

Vijayabaskar, M.; Balagopal, Gayathri

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## The politics of poverty alleviation strategies in India

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# UNRISD

United Nations Research Institute for Social Development

Working Paper 2019-7

## **The Politics of Poverty Alleviation Strategies in India**

*M Vijayabaskar  
Gayathri Balagopal*

Research report prepared for the UNRISD project  
New Directions in Social Policy:  
Alternatives from and for the Global South

December 2019



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UNRISD, Palais des Nations  
1211 Geneva 10, Switzerland

Tel: +41 (0)22 9173020  
[info.unrisd@un.org](mailto:info.unrisd@un.org)  
[www.unrisd.org](http://www.unrisd.org)

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This paper is part of a series of outputs from the research project New Directions in Social Policy: Alternatives from and for the Global South.

The project examines the emergence, nature and effectiveness of recent developments in social policy in emerging economies and developing countries. The purpose is to understand whether these are fundamentally new approaches to social policy or welfare systems which could offer alternative solutions to the critical development challenges facing low- and middle-income countries in the twenty-first century. This research aims to shed light on the policy options and choices of emerging/developing countries; how economic, social, political and institutional arrangements can be designed to achieve better social outcomes given the challenges of the contemporary development context; how the values and norms of human rights, equity, sustainability and social justice can be operationalized through “new” social policies; and how experiences, knowledge and learning about innovative approaches can be shared among countries in the South. For further information on the project visit [www.unrisd.org/ndsp](http://www.unrisd.org/ndsp). This project is funded by the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (Sida).

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## Acronyms

MGNREGA	Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act
MGNREGS	Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme
NFSA	National Food Security Act
PDS	Public Distribution System
EGS	Employment Guarantee Scheme
TPDS	Targeted Public Distribution System
FCI	Food Corporation of India
SCs	Scheduled Castes
STs	Scheduled Tribes
OBC	Other Backward Class
MBC	Most Backward Class
PUCL	People's Union for Civil Liberties
GP	Gram Panchayat
BJP	Bharatiya Janata Party
UPA	United Progressive Alliance
NDA	National Democratic Alliance
FICCI	Federation of Indian Chambers of Commerce and Industry
FPS	Fair Price Shop
MKSS	Mazdoor Kisan Shakti Sangathan
RTI	Right to Information
NSSO	National Sample Survey Office
PoS	Point of Sale
TNCSC	Tamil Nadu Civil Supplies Corporation
BPL	Below Poverty Line
APL	Above Poverty Line
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
NAC	National Advisory Council

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## Summary

In 2004, following the election of the Congress-led United Progressive Alliance (UPA), India began to introduce a series of legally enforceable rights to expand the economic security and social opportunities of its citizens. The flagship initiative of the UPA was the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA); a program which sought to protect the livelihoods of the poor agricultural labourers during periods of distress, by granting adult members of every rural household the right to demand 100 days of unskilled work at stipulated minimum wages from the state, making it the largest work guarantee programme in the world. The second measure was the National Food Security Act (NFSA), an improvement of the pre-existing public distribution system (PDS), through which state governments offered subsidised food grains to the poor.

After establishing the historical antecedents of the MGNREGA and the PDS, this paper briefly reviews the politico-economic context of the emergence of these two initiatives in India. This includes the political and civil society imperatives that shaped the design and implementation of the schemes. Based on secondary data, the paper then examines the performance of the two programmes over time and across sub-national regions.

The paper offers some explanations for the trends observed and sub-national variations. Explanations are based on both existing literature and interviews with key informants in the bureaucracy, political elites and civil society activists in New Delhi, Tamil Nadu and Rajasthan. Women, Dalits and Adivasis, who generally constitute the poorest inhabitants of rural India, have disproportionately benefitted from the MGNREGA, weakening traditional relations of power. The provision of work has also helped lower rural poverty and distress migration while generating some productive assets. However, participation in MGNREGA never reached its guaranteed 100 days per year, and the number of person days worked as well as completion rates of commissioned projects have fallen. We point to the role of political interference and friction in bureaucratic processes, especially in poorer states, belying the rights-based character of the Act. Yet some poorer states perform relatively better due to favourable mediating institutions and actors, such as state-level political elites.

