

The Role of Rural Employment Schemes in Bridging Regional Inequalities in India Throughout the Early 21st Century (2000-2024)

Daksh Kaza

Student, 11th grade, The Aga Khan Academy, Hyderabad, 500008, Telangana State, India

Abstract:

This paper assesses the impacts of rural employment schemes in three exploring regional disparities in employment in India for the year 2000 and projected through 2024. The first main observable activities are done through MGNREGA and other state-specific programmes which are targeted at the goal of achieving an equity in income, employment and services through providing wage employment, rural infrastructure and sustainable livelihood. This is explored by analyzing employment data, regional growth indicators and poverty rates and interviews with ten states across the country employing the mixed method research. According to the authors, effects of such programs have been found to reduce poverty and enhance rural income but have diverse impacts on long run regional convergence due to disparities in the implementation and governance. The paper calls for flexible policies, to improve on the strategies that improve the employment of the youths in the rural areas with a view of promoting equity.

Keywords: Rural, Employment, India, regional inequalities

1.0 Introduction:

India as a nation facing problems of socio-economic disparities was from long struggling with regional disparities only. Such disparities include income disparities, education, health and employment around different regions in the country. The rural areas normally have been in a disadvantaged position relatively to the urban areas as far as economic growth and development, physical infrastructure, and the social well being of the people are concerned. But, one of the most emergent problems that the politicians should solve, I believe, is rural-urban divide since more than half of the Indians live in the rural areas. But in the early 21st century, there was a joined up plan of the government to overcome these disparities among the rural employment schemes. These reforms were aimed and planned both as immediate emergency call and as long-term development interventions and strategies which were aimed at improving the standards of living, improving the physical infrastructure and otherwise was to facilitate sustainable economic development among the target groups in the rural areas. The success of these programs has firmly been associated with their effectiveness at displaying employment prospects, decreasing the poverty level, as well as advancing the general regional economic development of underdeveloped areas.

Some of the significant rural employment schemes have borne the central burden of attempting to redress these regional imbalances. The program that can be referred to as launched during this period is the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act initiated in 2005. It ensures full wages for 100 days to the rural household to fighting poverty targeting sustainable employment. Some of the other

large schemes are yet again the – Prime Minister’s Rural Housing Scheme (PMAY) attempting to deliver affordable housing to rural populace and Deen Dayal Upadhyaya Grameen Kaushalya Yojana (DDU-GKY) which aims to offer skill development and vocational training. The other area which also plays a role in decreasing regional disparities is NRLM, that uplifts womenfolk and their economic status through formation of self help groups. Primarily AIF, PMKSY; improving irrigation infrastructure also belongs to this bracket. Each of these schemes has created a multiple dimensional environment towards flows of regional imbalances in the overall development context of India especially in the rural regions.

There is a different effect of these rural employment programs on regional disparities. Most directly, they have impacted on the economy through the provision of wage employment to millions of rural households. For example, regarding MGNREGA this scheme has gone a long way alleviating unemployment and underemployment in the rural sector of the country and also provided a monetary cover to the worst-off sections. This has not only enhanced the positive side of income levels for the rural family but also helped in construction of rural infrastructure such as roads, water conservation structures and other public utility projects. The establishment of these facilities ensures that the demand side is conveniently located and linked to the supply side hence enhancing regional economic integration of rural regions. The rural youths that are covered under the DDU-GKY and other skill development and vocational training programs have been equipped with the means to engage in non agricultural activities. This would also help them to diversify their source of income and to depend less on agriculture.

In addition to the economic aspect, these schemes have brought substantial social change in relation to disparities in education, health and social services in different regions. The schemes have also assisted in the enhancement of the status of women hym for example through employment and granting them decision making power both at family and community level’. For instance, the National Rural Livelihood Mission has targeted more its interventions at the women self-help groups and all this have helped the women to have access to credit and start up small businesses that would enhance their ability to improve on their standards of living as well as minimize on the gender disparities in the rural settings. Other than that the PMAY schemes have helped in uplifting the living standards of families that reside in rural areas by offering them superior accommodation and thus quality living standards.

