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Ph. Studio/May, 57, A46(e)/A45(d)/A02(p). Residents of Shamaspur, near Delhi, digging irrigation channels from the well at left to their respective fields (May 21, 1957). Public Resource via Internet Archive

The Promises of the Right to Work: Achievements and Challenges

On 5 September 2005, for the first time, the ‘right to work’ was constitutionally mandated in India through NREGA. The history that led to this, in terms of rights, economic and policy intentions, began before independence. It took decades of sustained efforts, despite a strong constitutional commitment, to realise NREGA. It empowered people to contest caste and gender rigidities, improved livelihoods, democratised planning and built crucial infrastructure in rural India. While the implementation of NREGA has not been without its challenges, these do not warrant its repeal. The new VB-GRAM G Act passed in December 2025, has abrogated crucial provisions guaranteed by NREGA and effectively rescinded the right to work. Excessive centralisation, shifting the fiscal burden to states, and exclusionary technology and selective application cast serious doubts about the scheme’s impact.

The Promises of the Right to Work: Achievements and Challenges

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India has a long history, dating back to the colonial period, of addressing rural distress and unemployment. Labour-intensive famine relief works were used to provide sustenance wages and prevent starvation during this period. These programmes, however, operated within a colonial-feudal structure and were devoid of rights. Early articulations of a rights-based approach can be traced to the *Nehru Report* of 1928 (Nehru 1928). Structured discussions on post-independence economic reconstruction began with the establishment of the Congress National Planning Committee in 1938. Its deliberations were guided by the Indian National Congress's 'Resolution on Fundamental Rights and Economic Programme', adopted at the Karachi session in 1931 (Shah 1938). The resolution emphasised that 'In order to end the exploitation of the masses, political freedom must include real economic freedom of the starving millions'.

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Using National Sample Survey (NSS) data from 1960–61, economists V.M. Dandekar and N. Rath estimated that nearly one-third of the rural population lived below subsistence levels. As a response to poverty, they proposed rural employment through public works programmes, funded by a modest, 15 per cent reduction in the consumption expenditure of the top 5 per cent. Building on this framework, and following sustained mobilisation by civil society groups and political activists for

Constitution of India, Articles 39(a), 39(b), 41 and 21. Article 39(a) directs the State to secure that citizens have the right to an adequate means of livelihood; Article 39(b) provides that the ownership and control of material resources be distributed to serve the common good. Article 41 calls upon the State to make effective provision for the right to work, education and public assistance in cases of unemployment, old age, sickness and disability. Article 21 guarantees that no person shall be deprived of life or personal liberty except according to procedure established by law.

guaranteed employment, the Maharashtra Employment Guarantee Act was enacted in 1977. Although limited to one state, it was the first programme of its kind in India. Various food-for-work and wage employment programmes continued in independent India. However, in the absence of a legal mandate, their implementation remained uneven, subject to elite capture and prone to corruption. Section 2 provides a detailed discussion of these programmes.

Since the 1980s, a motley crew of activists and rural workers associated with the Mazdoor Kisan Shakti Sangathan (MKSS) have led a sustained struggle for transparency and accountability in rural welfare programmes. This struggle emerged in response to wage theft, corruption, and the denial of entitlements by local elites as well as government officials. The opacity of public works administration led MKSS to develop a unique approach, *jan sunwais* or public hearings, as a method to demand accountability from public officials (Roy and MKSS Collection 2018). By bringing rural workers and public officials onto a common

platform, this form of collective action was momentous in both intent and practice (Pande 2022).

In parallel, the Right to Food campaign, a network of civil society organisations was formed. It highlighted the paradox of overflowing food stocks in granaries alongside persistent penury, hunger and malnutrition in rural India. The landmark PUCL v. Union of India case in 2001 marked a phase of judicial activism by the Supreme Court through several progressive orders on the right to food. This set the stage for widening the canvas of struggle and led to broader mobilisation linking

the right to information with demands for the right to work and food across the country.

Through the Rozgar Adhikar Yatra (a march for employment guarantee), activists travelled by bus across hundreds of villages in ten north Indian states to mobilise rural workers to demand a legal right to work. As the yatra culminated in the streets of Central Delhi, signatures collected from across the country were displayed, expressing this demand in multiple languages. Slogans such as *'har haath ko kaam do, kaam ka poora daam do'* (give work to every hand and full wages for every work) echoed from the capital to the hinterlands. The United Progressive Alliance (UPA) – an alliance of the Indian National Congress and several Left parties – won the general elections and formed the union government in 2005. In response to the massive collective demand, they promulgated the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act, which was passed unanimously in both houses of the Parliament. The prefix 'Mahatma Gandhi' was added later. Hereafter, the Act is referred to as MGNREGA.

Despite early efforts to develop a vocabulary for a rights-based framework for socio-economic rights, it took fifty-eight years for India to codify a limited right to employment. This was significant, even though it was limited only to rural households. MGNREGA draws on the Directive Principles of State Policy (DPSP) enshrined in Part IV of the Constitution of India. [Articles 39\(a\)](#) and [39\(b\)](#) in the DPSP direct the State to secure the right to an adequate means of livelihood and to ensure that material resources are distributed to serve the common good. [Article 41](#) calls upon the State to provide for the right to work and public assistance in cases of unemployment. Expanding this interpretation, the Supreme Court in [Olga Tellis v. Bombay Municipal Corporation, 1985](#) (Supreme Court of India 1985) linked the right to work to the fundamental right to life under [Article 21](#):

The principles contained in [Articles 39\(a\)](#) and [41](#) must be regarded as equally fundamental in the understanding and interpretation of the meaning and content of fundamental rights. If there is an obligation upon the State to secure to the citizens an adequate means of livelihood and the right to work, it would be sheer pedantry to exclude the right to livelihood from the content of the right to life.

Building on the Maharashtra Employment Guarantee Act and giving legislative expression to these constitutional principles, MGNREGA is the largest public works programme in the world, with over 26 crore registered workers. In contrast to earlier rural employment schemes, its provisions constitute justiciable rights. It is universal in that every rural household is entitled to up to 100 days of work each year within its own panchayat. This guarantee of work is not a panacea for deprivation. However, as this chapter shows, despite implementation challenges, it has had several far-reaching positive effects.