In relative contrast, purchases of basic food grains via the PDS by all households show an upward trend, post-2004. The problem of leakages continues in many regions; yet, some states increased public subsidies and universalised food entitlements, introduced pulses and edible oils into the basket of goods, and reformed the purchasing and delivery of food through better computerised displays of institutional performance. The findings stress the importance of institutions such as electoral democracy, judicial and civil society activism, social audits, and political parties in incentivising the implementation of these programmes.

In conclusion, the paper highlights the need for a more local-sensitive approach to policy design and greater political mobilisation of intended beneficiaries for rights-based welfare programmes to be effective in addressing social and economic insecurities of the poor.

**Keywords:** Judicial activism, civil society activism, political mobilisation over social protection, MGNREGA, NFSA, PDS, state capacity.





# 1. Background

Over much of the period between 2003 and 2018, India experienced one of the fastest growth rates in the world when the state had implemented a set of economic reforms that may be labelled as neo-liberal. Though contested in terms of magnitude and spatial spread, this was also a period that witnessed reductions in absolute poverty, as defined by official poverty lines. Contrary to conventional assumptions that globalisation under neoliberal growth regimes will undermine social welfare provisioning, there is growing evidence worldwide to suggest that the outcomes are more complex. Welfare spending does not necessarily decrease everywhere, despite other policy shifts that are indicative of neo-liberalisation (Rudra and Haggard 2005)<sup>1</sup>. In fact, Barrientos and Hulme (2009) point to a quiet revolution unfolding in the poorer countries with the rapid spread of social protection measures. Importantly, as Ferguson (2015) points out, such protection involves a set of non-contributory transfers, unbound to employment. Since 2000, India too, despite the neoliberal tilt, has seen a series of policies legislated by the state, aimed at expanding the domain of welfare, some of which were of a non-contributory nature (Ruparelia 2013; Mooij 2014). This chapter provides a critical overview of the drivers, design and implementation of two important poverty reduction strategies in India, a national public rural employment guarantee programme, under the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act 2005 (MGNREGA), and the public provision of subsidised food grains through the Public Distribution System (PDS). There are clear overlaps between the interventions in the domain of income security through public employment assurances and the domain of food security through public provisioning of food grains. Among the range of poverty reduction strategies launched in post-colonial India, these are, arguably, the two most significant in terms of coverage and impact. The primary responsibilities for their delivery, as with other social welfare programmes, rest with the sub-national (state) governments.

The paper is structured as follows. After establishing the historical antecedents of the two policies, we briefly review the politico-economic context of the emergence of the two initiatives in India, emphasising the proximate drivers of the two policies; this includes the political and civil society imperatives that shaped the design and implementation of the schemes. Based on secondary data, we then review performance of the two programmes over time, and across sub-national regions. We offer some explanations for the trends observed based on both existing literature and interviews with key informants in the bureaucracy, with political actors and civil society activists. To understand regional variations better, we then move onto a discussion of the implementation processes in two select states, Rajasthan and Tamil Nadu, occupying different locations on the human development indices spectrum in the country. The final section draws together the observations made to identify a few critical factors that shape poverty reduction policies, outcomes and implications for such policy interventions elsewhere.

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<sup>1</sup> Based on data for the period 1972-1997 in over 50 countries.

## 2. The Antecedents of the Rights to Work and to Food

India's experiments with social security measures can be traced back to the colonial period, with the initiation of famine relief measures in the late 19th century. Involving a combination of a public works programmes and the introduction of a rudimentary urban public distribution system, these measures, in response to the changing political economy, have since then been reworked and revamped in post-colonial India. Persistence of rural poverty despite a degree of economic growth and accompanying rural unrest, has been a critical driver of the initiation of further social welfare programmes, particularly since the mid-1960s. Furthermore, the inability to generate increases in productive employment has been compensated by a series of governmental measures that seek to provide a degree of social protection for the economically excluded. Between 1999–2000 and 2004–05, “formal” employment that ensures access to social security benefits and a degree of employment security accounted for less than 10% of the total employment in India and has further reduced since the initiation of liberalising reforms from the 1990s (Papola 2013; Sood, Nath and Ghosh 2014). Agriculture continues to account for the bulk of employment absorption and includes a large number of marginal landholders who combine self-employment with waged work to meet their livelihood requirements. Rapid reductions in the national income share for the agricultural sector has not been matched by corresponding reductions in the workforce employed in agriculture, reflected in the persistence of rural poverty. Though unemployment rates are not too high, under-employment continues to prevail. The Annual Employment-Unemployment Survey, 2013–14 showed that the unemployment rate was 4.9% (Labour Bureau 2014). However, among those in the labour force, only 60.5% could find employment for the entire 12 months.