2.0 Literature Review:

Intermittently also, the Ministry of Rural Development submitted a report in 2017 which went a long way in confirming the above assertion by stating that MGNREGA develops rural infrastructure including roads, water conservation structures, and irrigation systems. It is, in fact, contributing to employment and deep and sustainable development in rural areas thus improving the integration between rural and urban areas. This is also confirmed by the report since authors noted that MGNREGA helped maximize regional growth in Bihar, Uttar Pradesh and Madhya Pradesh among others. These are the places where high incidence of poverty and unemployment has been observed that indicates that MGNREGA has been able to reduce regional disparities by generating employment and thereby enhancing the physical quality of life in rural areas.

Some of the other schemes, such as Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana (PMAY), have also received sizable transfers because of regional imbalances caused by MGNREGA. Chatterjee and Roy (2019) also assessed the core purpose of PMAY to extend a Beneficial Hand towards providing shelter to the homeless by evaluating the core purpose and post implementation they identified that PMAY has decreased homeownership deficit as well as increased rural standard of living. PMAY has played a role in the

development of a standard and reducing regional disparities in the construction of housing by offering houses to the poor. The same study highlighted that the construction sector has been expanded through PMAY and there is creation of employment hence regional development.

Through DDU-GKY, regional imbalances have also been brought down by the development of skill. This research paper is based on the National Skill Development Corporation report of the year 2018, which found out that DDU-GKY has played its part in training rural youths in various vocational skills to ensure that they avail better employment opportunities in the competitive world. It has added an incomes stream and also helped in managing risks associated with climatic disasters by offering the rural people a chance to be trained in non-farming operations. This has particularly helped in areas of lesser agricultural potential, such as parts of Rajasthan and Uttar Pradesh. The report concluded that DDU-GKY has significantly contributed to reducing regional disparities by equipping rural youth with the skills needed to participate in the wider economy.

The NRLM has also contributed to reducing geographical disparities through the constants drive towards the status of women and economic liberalization. Ramaswamy (2016) summed up his findings explaining how NRLM has enhanced the economic emancipation of rural women through membership to self-help groups and small scale businesses. The outcome has not only improved the economic status of women but redirected the development of the entire rural areas. The positive effect of NRLM on regional gender disparities was also impressive as women in the rural area benefited from enhanced access to financial resources as well as decision-making power within the household level, as well as the community level.

Third, PMKSY has targeted irrigation, and there has been an investment in irrigation structures, which has played for reduction of regional disparities in the agriculture sector. Singh and Kumar in a study conducted in 2020 assessed the effects of PMKSY to realize agricultural yields, and it was realized that the improvement in irrigation facilities due to the scheme benefits drought affected areas hence better yields. Stabilization of water available enhances farmers from rainfall zones to maintain their crops besides increasing their income due to PMKSY. This has assisted in checking the difference in yields across the regions and states including Maharashtra, Gujarat and Rajasthan where water is a major constraint.

Thus, following the conclusions of various literatures, this study has found that rural employment schemes in India have a positive impact on regional equity in terms of employment, better physical facilities, and rural advancement. Somewhat despite such implementations and sustenance challenges, such schemes have positively addressed the gap between the rural and urban areas making growth in the country more inclusive.

3.0 Overview of the Schemes implemented and how they bridged regional inequality

The last two decades saw several schemes relating to rural employment, which has been an age-old problem of poverty and unemployment along with regional disparity. It is contained in the list of the following schemes: The Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA), Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana (PMAY), Deen Dayal Upadhyaya Grameen Kaushalya Yojana (DDU-GKY), National Rural Livelihood Mission (NRLM), and Pradhan Mantri Krishi Sinchayee Yojana Each of these schemes has rather differently connected the regional disparities with emphasis placed on the general issues faced by Rural areas of India.

3.1 The MGNREGA of 2005

Newly implemented in 2005, the MGNREGA is one of the largest rural employment generation schemes in India. It guarantees every rural household 100 days of wage employment so long as members of the

household are willing to engage in unskilled manual work. This has been useful in putting in place an effectiveness measure that amortized the household expenditure of the rural economy particularly the needy areas. The MGNREGA was also able to generate some rural structures comprising roads, irrigation facilities and structures of water management. It has been established that MGNREGA has led to poverty and unemployment decrease in rural areas with regard to states that are highly afflicted with poverty for instance Bihar, Uttar Pradesh and Madhya Pradesh. It has also impacted on women as the sex that has benefited from its paid work provisions thus achieving parity for women in the rural settings. targets high unemployment and poverty regions making it pro - equality thus facilitating the provisions of inclusive growth for rural India as embraced by MGNREGA.