Section 1 traces the evolution of employment schemes leading up to MGNREGA. Section 2 examines its key features, achievements and challenges. MGNREGA was repealed and replaced by the VB-GRAM G Act in December 2025. The chapter concludes by analysing the proposed changes to the right to work and their potential ramifications.

12.1 History of rural employment schemes and wages

The *Nehru Report* (1928) set out provisions on the right to form unions, to maintain health and fitness for work, and to a living wage (Nehru 1928). Its recommendations majorly influenced post-independence India's constitutional framework and approach to labour and employment. Since subsistence employment or any job guarantee is intrinsically linked to minimum wages, the section begins with early debates on wage policy.

12.1.1 Early phase 1947–1961

In 1942, Dr B.R. Ambedkar, as Labour Member of the Viceroy's Executive Council, institutionalised the Tripartite Labour Conference (International Labour Office 1949)^{1,2} and introduced the Minimum Wages Bill on 11 April 1946 (Ministry of Labour and Employment 2019).³ The Bill was enacted in March 1948 (Government of India 1948). The Act established a framework for fixing minimum wages in 'scheduled employments, in consultation with workers' and employers' organisations.⁴

The Minimum Wages Act, 1948 was the first legislation in independent India to safeguard workers. Earlier laws, such as the Factories Act, 1881 and the Indian Mines Act, 1901 existed, but they reflected the British colonial administration's commercial priorities rather than labour welfare. The Act did not define a minimum wage or prescribe a method for its determination. Therefore, a tripartite committee on fair wages was appointed. In 1949, the committee released its report which classified wages into three categories: minimum wage (the lowest a worker could be paid), living wage (providing a 'measure of comfort'), and fair wage (linked to the 'capacity to pay'). It stated that any industry unable to pay the minimum wage had 'no right to exist' (Government of India 2021).

¹ The Executive Council was equivalent to the Council of Ministers in British India. The Labour Member of the Viceroy's Executive Council may be compared to the Labour Minister in the Government of India.

² The establishment of the Tripartite Labour Conference marked a shift in the role of the government—from maintaining 'law and order' between workers and employers to facilitating engagement among workers, employers and the state.

³ The Labour Investigation Committee, appointed by the Government of India in 1944 under the chairmanship of D.V. Rege examined wages, working conditions and the possibility of establishing a framework for fixing minimum wages in India.

⁴ 'Scheduled employment' refers to specific industries listed in the Act, such as agriculture, construction and mining.

Industry representatives such as H.P. Mody and A.D. Shroff influenced some aspects of the report to their favour.⁵ The idea of ‘capacity to pay’, which tied fair wages to industry profitability, directly reflected the Bombay Plan’s argument and constrained wage increases to increases in profits (Thakurdas et al. 1944). As a result, minimum wages remained depressed. Wage boards set up under the Act cited economic fragility and the infancy of industries for not extending or enforcing statutory minimum wages (Ministry of Labour 2002).

12.1.2 **The ‘Right to Work’ constitutional debates and the first two Five-Year Plans**

Debates in the Constituent Assembly on classifying the right to work as a DPSP reflected diverse perspectives and differing views on its enforceability and significance. Supporters argued that its inclusion would guide the state in promoting welfare and ensuring a minimum standard of living, while critics noted that DPSPs are unenforceable and thus questioned their practical utility (Austin 1999). The tension between enforceable fundamental rights and the non-justiciable DPSP continues to shape the relationship between Parliament, the judiciary and the political economy of India to date.

Professor K.T. Shah strongly advocated for recognising the right to employment as a fundamental right. His aim was to constitutionally compel the State to guarantee socio-economic security, arguing that it would place a positive obligation on the state to guarantee socio-economic security. Others, including Dr B.R. Ambedkar, held that while the right to work was an essential goal, its immediate universal enforcement was not fiscally and institutionally viable in a newly independent country that was hollowed out of its resources (Constituent Assembly of India 1948).

The placement of the right to work within the directive principles, rather than among the fundamental rights, therefore, reflected a deliberate constitutionalisation of aspiration and not an abandonment of the welfare ideal. As Dr B.R. Ambedkar noted in his concluding words on the debate:

The word “strive” which occurs in the Draft Constitution, in my judgment, is very important. We have used it because our intention is that even when there are circumstances which prevent the Government, or which stand in the way of the Government giving effect to these Directive Principles, they shall, even under hard and unpropitious circumstances, always strive in the fulfilment of these Directives. That is why we have used the word “strive”. Otherwise, it would be open for any Government to say that the circumstances are so bad, that the finances are so inadequate that we cannot even make an effort in the direction in which the Constitution asks us to go. (Constituent Assembly of India 1948).

⁵ A.D. Shroff was a signatory to the *Bombay Plan* and submitted a ‘Minute of Dissent’ included in the Committee’s report.

Independent India, under Jawaharlal Nehru, adopted five-year plans as the framework for its economic policy. The First Five-Year Plan (1951–1956) prioritised agriculture and irrigation, focusing on rehabilitation and food price stabilisation following Partition (Sarma 1958). It identified ‘disguised unemployment’ and ‘structural underemployment’ in agriculture as central concerns of employment policy. The Second Five-Year Plan (1956–1961) laid the foundations of the Nehru–Mahalanobis model, of charting out a tempestuous, and often conflicting path of marrying liberal democratic governance with a socialistic framework of planning (Menon 2022). It prioritised rapid industrialisation and heavy industry while relegating employment generation to cottage and small-scale industries which were supposed to be labour intensive (Inoue 1992). The Planning Commission set a target of creating ten million jobs (Sarma 1958). It aimed to ‘eliminate unemployment within ten years and reverse the constraints on India’s economic development under colonialism’ (Tillin 2025). However, while industrial output grew, employment did not, and the target could not be achieved.