Employment augmentation through public works programmes, support through subsidies and the promotion/protection of various kinds of self-employment – such as handloom weaving – innovations in the PDS and social security pensions for the marginalised are key components of such social protection measures initiated in India. The Constitution of India does not ensure a judicially enforceable fundamental right to work. However, the right is a part of the directive principles of the Constitution, which provide guidelines for the government to frame policies. Although they cannot be enforced judicially, they allow for the formulation of laws that can, in turn, be made enforceable. The MGNREGA, Right to Education Act and the National Food Security Act are examples of possibilities envisaged in the directive principles to ensure a degree of social protection, and how that can be translated into enforceable rights (Harriss 2013; Ruparelia 2013; Mooij 2014; Jenkins and Manor 2017).

Public works programmes in India have a long history. Among them, the Maharashtra Employment Guarantee Scheme (EGS), run by the Maharashtra government from 1972, is the most comprehensive and closest to the MGNREGA in terms of a rights-based construction. While most other programmes had a shelf-life of no more than a few years, this programme was re-constituted into a rights-based entitlement and continued for 20 years, inviting the attention of both policymakers and the academic community (Dev 1996; Hirway and Terhal 1994; Patel 2006; Jadhav 2006; Joshi and Moore 2000). Originally launched as a drought relief programme in the early 1970s, it was soon rescaled as an anti-poverty programme and granted a statutory basis through a law passed in the Maharashtra Legislative Assembly in 1977.

While some scholars view this as a poor substitute for proper land reforms and entrenchment of the interests of the rural landed elites, it was also seen as an empowering tool that opened spaces for staking claim among the rural poor.<sup>2</sup> However, such programmes were not without pitfalls. The Maharashtra EGS declined in terms of scope and demand over time. Moore and Jadhav (2006) identified the loss of political interest due to shifts in configurations of political power and “bureaucratic suppression” of demand by routinising implementation, as the two most important factors behind the decline. This also provided avenues for corruption and rent-seeking by, for instance, adding fictitious names to the rolls, paying workers less than the stipulated rates or allowing poor quality of infrastructure (Hirway and Terhal 1994), discrimination based on caste identities and landed elites using this programme to access labour to work on their lands (Patel 2006). Many of these observations have fed into innovations introduced into the MGNREGA.

In addition to such employment augmentation schemes, the public provisioning of subsidised food has been a key pillar of poverty alleviation measures in India. Although the National Food Security Act (NFSA) was passed only in 2013, a PDS to deliver subsidised food grains had been in place for much longer (Mooji 1998)<sup>3</sup>. Following food price inflation and famines after World War II, price stabilisation and rationing drove food distribution policies during the 1940s. With the establishment of the Food Corporation of India (FCI) and the Agricultural Prices Commission in 1964, which recommended a system of minimum support price (MSP), the focus was on attaining self-sufficiency in food grain production and income support to farmers. The period from 1965–1990 witnessed the expansion of the PDS throughout the country, particularly in rural areas, with 75% of ration shops being located there.

The post liberalisation period (1990s) marked the entry of targeted public distribution system (TPDS) in 1997, as part of the Structural Adjustment Programme to provide highly subsidised food grains to those families identified by state governments as living below poverty line (BPL) households. From 1999–2000, 31.3% of rural households and 19.9% of urban households consumed rice from the PDS (National Sample Survey Office, NSSO 2001). However, following a Supreme Court ruling in 2001, and regional political developments, several state governments undertook measures beyond the provisions of the TDPS to reduce leakages in the PDS through both institutional and infrastructural improvements. Regional governments such as Tamil Nadu, undivided Andhra Pradesh, Chhattisgarh and Himachal Pradesh, for example, have taken advantage of the PDS to appeal to the electorate promising the provision of highly subsidised food. This was followed by the passing of the National Food Security Act (NFSA) by the Indian government in 2013.