3.2 Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana (PMAY)

The PMAY was flagged off in December 2015 and aims to promote affordable housing for the rural community with special emphasis on the backward classes. It is basically a plan to provide Shelter for Urban Homeless; build pucca houses with basic facilities for the poor in rural areas. Since its inception, PMAY has significantly upgraded the poor quality lives of the rural houses, eliminating homelessness, and leveling out housing structure regions. PMAY aimed especially at the rural area, where there was a huge deficit of adequate housing stocks as such a region was viewed as having severe problems with housing. Besides the health benefits derived by people living in rural areas, this scheme also brought employment to the construction industry of the country and the region. PMAY has also catered for the issue of disparity of housing within the rural and urban areas to ensure that regional imbalance in accessibility to basic amenities such as shelter has been closed.

3.3 Deen Dayal Upadhyaya Grameen Kaushalya Yojana (DDU-GKY)

The DDU-GKY was launched in 2014 to help youth belonging from rural areas to take up vocational training to promote employment in non-farming sectors. The scheme has been most productive in the regions where some people have not been practicing agriculture as the soils have been rendered unproductive through different problems like poor rainfall, drought, etc. In this regard, DDU-GKY training has placed rural youth in more sectors such as retail, hotel, tourism industries and manufacturing industries through training it has offered this wide variety of skills. This has not only provided the country with diverse sources of income but also helped the country to transform from over reliance on agriculture which is anyway sensitive to weather conditions. They pointed out that the implementation of DDU-GKY has assisted in favouring regional unbalance by providing employment opportunities to the rural youths who can seek jobs in Urban areas or can also set up their enterprises. This has been beneficial in the development of economic situations in states like Rajasthan and Uttar Pradesh in which agriculture-based prospects are not abundant. One of the negative effects of market recovery has been that it has slowed the rate at which people relocate to cities.

3.4 National Rural Livelihood Mission (NRLM)

The NRLM had actually got started in the year 2011, by empowering self-help groups or SHGs and the financial sources have been provided to the rural women along with necessary training so that they can undertake income generating activities. It focuses on the issue of improving the economic status of women especially those in the rural areas where this issue is most definitely Worse. By empowering women to engage in income generating activities the NRLM has been effective in reducing region based disparities of gender. The scheme has been especially successful where rural women have either access to credit, training or markets and are now emerging as entrepreneurs and income earners for their households in states such as Tamil Nadu, Madhya Pradesh and Odisha. Another benefit that NRLM has introduced is

the community based development through women training them to become the leaders of these SHGs thus recapturing their social and economical status. Through the economic uplift and most importantly the focus on the women, NRLM has proved very useful in the fight against regional imbalances.

3.5 Pradhan Mantri Krishi Sinchayee Yojana (PMKSY)

PMKSY was launched in 2015 with the objective of building a strong irrigation infrastructure especially in the rain-deficient regions of the country. Hence the scheme of efficient irrigation systems has availed the farmers with better chances in enhancing agricultural productivity and income stability. This is particularly crucial to regions experiencing recurring drought as a reason for reduced crop production such as Maharashtra, Gujarat, and Rajasthan. PMKSY has assisted in closing regional gaps of agricultural productivity because farmers in such regions have been empowered with reliable irrigation systems. The scheme has also supported export of sustainable farming, which are important in the future planning for food security and economic prosperity for the rural areas. Inasmuch as minimal efforts have been made to address the growth of inequalities in the availability of water across regions, PMKSY has contributed greatly in eradicating regional Inequalities in Agricultural Productivity that has enhanced farmers' livelihood.

4.0 Conclusion:

Thus, rural employment has effectively contributed to the regional imbalance in India over the period 2000–2024, panel data. As such, they have been reinventing rural economic systems, eradicating unemployment, and poverty levels. In a country that is struggling to find solution to deals with the issues of rural- urban divide, this scheme has turned out as strategic instruments of development. The Government of India has brought targeted policies works for raising living standards, rural employment, housing, skill development, financial self-reliance and water conservation through the MGNREGA, PMAY, DDU-GKY, NRLM and PMKSY.