12.1.3 The beginnings of employment programmes in India (1961–1991)

The 1960s were marked by acute agrarian distress. Food production failed to keep pace with population growth, and successive droughts intensified the crisis. In response, the Nehruvian approach was set aside in favour of technology-driven agricultural interventions. Popularly known as the ‘Green Revolution’, this shift generated agricultural surplus and ushered in a new form of agrarian capitalism (Yadav 2021). While some classes benefited from the surplus that was generated, unemployment among the peasantry and the landless labourers remained widespread. These conditions shaped the emergence of new social policy responses to address rural poverty and unemployment.

In this context, the Maharashtra Employment Guarantee Scheme evolved from an initial pilot in 1965, and slowly expanded in 1969. It was adopted statewide in 1972. Enacted in the aftermath of consecutive droughts, it was shaped by the efforts of activist and politician V.S. Page (Bhattarai et al. 2018). During the severe drought of 1972–74, the centrally sponsored ‘Crash Scheme for Rural Employment’ was introduced. After central support ended, Maharashtra enacted its Employment Guarantee Act in 1977, financed through new forms of taxation (Tillin 2025).

During the 1980s, an important policy shift occurred for employment programmes, moving from state-level or relief-based schemes to consolidated national programmes. The National Food for Work Programme (1977) was restructured as the National Rural Employment Programme in 1980. The Rural Landless Employment Guarantee Programme, a *guarantee-based* national programme, launched in

1983, extended coverage to landless households. As economic liberalisation began to take shape, both the schemes were merged into the Jawahar Rozgar Yojana in 1989.

The decade also saw important judicial interventions. In *Sanjit Roy v. State of Rajasthan*, 1983, the Supreme Court of India held that payment below statutory minimum wages, even in public works programmes, amounted to forced labour in violation of Article 23 of the Constitution (Supreme Court of India 1983). As noted earlier, in *Olga Tellis v. Bombay Municipal Corporation*, 1985, the Court linked the right to work to the right to life.

12.1.4 The third phase (1991–2004)

Post-1991, India witnessed liberalisation, deregulation and market-oriented reforms. The share of labour in value added and real wages declined (Bhattacharjea 2022). Agrarian distress deepened and rural incomes stagnated by early 2000s (Pankaj 2012). In response, the Employment Assurance Scheme (EAS) (1993) was introduced to provide employment in backward blocks during agricultural lean seasons. However, this was not a guarantee of work. The Jawahar Rozgar Yojana was restructured into the Jawahar Gram Samridhi Yojana (JGSY) (1999), with a focus on rural infrastructure creation (Planning Commission 2002). In 2001, JGSY and EAS were merged to form the Sampoorna Grameen Rozgar Yojana (SGRY), under which wages were paid partly in food grains. These allocation-based schemes led to significant exclusions and remained fragmented, seasonal and limited in scope (Duggirala and Kumar 2021).

It was in this context that the NREGA was introduced. Concerns were raised about its fiscal implications and the risk that a scheme of such scale would lead to ‘unproductive expenditure’. Some bureaucrats argued for restricting the guarantee to below poverty line (BPL) households. The bill was then referred to the Parliamentary Standing Committee on Rural Development, which incorporated key provisions initially omitted, including enforceability as a legal right, economic and geographic universality, demand-driven allocation, unemployment allowance, gender quotas, worksite facilities and Centre-state sharing of expenditure (Khera 2011).

12.2 MGNREGA: 2005–2025

Employment schemes in India have historically responded to cycles of low-wage employment and unemployment, which produced persistent vulnerabilities such as hunger, health shocks and indebtedness. Targeted, scheme-based approaches proved inadequate, leading to the articulation of a universal, rights-based framework. MGNREGA rests on a simple premise; it provides a livelihood cushion by guaranteeing work at minimum wages near workers’ communities. Framing this as a legal right was also intended to address structural asymmetries

such as caste, gender and bureaucratic control. Key statutory obligations included the right to work on demand; unemployment allowance if work is not provided within fifteen days of demand; payment of wages within fifteen days of completion of work; compensation for wage delays; equal wages for men and women; and the provision of essential worksite facilities.

The Act also aimed to create ecologically sustainable assets, including water and soil conservation, drought-proofing, renovation of water bodies and rural connectivity. In line with the 73rd Constitutional Amendment, planning was to be carried out by rural communities through gram sabhas, strengthening decentralised governance. Its universal design sought to minimise inclusion and exclusion errors, pitfalls other social security schemes were prone to. In fiscal terms, the Act departed from earlier schemes: the Union government bears 100 per cent of wage costs and 75 per cent of material costs, while states' shares were limited to bear the remaining 25 per cent. In effect, the Union government accounts for roughly 90 per cent of total expenditure. The labour-material ratio is mandated at a minimum of 60:40 at the panchayat level.

In line with [Section 4](#) of the Right to Information Act, which mandates proactive disclosure of information, MGNREGA became the first welfare programme in India to digitise implementation and monitoring in its entirety through a publicly accessible Management Information System (MIS). Social audits and public hearings were built into the Act to strengthen participatory democracy and accountability.

Initially rolled out in the poorest 200 districts in February 2006, the programme was extended nationwide in 2009. Beyond its immediate objectives, MGNREGA also sought to redistribute power between the state and the rural poor. This rights-based framework, however, operated within systems habituated to elite control and bureaucratic opacity. As economist Jean Drèze observed, 'it is a pro-worker law implemented by an anti-worker system' ([Drèze 2019](#)). Never an easy task to alter entrenched norms, the initial years (up to 2009) were largely devoted to establishing an institutional architecture for programme implementation.

12.3 Numerous achievements

From its early years, MGNREGA attracted both strong support and derision. Some sceptics and sections of the media dismissed it as an 'expensive gravy train' and a 'money guzzler'. Rather than an employment guarantee Act, others proposed more 'creative' alternatives, such as 'simply dropping money by helicopter, gas balloon (or even diwali rocket) over rural areas' ([Aiyar 2004](#)). For 'dole-hole' critics ([Bhagwati and Panagariya 2014](#)), the programme amounted to little more than state-sponsored charity—paying people money to dig holes. While some critics

raised concerns about its inflationary effects (Jain 2007), others went further, portraying it as a mechanism that risked institutionalising corruption.