### **3. Drivers of the New Rights to Work and to Food**

#### **3.1. *The Right to Work***

The MGNREGA, estimated to cost 1% of the country’s GDP (Dreze 2011), was passed in Parliament in September 2005 and implemented in a phased manner from 2006. The Act guarantees a minimum of 100 days of employment for rural households annually, with a state-specific fixed minimum wage. Starting with 200 of the most backward

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<sup>2</sup> Material in this section is drawn largely from Dev (1996) and Hirway and Terhal (1994).

<sup>3</sup> The discussion on evolution of the PDS draws substantially from Mooji (1998).

districts, it was extended to 130 more districts within a year and then encompassed all the remaining districts by 2008 (Ministry of Rural Development 2012). The Act also prescribes the nature of work and its hierarchy of priorities, as follows:

*(i) water conservation and water harvesting; (ii) drought proofing (including afforestation and tree plantation); (iii) irrigation canals including micro and minor irrigation works; (iv) provision of irrigation facility, horticulture plantation and land development facilities to land owned by households belonging to the Scheduled Castes (SCs) and Scheduled Tribes (STs) or below poverty line (BPL) families or to the beneficiaries of land reforms or to the beneficiaries under the Indira Awas Yojana of GoI or that of the small farmers or marginal farmers as defined in the Agriculture Debt Waiver and Debt Relief Scheme, 2008; (v) renovation of traditional water bodies including desilting of tanks; (vi) land development; (vii) flood control and protection works including drainage in water logged areas; (viii) rural connectivity to provide all-weather access; and (ix) any other work which may be notified by the central government in consultation with the state government.*<sup>4</sup>

Even though there are strong overlaps with the Maharashtra Employment Guarantee Act, the MGNREGA introduced several innovative institutional measures and differed in design from previous national rural employment programmes, as follows:

- Unlike the earlier public works related employment programmes, the MGNREGA guarantees work as a right.
- It was seen as a post-clientelist programme, because it sought to reduce corruption by banning contractors and thus plug the leakage of resources to political brokers and local elites (Maiorano 2014).
- It is not targeted and offers work based on self-selection, avoiding the errors of omission that targeting entails.

It also stipulated that one-third of the employment offers must include women, and work has to be provided within a radius of 5 km from the place of residence. Since there should be a parity of wages between both men and women, it can also be seen as potentially effecting fundamental changes in rural social relations and undermining gender-based labour market segmentation. Furthermore, the wage rates notified under this Act are higher than the minimum wages and so, may serve as an institution around which rural wage bargaining may take place. To embed the programme within the local democratic structures, the Act mandates that at least 50% of the funds are to be spent by elected local bodies. The local bodies are also responsible for choosing the nature of work to be undertaken, based on the parameters prescribed in the works manual. Importantly, the assurance of employment also implies a degree of freedom for the rural poor from inter-locked markets that tie them into a vicious low wage yet high interest rate regime. The central government mostly finances the scheme. While it takes care of the entire cost of employing unskilled workers (hence, the wage component), it also contributes 75% of the material component. Under the Act, the wage to material ratio of the cost is to be maintained at 60:40, at the gram panchayat (GP) levels. Hence, the state government's liability increases as the work involves more material components and this, therefore, acts as a disincentive to deploy more materials.

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<sup>4</sup>Adapted from the MGNREGA Works Field Manual downloaded from [http://nrega.nic.in/mgnrega\\_works\\_draft\\_manual12.pdf](http://nrega.nic.in/mgnrega_works_draft_manual12.pdf). Accessed on 1 September 2015.

### **3.2 The PDS and NFSA**

Even though the PDS has been around for a long time, and despite a commitment to universal food security on the parts of the two successive UPA governments (2004–2014), it was only in 2013 that the NFSA was passed. Section 3 (1) of the NFSA states that, “Every person belonging to priority households, identified under sub-section (1) of section 10, shall be entitled to receive five kilograms of food grains per person per month at subsidised prices specified in Schedule I from the State Government under the Targeted Public Distribution System in addition to special provisions for pregnant and lactating women and children below the age of six to ensure improved nutrition.” The Act specifies the criteria for 17 categories of “priority” households that include BPL households, scheduled caste (SC) and scheduled tribe (ST) households, those residing in slums and temporary shelters and single women with dependent children. Together, it is supposed to cover up to 75% of rural households and 50% of the urban population. However, unlike the MNREGA, the provisions of the NFSA are targeted when compared to the original National Food Security Bill, which extended universal entitlements.

