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**NREGA and Rural Employment Scenario in Punjab:
An Evaluative Study of Hoshiarpur District**

Abstract

National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA) 2005, enacted by the Indian Parliament, is a unique policy intervention by the State for providing 'livelihood security' to the resource poor people in rural India. Under the Act, the Provincial Governments are legally bound to provide 100 days guaranteed manual employment on local public works to every rural unskilled adult (job-card holder) who is willing to work at the prevailing minimum statutory wage rate. In the absence of employment they would be paid unemployment allowance.

NREGA became operative on February 2, 2006. To begin with 200 districts were identified from across the country. Another 130 districts were brought under the purview of the Act with effect from April 1, 2007. The remaining 274 districts came under NREGA on April 1, 2008. It is important to note that there were 604 districts of India on March 31, 2008.

The implementation of NREGA in all the districts in all the provinces of India, with effect from April 1, 2008, has, however, placed the biggest challenge before the Indian democracy. The polity, executive, judiciary and civil society would have to be sensitized to attain NREGA's fundamental objective of providing 'livelihood security' to the underprivileged, especially to the below poverty line (BPL) population, in rural India.

The present paper is an attempt to evaluate the implementation and effectiveness of the Act in Punjab in this context. In the beginning, the Act was implemented in only one district of Punjab, namely, Hoshiarpur, w.e.f. the financial year 2006–07. The paper is also an attempt to study the socio-economic background of the job-seeker households and of those who got

employment under the Act. The perspective of the job card-holders those who get employment and that of the Panchayats have also been studied. The paper has been organized into eight sections.

The study is based both on secondary and primary data. The primary data and information have been collected through a questionnaire. In all 10 villages, from each of the 10 development blocks, were then randomly selected. Out of each selected village, 10 beneficiaries were randomly selected. The study, thus, pertains to 100 households.

The performance of NREGA in district Hoshiarpur has not been very encouraging during the first two years of its implementation. Most of the employment was generated in 2006–07. The achievement of the Act in terms of annual average days of employment per household has been nearly 1/4th of the minimum 100 days employment. Out of 126 workers who were called for work only 17 could complete the 100 days norms of employment in two years period.

Amongst the 100 sampled households 93 were below poverty line and 75 were scheduled caste. Clearly, the resource poor households in the rural area are the most targeted group under NREGA.

Nevertheless, the programme is being viewed as a great agent for socio-economic upliftment and providing livelihood security to the poorest of the poor in the rural India, if implemented earnestly. The employment and earnings under NREGA should be treated as additional avenues for such households. The existing rural employment should not be transferred under NREGA. The executing machinery and the beneficiaries under NREGA need to be sensitized about the fundamental objectives of NREGA. The state government must appoint whole time programme officers who must be dedicated, committed and honest persons. Their commitment to the rural poor and rural area should be impeccable.