Notwithstanding the validity of some of these concerns, they have often received disproportionate attention. It would be unrealistic to expect that 100 days of employment a year, at minimum wages could, on its own, eradicate poverty, fundamentally reshape power relations, or significantly boost the rural economy. Yet, the programme has provided a crucial safety net, particularly during periods of acute distress. Despite operating at roughly half its mandated capacity⁶ and facing persistent implementation challenges, its impact has been enormous. Four broad areas of achievement may be identified: (a) community empowerment; (b) reduction in gender and caste inequalities; (c) increases in rural incomes; and (d) creation of quality assets.

12.3.1 Community empowerment and shifts in gender and caste inequalities

As per official records, out of around 18 crore rural households (as per the Socioeconomic and Caste Census 2011), roughly 15.5 crore are registered under MGNREGA (Ministry of Rural Development 2011). The programme has also served as an important entry point for civil society organisations and activists to mobilise rural workers and build collective platforms for demanding their rights. Beyond providing employment, it has contributed to the emergence of a new lexicon of rights and entitlements in rural India.

Evidence from the field suggests that this has translated into tangible shifts in both individual and collective agency. In Muzaffarpur, Bihar, workers' collectives such as MGNREGA Watch have enabled women to directly engage with administrative officials and assert claims over pending wages, reflecting new forms of access and confidence among workers (Sharan 2021). Similarly, in Belgavi, Karnataka, women's participation in MGNREGA has, in some instances, extended beyond the workplace to challenge entrenched gender norms in community spaces and local cultural practices. These examples point to how the programme has enabled new forms of voice, negotiation, and collective action among historically marginalised groups (see Annexure 12.1 for more case studies).

Organising around MGNREGA has, in several contexts, also opened up spaces that cut across entrenched caste boundaries. Accounts from the field suggest that participation in worksites and related forms of mobilisation has enabled interactions across caste lines and expanded the ability of marginalised groups to access and inhabit local public institutions more assertively. As Sandeep Pradhan, an MGNREGA organiser from Jharkhand, said in a public meeting in January 2026,

⁶ The average number of days of employment per household has remained around fifty days annually, based on MGNREGA MIS data (Ministry of Rural Development n.d.)

CASE STUDY

Surekha | Belagavi, Karnataka

Surekha is a resident of Jamboti Panchayat, Khanapur Taluk in Belagavi district, Karnataka. This Marathi speaking village is located in a dense forest in the north western periphery of Karnataka. The village, located in the north-western part of the state, has seen high levels of male seasonal migration to Goa for work in construction and service occupations, leaving women with limited sources of income. With the support of a migrant worker turned labour organiser, Surekha learned about MGNREGA in 2011 and began mobilising other women in her village to participate in public works. For the first time, women discovered that they could earn the same as men, that they could have their own bank account and that they could work on their own terms. A growing sense of autonomy extended beyond the workplace into community life. In the village temple, where a weekly bhajan ritual was traditionally restricted to men, women began to assert their right to participate. Led by Surekha and other MGNREGA workers, they challenged these norms and secured equal participation in the ritual. Akin to the temple entry movements of the 1920s, MGNREGA became the *Satyagraha* engine for Surekha in the 2010s. Women sit shoulder to shoulder and sing note to note with other men in the temple today.

‘It was only because of MGNREGA that for the first time in his village, people across caste lines ate together at worksites.’ Mahantesh, a Dalit migrant worker turned MGNREGA organiser, from Bagalkot, Karnataka noted how organising around MGNREGA made it possible for Dalits in his village to fearlessly enter the premises of their Panchayat Bhavan.

Although these processes are not uniform across the country, improvements in women’s empowerment and in the economic condition of poorer households are also borne out in academic evidence using public data and field surveys. Real wages of female casual workers increased by 8 per cent in districts where MGNREGA was implemented compared to others (Azam 2012). Access to paid employment has also strengthened women’s intra-household bargaining power (De Mattos and Dasgupta 2017). Findings from a nationally representative panel survey of 26,000 rural households show that 45 per cent of women who worked under MGNREGA in 2011–12 had no prior earnings in 2004–05, alongside a substantial increase in women’s access to bank accounts and their ability to seek healthcare independently (Desai, Vashishtha

and Joshi 2015). A range of state-level surveys and ethnographic studies further corroborate improvements in women's employment and agency (Pankaj and Tankha 2010; Pellissery and Jalan 2011; Carswell and De Neve 2013; Ahangar 2014; Sahoo 2014). There is also evidence that women's participation in the programme has had positive spillover effects on the time children spend in school and their educational outcomes (Afridi, Mukhopadhyay and Sahoo 2016).

At the same time, these gains vary across regions. Women's participation tends to be higher in southern states, while remaining relatively lower in parts of northern India (Narayan 2022). This divergence is notable given that many states of the Indo-Gangetic plains are poorer and have lower work uptake when compared to southern states. Better state capacity, implementation quality and awareness among workers pay an important role in shaping outcomes for states.

12.3.2 Increase in rural incomes

Empirical studies show that, in better-implemented states, there is a substantial increase in per capita income and consumption during the agricultural lean season, contributing to poverty reduction (Klonner and Oldiges 2022). Using a decade of monthly data for a panel of over 200 districts, research finds that real daily agricultural wage rates increased following the implementation of MGNREGA (Berg et al. 2018). The programme has also raised wages for casual workers in the private sector (Imbert and Papp 2015) and increased rural household consumption expenditure by between 6.5 per cent and 10 per cent, with stronger effects among marginalised castes (Bose 2017).

Participation in MGNREGA has been higher among poorer households, particularly Dalits and Adivasis, and has been associated with a reduced reliance on moneylenders (Desai, Vashishtha and Joshi 2015). Despite 35% higher wages in urban areas, some seasonal migrants have preferred to work under MGNREGA rather than migrate (Imbert and Papp 2019). Studies also indicate that MGNREGA has had significant positive macroeconomic effects across sectors, including impacts on government revenue (Sharma, Saluja and Sarma 2016). Contrary to popular perception, there is no evidence of a systematic association between MGNREGA expenditure and price inflation (Bahal and Shrivastava 2022).