#### **3.2.1. Drivers of the NFSA**

Civil society actors play a critical role in the domain of food security. The political purchase for a food for work programme increased following a public interest litigation (PIL) filed by the People’s Union for Civil Liberties (PUCL) – a civil society organization – in the wake of large scale droughts in the country in 2001, even as there were 60 million tonnes of accumulated stocks in the godowns of the Food Corporation of India (Interview with Kavita Srivastava, PUCL, April 2016). The Supreme Court, in what is considered a landmark interim order, in November 2001, converted the benefits under the PDS and other social welfare programmes into legal entitlements (Interview with Kavita Srivastava, PUCL, April 2016).

The NFSA was on the agenda of the second term of the Congress-led UPA government but, by then the global crises undermined the fiscal leeway available for implementation. This was compounded by the fact that the programme implementation was even more challenging in terms of both financial and institutional architectures. Although Sonia Gandhi managed to overcome resistance within her party, the parliamentary committee and the cabinet eroded the bill, and what was passed was a diluted version of the bill proposed by NAC (Interview with Harsh Mander, March 2016). Although farmers’ welfares and ensuring agricultural incomes were some of the key elements of the Bharatiya Janata Party’s (BJP) election manifesto, once the BJP assumed power in 2014, the Act appeared to be pushed less seriously, similar to the case of MGNREGA. However, this was countered by civil society organisations, especially in the context of the drought affecting several states.

In the next section, we map the financial and physical trends in the performance of the MGNREGA and PDS, and their regional variations for some of the indicators. Since the NFSA is in the early stages of implementation, we focus on the existing PDS.

## 4. The Rights-Based Approach in Practice: Trends and Regional Variations

### 4.1. MGNREGA: Performance and Issues

The demand for MGNREGA has demonstrated fluctuations, with demand falling by nearly 27% between 2012–13 and 2015–16, followed by a revival in 2016–17 (Table 1). The most reason cited to explain this decrease are delayed payments, as workers work within a tight expenditure schedule and cannot afford to wait long periods for payments. Another factor has been the bureaucratic repression of demand. Work plans are approved and sanctioned only at the last moment, the timing of fund flow from the central to the state to the local governments is critical. Another source of delay is the new requirement to transfer cash through bank accounts, which poses considerable hurdles in poorer states with weak banking infrastructures.

Even though the share of women workers increased during this period, the shares of SCs and STs have declined. Nevertheless, it must be emphasised that SCs, STs and women are over-represented in MGNREGA employment in relation to their respective shares in the population, suggesting that the programme does positively impact extremely vulnerable households. The average number of employment days generated have not gone beyond 50, and in fact declined by nearly 14% between 2009–10 and 2013–14. Tables 1 and 2 provide an idea of the scope and outlays of the scheme in the last five years.

**Table 1 Physical Achievements under MGNREGA in India (2008–09 to 2013–14)**

	2008–09	2009–10	2010–11	2011–12	2012–13	2013–14
Total job cards issued (in Cr)	10.01	11.25	11.98	12.50	12.79	13.13
Employment provided to households (in Cr)	4.51	5.26	5.49	5.06	4.98	4.76
Person days (in Cr)	216	284	257	219	230	220
Scheduled castes	63.36 [29%]	86.45 [30%]	78.76 [31%]	48.47 [22%]	50.96 [22%]	49.26 [23%]
Scheduled tribes	55.02 [25%]	58.74 [21%]	53.62 [21%]	40.92 [19%]	40.75 [18%]	37.22 [17%]
Women	103.57 [48%]	136.40 [48%]	122.74 [48%]	105.27 [48%]	117.93 [51%]	115.15 [53%]
Person days per household	48 days	54 days	47 days	43 days	46 days	46 days

Source: Ministry of Rural Development, Government of India. 2014. *Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act*. [http://nrega.nic.in/Netnrega/WriteReaddata/Circulars/PRC%205-6%20Jun%2014%20v2%2030%20MAY%2014\\_version-4\\_Final.pdf](http://nrega.nic.in/Netnrega/WriteReaddata/Circulars/PRC%205-6%20Jun%2014%20v2%2030%20MAY%2014_version-4_Final.pdf). Consulted on August 25, 2015.

