context of the need to strengthen MGNREGA, the Central government has announced a “new” scheme, the Garib Kalyan Rojgar Abhiyaan.
- This is to provide work to migrant workers in 116 selected districts.
- The criteria for selection are unclear.
- E.g. the States of West Bengal and Chhattisgarh are omitted when reverse migration is particularly high in these States
- Of the Rs. 4,794 crore spent between June 20 and June 28, 2020, Bihar received more than 50% of the fund.
- But, Bihar has had a poor record of implementation of MGNREGA.
- [The elections are round the corner in Bihar and this fact cannot be totally ignored.]
- Secondly, the new scheme has listed 25 kinds of work.
- But it is clear that almost every single one of them is already covered under the convergence programmes of MGNREGA.
- Also, there is no new “skill mapping” required for this as stated, since this work is already covered under MGNREGA.
- The nature of the work is manual, mainly construction and earth work including laying cables for Internet connections in rural areas.
- It is unstated but clear that this will benefit private telecom companies.
- Most importantly, there are apprehensions about the new scheme's impact on the MGNREGA work in these selected districts.
- There is no clarity on this critical issue in the set of guidelines issued by the

Ministry of Rural Development, the nodal Ministry for this scheme.

- Last year, under MGNREGA, in these 116 districts taken together, an average of just 43.7 workdays were created.
- This was lower than the national average of 50 days.
- This poor record of provision of work may have been one of the reasons for the higher rates of migration from these districts.
- So, instead of new schemes, MGNREGA could be expanded to give work to all workers.
- This is a legal right, whereas the Garib Kalyan Rojgar Abhiyaan has no such legal binding on the administration.
- Also, the scheme is primarily meant for migrant workers in those districts where their numbers are 25,000 or more.
- That means in these selected districts women who comprise a smaller percentage of migrant workers will be largely excluded.
- However, women in these districts had a high demand for work.
- This is reflected in the fact that the average of women working in MGNREGA in these districts last year was 53.5%.
- This was higher than the average for the rest of India.
- So unless this work in 116 districts is in addition to MGNREGA, women will suffer.

What should the future measures be?

- MGNREGA should not be diluted in the name of the Garib Kalyan Rojgar Abhiyaan.
- The potential for MGNREGA to provide relief to the suffering of rural India should be utilised to its fullest capacity.
- This will also require a removal of the restriction of only one person per household to make every individual eligible.
- The cap of 100 days should be removed to expand it to at least 200 days.
- Unemployment allowance should be guaranteed for all those turned away from work.
- The Rs. 8,000 crore fund available to the States is clearly insufficient.
- It is therefore essential for the Central government to release the next set of funds without delay.

Source: The Hindu



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