12.3.3 Creation of quality assets

Since its inception, MGNREGA has created over 9.84 crore⁷ assets across 266 types of works. Narayanan (2016) identifies four key impact areas of these assets: income growth, agricultural productivity, environmental resilience and disaster mitigation. Studies show that these works have contributed to decentralised water

⁷ https://nrega.dord.gov.in/MGNREGA_new/Nrega_home.aspx. Accessed on June 6, 2026.

management through the labour-intensive construction of small-scale water conservation structures (Tiwari et al. 2011; Singh et al. 2013; Sebastian and Azeez 2014). Over twenty lakh ponds, five lakh dug wells and five lakh check dams have been constructed since 2014 (Press Information Bureau 2019). These structures augment water availability, increase agricultural production, reduce soil erosion, improve soil fertility and enhance resilience to droughts and floods. A notable example is Rajasthan's 'four waters' concept—rainwater, runoff, soil moisture and groundwater—which led to a 4.66-foot rise in groundwater levels across twenty-one non-desert districts, securing water for 4.1 million people (NITI Aayog 2019).

MGNREGA has also contributed to environmental resilience through large-scale afforestation. States such as Chhattisgarh, Tamil Nadu and Telangana have focused on highway and roadside plantations (Narayanan et al. 2014). In Jharkhand and Andhra Pradesh, fruit plantations (particularly mango) have contributed to both income generation and increased green cover (Drèze and Nair 2023). Plantation works provide immediate wage employment, long-term income security from fruit yields and additional earnings through intercropping (Turangi 2020).

CASE STUDY

Akkapalligudem | Jangaon District, Telangana

In Akkapalligudem village in Jangaon district of Telangana, land development works under MGNREGA have enabled the reclamation of previously uncultivable land. These interventions include land levelling, clearance, and the creation of irrigation structures like trenches and farm ponds. Avinash Bharatha, the Village Development Officer (VDO), initiated these works in 2020. His sustained efforts have ensured that the land reclamation works lead to sustained livelihood improvements for villagers. In 2024, Malliah reclaimed 1.5 acres of land through these works and now cultivates cotton, increasing his annual income by around ₹60,000. The works on his land alone generated 610 person-days of employment for 119 workers under MGNREGA. Similarly, Gottam Karunakar reclaimed 0.75 acres, where he now cultivates paddy and groundnut. Across the village, more than 15 acres of land have been brought under cultivation through such land development projects. In addition, plantations have been developed on reclaimed land through convergence with the horticulture department. For instance, P. Ramesh has planted eighty coconut trees along the boundary of his land, with support for planting and maintenance, creating a potential source of sustained income.

12.3.4 Social accountability

Civil society played a central role in mobilising and championing the architecture of MGNREGA, particularly in institutionalising a citizen-led approach to monitoring and grievance redressal through social audits (Adhikari and Heller 2024). Social audits are premised on enabling local communities to audit public programmes and hold authorities to account through public hearings. Around 1 per cent of programme funds is earmarked for social audits. Independent statutory bodies have been established in each state to oversee their implementation. As with other aspects of the programme, there is considerable variation across states in how social audits are conducted and in the extent to which their findings are acted upon (Aiyar and Mehta 2015).

In its early years, the Ministry of Rural Development supported such processes through initiatives aimed at facilitating engagement between policymakers, researchers and practitioners, including the publication of an anthology of research studies in the first decade of implementation (UNDP 2015). However, these consultative processes appear to have weakened after 2015.

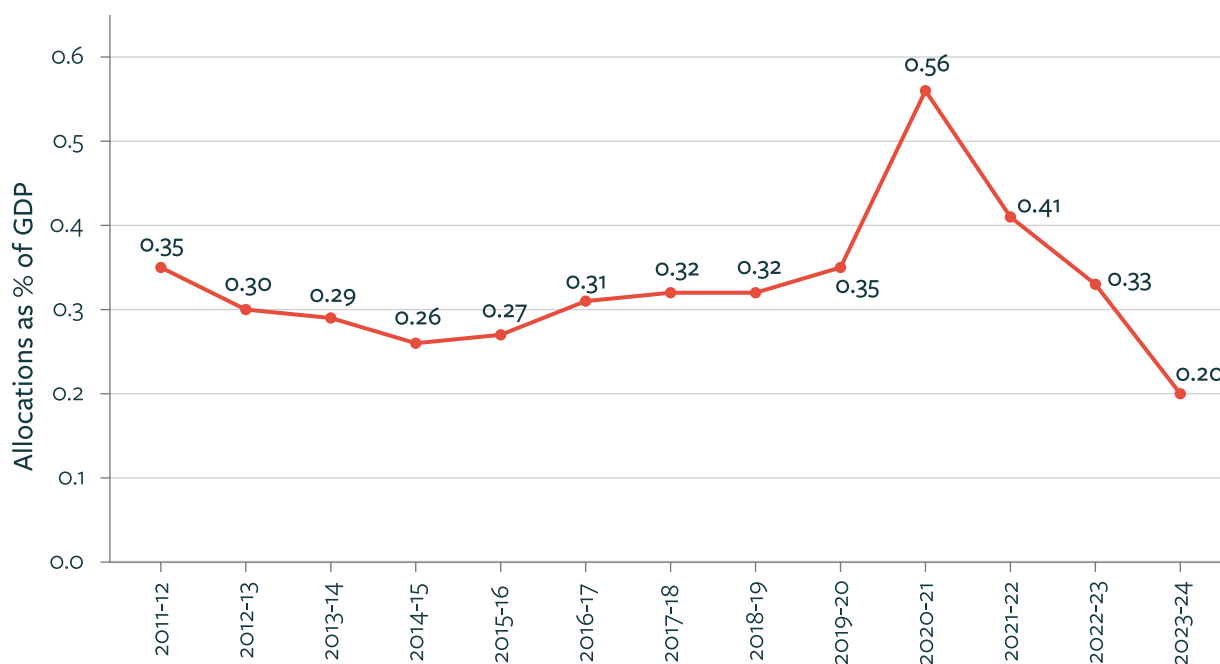
12.4 Challenges

Budget constraints leading to the suppression of work demand and delays in wage payments, along with low wage rates, have been key concerns. Over time, the introduction of untested digital technologies in programme implementation has steadily subverted the Act.