Table 2 provides an overview of the trends in expenses incurred from 2006–07 to 2013–14. As seen, although the amount spent against the budget outlay has increased marginally, this is not reflected in the amount of employment generated. Variations in political commitments to the programme have led to delays, especially with the UPA II

losing power to the NDA in 2014. Lack of initial enthusiasm on the part of the new government is supposed to have further contributed to this decline in offtake. It has been reported that the NDA government delayed transferring money to the states (Interview with Ashok Pankaj, CSD, March 2016). However, electoral reverses at the sub-national level, like in Bihar, for the ruling political party is held to have contributed a change in attitude within the new government. Since then, the government has sought to sustain the populist appeal of the programme but with an emphasis on the asset creation aspect of it. Apart from electoral pressures, lobbying by one of the leading business associations in India, the Federation of Indian Chambers of Commerce and Industry (FICCI) to address the slackening rural demand further contributed to the revived interest in implementation of the MGNREGA (Interview with government official, New Delhi, March 2016).

**Table 2 Trends in Expenditure on MGNREGA in India (2006–07 to 2013–14)**

	<b>FY 06–07</b>	<b>FY 07–08</b>	<b>FY 08–09</b>	<b>FY 09–10</b>	<b>FY 10–11</b>	<b>FY 11–12</b>	<b>FY 12–13</b>	<b>FY 13–14</b>
Budget outlay (In Cr)	11300	12000	30000	39100	40100	31000	30287	33000
Central release (In Cr)	8640	12610	29939	33506	35768	29189	30009	32743
Total available funds (In Cr)	12073	19305	37397	49579	54172	48805	45051	42265
Expenditure (In Cr) [% against available funds]	8823 [73%]	15856 [82%]	27250 [73%]	37905 [76%]	39377 [73%]	37072 [76%]	39657 [88%]	37468 [89%]
Expenditure on wages (In Cr)	5842 [68%]	10738 [70%]	18200 [69%]	25579 [70%]	25686 [68%]	24306 [70%]	27128 [72%]	26096 [74%]
Expenditure on materials (In Cr)	2758 [32%]	4617 [30%]	8100 [31%]	11084 [30%]	11891 [32%]	10650 [30%]	10403 [28%]	9159 [26%]

Source: Ministry of Rural Development, Government of India. 2014. *Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act*. [http://nrega.nic.in/Netnrega/WriteReaddata/Circulars/PRC%205-6%20Jun%2014%20v2%2030%20MAY%2014\\_version-4\\_Final.pdf](http://nrega.nic.in/Netnrega/WriteReaddata/Circulars/PRC%205-6%20Jun%2014%20v2%2030%20MAY%2014_version-4_Final.pdf). Consulted on August 25, 2015.

However, the implementation has not been without pitfalls. Despite the Act identifying an important role for GPs, and designing it as demand-driven, it is generally believed that the quality of functioning of GPs and the demand for work under MGNREGA do not correlate. The quality of district administration, such as district collectors, or the state governments tend to influence outcomes better. To that extent, the creation of demand has been more of a top-driven bureaucratic effort. Another factor is the role of state level political elites in utilising the Act to strengthen their position or enhance their appeal among the electorate. A rights-based approach, according to interviewees, may also not work in areas where the poor have not experienced engagement with the state on the basis of rights. The following are some issues in the implementation of the scheme.



*a) Shortfall in Access to Employment:*

In a survey on employment and unemployment in the country, the NSSO collected details on employment provided under MGNREGA. Despite the scheme being a rights-based one and work allocation done based on self-selection, 18.8% of those who were registered under the programme seeking work were denied, indicating problems of access (NSSO 2014).