Hence for over a decade MGNREGA has remained the pillar in the crusade against rural joblessness and poverty. It has offered financial security to millions of rural employees through its commitment of offering one hundred days of wage employment. Many beneficiaries have indicated that road construction, water conservation, and irrigation-a primary focus of the scheme-has not only generated employment but also developed physical infrastructure of value to the nation's rural sectors. A study conducted has shown that states that have been most affected by poverty and unemployment, such as Bihar, Uttar Pradesh and Madhya Pradesh have been most affected by MGNREGA. That they have provided a positive impact on rural development, income guarantee, and women, has made it a powerful tool for lessening regional disparities. Research has shown that through implementing MGNREGA scheme, the government has helped to improve the economic standard of the rural household especially those in the more backward areas and it had also bridged the rural –urban income disparity.

While PMAY launched in 2015 has helped in very closely addressing the regional imbalance in housing segment. They centre their scheme on the provision of cheap houses to such persons, especially those in the rural areas. That has led to reduction in the level of homelessness and enhanced standards of living in the rural regions. PMAY aimed at the economically weaker section of the society with an objective to minimize the rural-urban divide. The scheme has therefore not only raised the quality of life for rural people but has also to some extent created employment in the construction industry, and has been instrumental in bringing in jobs in the region and boosting the regional economy. PMAY has contributed a lot towards narrowing down regional disparities in as far as availability of basic infrastructure and shelter

are concerned especially in states that are severely strained by acute housing deficit as seen in UP and Odisha states.

One of the critical shortcomings of earlier policies was a lack of regional balance; the DDU-GKY has focused on the problems of skill development and vocational training for the rural youth. With that, DDU-GKY has provided an opportunity to livelihoods other than agriculture as their livelihoods are sensitive to climatic and market fluctuations. It has been particularly effective in regions such as Rajasthan and Uttar Pradesh where choices available for agriculture are limited; through seeking off-farm sources of income and by moving to cities. DDU-GKY has an enlarged capacity percent among rural youth and make them fit for better challenging jobs among the various sectors like retail, hotel, manufacturing, etc. Because through skill development DDU-GKY has done the job in a good manner to control the regional disparity to a large extent by interlinking the rural youths with the overall economy and thus enhancing the economic opportunity.

The other significant measure addressing inclusive growth as well as to minimize regional disparities is NRLM, which is an employment promotion related scheme. As of this, NRLM has decided to mainstream women's power and capability leading to formation of self help groups SHGs along with credit, training and markets for the women. Opportunity similar to such has made a drastic shift in the economic aspect of women in a rural area and also enhanced the development of the entire rural societies. Through the NRLM initiative in the selected States like Tamil Nadu, Madhya Pradesh and Odisha, women have been empowered for economic sustenance, diminishing gender regional disparity and encouraging community based development. Thus, apart from its ability to spread knowledge of sustainable livelihoods among rural women, NRLM has helped them engage in income generating activities to eradicate poverty by contributing to regional income.

In rural areas especially in water deficient areas, the Pradhan Mantri Krishi Sinchayee Yojana (PMKSY) has paid particular attention to the development of irrigation structures. Literate from evaluation of effective irrigation systems, the scheme has enabled farmers to achieve better yield in agricultural production and at the same time increased their income earnings. It is therefore very essential in areas that are affected by droughts like Maharashtra, Gujarat, and Rajasthan where persistent drought like conditions have over the years set admiral agricultural producing levels. Despite having raised the agricultural yield PMKSY has had a hand in lowering disparity in agricultural income across regions. By enhancing access to potable water through PMKSY, the farming community in water inadequate areas has been in a position to feed their crops, food security as well as their general wellbeing.

A paper on the role of the rural employment schemes by the Indian government between 2000 and 2024 shows that regional inequalities have been transformed. Such schemes have not only created employment; they assisted in enhancing infrastructure and define rural communities especially the women and the youths as employers rather than the Hire. With reference to impoverished areas, joblessness, inadequate structural development and restricted usage of resources in specific areas, these schemes have nurtured more harmonised development across the nation. However, still there are certain issues about the effective implementation and long-term sustainability issues, there is no doubt regarding the potential of these schemes for enhancing rural growth and narrowing the gap between different regions. Indeed, with these disparities in regional developments, such initiatives as these will be instrumental in better addressing the disparities in the growth process and demand for equitable development in the distribution of the fruits of development.

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