12.4.1 Budget constraints and suppression of work demand

In principle, the MGNREGA budget is determined through a bottom-up process. Gram sabhas prepare a shelf of works and estimate the required person-days for each Gram Panchayat (GP) for the upcoming year. The corresponding wage and material costs are then calculated to arrive at the GP-level labour budget. Aggregation across GPs yields district and state labour budgets and their sum constitutes the national labour budget. In practice, however, this process varies considerably, and there is reason to believe that allocations are effectively determined in a top-down manner. The introduction of the 'Approved Labour Budget' by the union government has truncated the projected bottom-up estimates (Narayanan and Pothula 2018).

Early estimates suggest that, if implemented in letter and spirit, the programme would require allocations of around 1.7 per cent of the GDP (Ravallion and Murgai 2005), with similar estimates produced by civil society groups (PAEG, 2023). However, as Figure 12.1 illustrates, the budget allocation has been around 0.30 per cent of GDP, based on the Union government expenditure and excluding the state share. Even in FY 2020–21, when demand rose sharply during the national

Figure 12.1 : Allocation as a % of GDP over time

Sources and notes: Gupta and Tamang 2024

lockdown, allocations reached only 0.56 per cent of GDP. Inadequate allocation results in at least two forms of rights violation: suppression of work demand and delays in wage payments.

Dated receipts for work applications are rarely provided and demand is often recorded in the MIS only when funds become available. This leads to two forms of employment rationing: limited days of work for many households, or more days of work for fewer households. This is reflected in the persistence of low average days of employment levels, with households receiving around fifty days of work per year.

Using MIS data, studies estimate that suppressed demand may be as high as 34 per cent (Ajith and Narayanan 2023). Similar patterns emerge from primary surveys. A four-state study during the pandemic found that 39 per cent of households in the study areas did not receive any work (Azim Premji University 2022). The same study suggests that meeting actual demand would have required allocations at least four times higher than those provided.

12.4.2 Delays in wage payments

Delays in wage payments have been a persistent problem (Narayanan, Dhora-jiwala and Golani 2019; Bheemarasetti et al. 2025). A memorandum issued by the Ministry of Finance acknowledged that insufficient fund allocations have a direct bearing on payment delays in wage payment (Ministry of Finance 2017). Critics argue that, instead of addressing this constraint, the government has repeatedly altered the wage payment system. Earlier, funds were released in advance to GPs,

which were responsible for making timely payments to workers. This system was later discontinued. With the introduction of the National electronic Funds Management System (Ne-FMS) in 2016, payments began to be transferred directly from the union government to workers' accounts upon completion of work. For a detailed view of the changes over time, its implications and the intricacies of the current wage payments process, see [Azim Premji University \(2022\)](#).

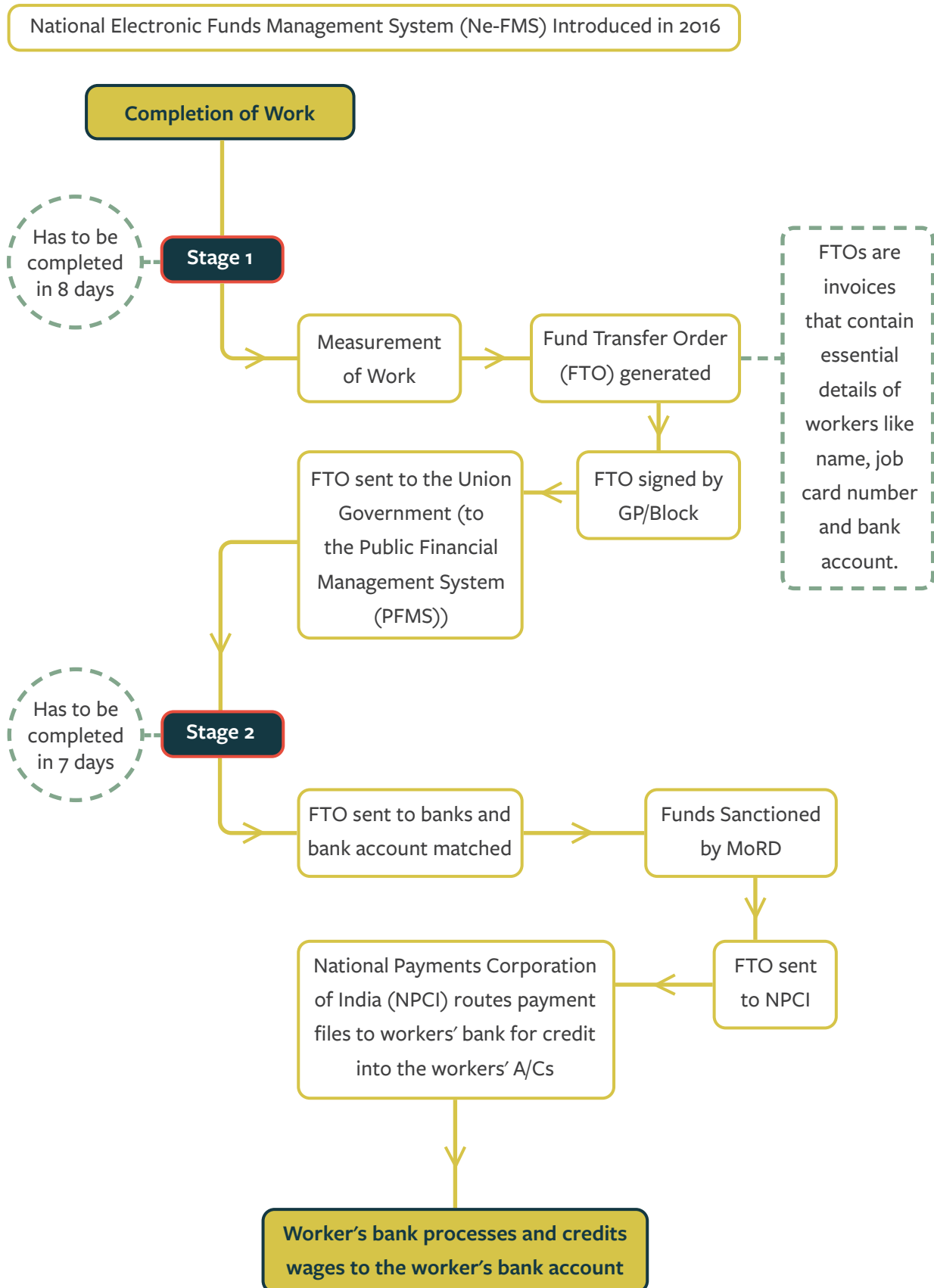
At present, the payment process involves two broad stages. In stage 1, states generate and submit electronic fund transfer orders (FTOs) within eight days of work completion. They include worker details such as names and bank account numbers. In stage 2, the Union government processes these orders and transfers wages to workers' accounts within seven days. Following the Supreme Court's 2018 order in *Swaraj Abhiyan v. Union of India*, delays in stage 1 have reduced, but delays in stage 2 persist ([Supreme Court of India 2018](#)). The Union government's share of delay compensation also remains largely unpaid.