*b) Regional Variations:*

In 2009–10, rationing rates in poorer states, such as Bihar and Uttar Pradesh, was as high as 78.5% and 53.6%, respectively, and was less than 25% only in Rajasthan, Tamil Nadu and Himachal Pradesh (Dutta *et al* 2012). In 2011–12, unmet demand was more than 20% in West Bengal, Jharkhand, Odisha and Rajasthan, and even lower in poorer states of Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh and Uttar Pradesh (NSSO 2014). A relatively higher share of demand was also not met in states that had lower poverty ratios such as Punjab and Rajasthan. Although poverty levels were low in Tamil Nadu, unmet demand was less than 10%, indicating state level efficiency in responding to demands (NSSO 2014). The relationship between demand and state responses indicate the importance of mediating institutions. There are state-level differences in the expenditure made on materials used, wage rates and promptness of payment, and also in the share of women and SC/ST in the employment generated (Table 3).

**Table 3 Average Number of Days Worked, Average Wage Rate, Wage Payment within 15 Days, Share of Material Component and Share of Women in Person Days in MGNREGS, State-Wise in 2015–16**

States		Avg. days of employment provided per household	Avg. wage rate	Notified wage rates	% of payments generated within 15 days	Material (%)	Work completion rate	Percentage of person-days worked by women
<b>North</b>	Haryana	28.73	253.32	251	31.79	22.55	31.43	45.13
	Himachal	41.93	161.21	168.83	28.93	23.37	54.01	63.15
	Jammu & Kashmir	48.45	163.89	164	13.02	52.24	33.84	25.28
	Punjab	30.45	205.76	210	14.13	20.21	44.6	57.99
	Rajasthan	55.47	116.41	173	46.48	18.26	17.06	69.02
	Uttarakhand	41.13	160.97	161	23.64	32.14	38.75	51.73
<b>Central</b>	Chhattisgarh	46.64	152.8	159	7.81	28.67	31.98	49.02
	Madhya Pradesh	45.8	149.84	159	28.08	35.53	55.77	43.15
	Uttar Pradesh	33.53	160.88	169.59	19.9	18.61	35.41	29.52
<b>East</b>	Bihar	45.11	176.8	162	15.52	32.75	12.36	40.85
	Jharkhand	52.01	161.97	162	71.49	30.6	50.42	32.74
	Odisha	44.78	188.02	174	37.09	20.53	37.05	38.02
	West Bengal	46.88	169.91	174	16.38	22.11	20.87	46.28
<b>North-East</b>	Arunachal	27.84	167.14	167	6.52	36.11	23.44	31.64
	Assam	32.38	178.94	177.68	18.58	35.44	4.91	33.58
	Manipur	15.9	189.96	177.68	83.14	33.11	88.71	37.26
	Meghalaya	54.21	162.87	163	0.76	27.5	71.04	42.92
	Mizoram	68.95	183	177.68	73.22	13.63	97.75	37.68
	Nagaland	50.81	166.98	167	4.89	30.13	92.4	31.28
	Sikkim	66.98	168.73	167	42.14	37.94	14.07	47.57

	Tripura	94.46	159.15	167	57.68	30.02	80.87	50.11
<b>West</b>	Goa	18.16	203	208	31.2	23.95	58.74	76.9
	Gujarat	40.49	158.49	178	34.48	23.31	52.42	46.21
	Maharashtra	59.87	175.43	181	35.15	25.32	27.69	44.52
<b>South</b>	Andhra Pradesh	55.2	129.5	180	79.23	39.42	61.67	57.78
	Telangana	55.28	127.09	-	66.32	14.1	38.51	60.76
	Karnataka	48.44	203.7	204	29.83	35.23	38.7	47.12
	Kerala	49.26	231.82	229	18.5	2.3	81.69	91.27
	Tamil Nadu	60.9	133.45	177.68	32.05	23.07	83.89	85.2
<b>All India</b>	48.85		154.09	-	36.97	25.8	42.08	55.26