In addition, MGNREGA wages have remained below statutory minimum wages in most states. Since 2009, wages have been delinked from state minimum wages. Two government committees have recommended that MGNREGA wages should not fall below minimum wages and that indexation should be linked to the Consumer Price Index (Rural) rather than the Consumer Price Index (Agricultural Labour). The Parliamentary Standing Committee on Rural Development and Panchayati Raj, in its report of 3 April 2025, has also recommended a revision of wage rates ([Standing Committee on Rural Development and Panchayati Raj 2025](#)), noting that 'without a fair wage, the scheme fails in its objective of providing economic security to rural workers'. Despite these recommendations, MGNREGA wage rates continue to remain lower than state agricultural wages in most states ([Tamang 2025](#)). For further discussion, see [Aggarwal \(2017\)](#).

12.4.3 Digital technologies–induced exclusions

MGNREGA has increasingly become a laboratory for the use of digital technologies in social policy implementation. Many of these were introduced hastily and without adequate consultation, leading to a form of technocratic governance in social policy ([Buddha, Dhorabjiwala and Narayanan 2021](#); [Narayanan 2023](#)). For instance, in 2017–18, the Union government introduced electronic muster rolls (e-MR), making their generation contingent on the geo-tagging of worksites. This effectively positioned the MIS as the engine of programme implementation. This was a precursor to the National Mobile Monitoring System (NMMS) app, which requires workers' time-stamped, geo-tagged photographs to be uploaded twice daily. In the absence of a reliable back-end authentication mechanism to match workers with their photographs, the system fails to meet its stated objective of curbing corruption and has led to significant exclusions ([Buddha and Tamang 2024](#)).

Figure 12.2: Process flow of payment of wages through Ne-FMS under MGNREGA



Aadhaar has been central to this suite of digital technologies. Its evolving role in MGNREGA reflects shifting official objectives, including reducing wage delays, minimising payment rejections and eliminating ‘fake’ or duplicate job cards (Bheemarasetti et al. 2025). However, analysis of more than three crore wage transactions shows that Aadhaar-based payment systems have neither improved payment timeliness nor reduced rejection rates when compared to account-based systems. Instead, they have increased opacity and led to new problems such as diverted, misdirected and locked payments (Drèze 2018). Further, rather than eliminating fraudulent job cards, the shift towards Aadhaar-based systems has been associated with the deletion of active workers from programme records (Buddha and Tamang 2023). In the absence of clear protocols, many workers were removed on the grounds of being ‘unwilling to work’, in violation of the Act (Narayanan and Buddha 2024). Claims of fiscal savings from Aadhaar also appear inflated (Bhaskar, Sarkar and Singh 2024).

Over time, Common Service Centres and banking correspondents have been introduced as last-mile digital interfaces between workers and the state. Although there are some positives of these initiatives, they operate with limited accountability. As a result, last-mile challenges persist (LibTech India 2020). Chronic underfunding of social audit units has further weakened oversight, widening the gap between the programme’s participatory design and its implementation in practice.

From MGNREGA to VB-GRAM G

In December 2025, MGNREGA was repealed and replaced by the Union government with a new law, the Viksit Bharat Guarantee for Rozgar and Ajeevika Mission (VB-GRAM G) Act (Ministry of Rural Development 2025).

Table 12.1 provides the key differences between MGNREGA and the VB-GRAM G Act.

Table 12.1: Key changes in provisions from MGNREGA to VB-GRAM G

	Key Issue	MGNREGA, 2005	VB-GRAM G, 2025
1	Right to work	<p>‘Universal’</p> <p>Establishes a universal right to work, i.e., any person living in any rural area willing to do ‘unskilled’ manual work is provided work. Therefore, any eligible family could demand up to 100 days of work every year.</p>	<p>‘Discretionary’</p> <p>State Governments shall provide work in such rural areas as notified by the Central Government (Section 5(1)). Thus, if a rural area is not notified and budgeted by the Union government, there is no right to work for the people of that area, effectively reducing it to a discretionary scheme run at the will of the Union Government.</p>

Table 12.1: Key changes in provisions from MGNREGA to VB-GRAM G

	Key Issue	MGNREGA, 2005	VB-GRAM G, 2025
2	Nature of guarantee	<p>‘Demand-driven’ MGNREGA is a demand-driven guarantee, i.e., every rural worker must be provided work within 15 days of demand, failing which they are entitled to an unemployment allowance.</p>	<p>‘Command-based’ The Union Government shall determine state-wise normative allocation for each financial year. Any expenditure in excess of such allocation shall be borne by the State Government (Sections 4(5) and 4(6)). This pre-determined budgetary allocation will act as a cap on the number of days of employment that may be provided in each state. This converts a statutorily-guaranteed demand-driven right into a command-based programme where employment is constrained to a pre-determined financial ceiling.</p>
3	Period of guarantee	<p>‘Work throughout the year’ MGNREGA provides an all-year round guarantee of employment, i.e., work may be demanded at any time of the year. In particular, women and landless workers got bargaining power to challenge gender and caste inequality.</p>	<p>‘No work in peak season’ Blackout period of 60 days must be notified by State Governments during ‘peak agricultural season’, where no work shall be undertaken (Section 6). This provision allows work to be denied to anyone seeking and willing to work. Women and landless would be most affected, weakening the guarantee’s function as a reliable safety net and undermining their bargaining power. Various farmers’ groups have extended support to reinstate MGNREGA and evidence suggests that farmers have benefited using MGNREGA. This clause attempts to legally pit farmers with labourers.</p>

Table 12.1: Key changes in provisions from MGNREGA to VB-GRAM G

	Key Issue	MGNREGA, 2005	VB-GRAM G, 2025
4	Fund allocation and capping	<p>‘Central wage allocation is uncapped’ 100% of labour wages are paid by the Union.</p>	<p>‘State-wise capped normative allocation’ Central allocation is capped by a state-wise normative allocation determined annually by the Union Government based on ‘objective parameters prescribed by the Central Government’ (Section 4(5) and 22(4)).</p>
5	Financial burden on states	<p>‘Limited state expenditure’ State expenses are limited to its share of 25% material costs and the total cost of unemployment allowance.</p>	<p>‘Increased burden on states’ Any expenditure incurred by a State in excess of its normative allocation shall be borne by the State Government (Section 4(6) and 22(5)). This will put a massive burden on states.</p>
6	Cost-sharing between Union and State Governments	<p>‘90:10’ Cost-sharing ratio of 90:10 between Centre and States, where 100% of wages and 75% of material costs are borne by the Union Government.</p>	<p>‘60:40’ The fund-sharing ratio between the Centre and States shall be 60:40 for most states and 90:10 for North-Eastern and Himalayan states. This is for wage and material costs (Section 22(2)).</p>
7	Nature of planning	<p>‘Bottom-up planning’ Bottom-up planning through Gram Sabha and Gram Panchayat based on local needs. “Physical muster rolls” Attendance at worksites through physical muster rolls available for public verification.</p>	<p>‘Centralised planning’ Viksit Gram Panchayat Plans aligned with PM Gati Shakti and national infrastructure stack. (Section 4, Schedule 1). According to Schedule 1, Clause 6, ‘The Viksit Bharat National Rural Infrastructure Stack shall guide States, Districts and Panchayati Raj Institutions in identifying priority infrastructure gaps, standardising work designs, and ensuring that public investments contribute measurably to saturation outcomes at the Gram Panchayat, Block and District levels.’ (contd.)</p>

Table 12.1: Key changes in provisions from MGNREGA to VB-GRAM G

	Key Issue	MGNREGA, 2005	VB-GRAM G, 2025
7	Nature of planning (contd.)		This reframes local planning not as an expression of local needs, but as a step in building a national infrastructure database aligned with centrally determined priorities.
8	Method of attendance	‘Physical muster rolls’ Attendance at worksites through physical muster rolls available for public verification.	‘Biometric authentication based’ The new Act mandates the use of biometric authentication for workers at worksites and functionaries (Section 24(a) and the use of biometric attendance systems (Section 15(b)). This is despite biometric authentication being fraught with problems, particularly for agricultural and construction workers whose fingerprints are worn down by manual labour and thus produce weaker biometrics, as evidenced by numerous ground reports and research studies, including those by the UIDAI. Earlier this year, the MoRD itself acknowledged biometric attendance was not working and would need to be physically verified. And yet, the GRAMG mandates the use of such systems for worker attendance. This might deny the right to work and wages.
9	Use of technology	‘Administrative tool’ Technology as administrative aid; not a statutory condition for access.	‘Legally mandated use of technology’ Biometric authentication, geospatial planning, dashboards mandated in law (Section 24). (contd.)

Table 12.1: Key changes in provisions from MGNREGA to VB-GRAMG

	Key Issue	MGNREGA, 2005	VB-GRAMG, 2025
9	Use of technology (contd.)		Technology becomes a legal gateway increasing risk of exclusion and denial of rights. Technocratic initiatives introduced without any consultation widened the gulf between workers and officials, and paved the way for new forms of corruption. Staff shortages exacerbated it. Built-in principles to mitigate corruption like social audits have been underfunded in the last decade. VB-GRAMG has no new provisions to mitigate corruption.
10	Wage rates	‘Notified wages linked to inflation’ There was a notified MGNREGA wage rate with escalation.	‘No wage guarantee’ There is no assured wage rate—it depends on what the Center fixes for each specific Panchayat.
11	Nature of assets created	‘Village assets’ Funds built local assets not covered under other schemes.	‘Contractor-led projects’ Work can be diverted to large infrastructure under PM Gati Shakti, turning Panchayats into labour suppliers.
12	Presence of contractors	‘No contractors’ Contractors were banned.	‘Contractors likely to be allowed’ Contractors are allowed through ‘convergence’ opening the door to leakages and capture.

Sources and notes: Collated by NREGA Sangarsh Morcha, 2026. <https://savemgnrega.in/resources>

The repeal has sparked intense debate. Some argue that the challenges in MGNREGA could have been addressed within the rights-based framework it established, without the need for repeal. Supporters of the VB-GRAM G Act contend that it addresses structural gaps in MGNREGA and guarantees 125 days of employment annually (Chouhan 2025). The Economic Survey 2025–26 similarly argues that improvements in the rural economy driven by strong macroeconomic fundamentals and a reduced dependence on MGNREGA as a source of livelihood, necessitated a policy shift.

Critics, however, contend that the VB-GRAM G Act excessively centralises programme implementation, increases the fiscal burden on states, institutionalises the use of exclusionary technologies and is likely to exacerbate contractor based works banned under MGNREGA (Sinha 2025; Narayanan 2025; Swaero and Buddha 2026). Concerns have also been raised about the provision to pause public works for sixty days during the peak agricultural season, which may weaken the bargaining power of women and landless, and generate tensions between workers and farmers. The implications of these competing claims will become clearer over time.

India has had a contested history of rural employment policies. As this chapter has shown, MGNREGA embodied a range of progressive measures, including the legal guarantee of the right to work. Its scope remains ambitious, but its two-decade record presents a mixed picture. As researchers and practitioners engaged with its implementation, we continue to recognise its transformative potential. Public policy is a continuous work in progress. In that spirit, the priority must be to address its gaps rather than pursue hasty shifts that risk undermining its core guarantees.

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