Source: Ministry of Rural Development, Management Information System

Although the scheme guarantees 100 days of work per rural household, no state other than Tripura was able to achieve it. As Tripura has a low level of industrialisation, stagnation in agriculture and lack of employment opportunities, the scheme received strong political support from the Left Front government in Tripura, due to its ability to generate employment and reduce poverty (Bhowmik and Bose 2015). North Eastern states of Mizoram and Sikkim were able to provide 68.95 and 66.98 days, on an average, followed by Tamil Nadu (60.9 days). The average wage paid to workers was equal to or more than the notified wage in Haryana, Kerala, Bihar, Jharkhand, Odisha and North Eastern states. Payment of wages at rates below the notified rates suggests that the rights-based entitlement can be genuinely so, only when collective action strengthens. This points to another important concern expressed by a key informant about the effectiveness of a rights-based programme in the absence of a sound judicial infrastructure. Work completion rate was one of highest in Tamil Nadu, Kerala and some of the North Eastern states, and lower than the national average in Rajasthan and Bihar. This has been attributed to the level of technical capacity at the GP level, which is crucial in planning and operationalising the work (Interview with Ashok Pankaj, CSD, March 2016). The data on the share of women in person-days worked show that Kerala, Tamil Nadu, Goa, Rajasthan and Himachal Pradesh had a high proportion of women person days. Next, the stipulation that the government should pay workers within two weeks is routinely violated. It is only in few states, such as Manipur, Andhra Pradesh, Mizoram and Jharkhand that most workers are paid within two weeks of work completion.

One of the most citizen empowering features of the MGNREGA was social audits, which were meant to ensure downward accountability of the scheme by enabling citizens to monitor the scheme and challenge the government about discrepancies and corruption. Data from the MGNREGA management information system indicate the poor implementation of social audits in the country, with only 40.8% of social audits having been completed in the financial year of 2015–16. This pattern suggests that there is resistance to social audits from the sub-national governments.

*c) Asset Creation:*

A major criticism levelled against MGNREGA is the inadequate emphasis on work completion with less than half of the work being completed in most states. While the employment dimension of the Act is seen as a reasonable success, outcomes of the asset creation objective have therefore been mixed (Ministry of Rural Development, Government of India 2012). Thus, it has often been criticised for merely transferring money without creating assets. Criticisms notwithstanding, recent studies on this count (Narayanan 2016<sup>5</sup>; Ranaware et al 2015; Khera 2016<sup>6</sup>) state that while the initial emphasis was more on job creation, over time, it shifted to asset creation. This has been propelled by two policy moves by the government; first an expansion of the list of works that can be undertaken under the Act including work on private lands, and second, encouraging convergence works. Convergence refers to the combination of MGNREGA programmes with other government programmes to create assets. The initiative, as Narayanan (2016) pointed out, has led to the creation of new rural livelihood options, improved productivity in agriculture and, importantly, expanded water related infrastructure through a range of measures. A study conducted by the Indian Institute of Science in four states, using assessments of ecological, socioeconomic and physical indicators – such as groundwater, soil and organic carbon and biomass estimation – and household surveys, demonstrated that assets created through MGNREGS work on water and land development have helped improve groundwater levels, increase availability of water for irrigation, increased areas

<sup>5</sup>[http://www.ideasforindia.in/article.aspx?article\\_id=1596](http://www.ideasforindia.in/article.aspx?article_id=1596) downloaded on 15/1/2017.

<sup>6</sup><http://indianexpress.com/article/opinion/columns/mgnrega-digging-holes-filling-them-up/> downloaded on 15/1/2017.

under irrigation and improved the availability of drinking water for humans and livestock (Esteaves *et al* 2013). Findings from research in Maharashtra reveal the importance of assets created through MGNREGA for agriculture, dietary diversity and diversification of economic activity into horticulture and pisciculture as well as improved irrigation and drinking water facilities (Ranaware *et al* 2015). Interestingly, although there are models of asset creation, such as the creation of dry wells in Jharkhand, no single state has simultaneously witnessed robust employment generation, asset creation and GP generating demand (interview with key informant, March 2016). Table 4 shows that at the GP level, the largest number of assets were created under rural sanitation (1046283), irrigation facilities for SCs and STs (1511796) and water conservation and water harvesting (795796).

**Table 4 Assets created under MGNREGS, all India, 2016-17**

<b>Category</b>	<b>Gram Panchayat</b>	<b>Block Panchayat</b>	<b>Zilla Parishad</b>
<b>Flood control</b>	91654	1718	297
<b>Rural connectivity</b>	418059	15163	3694
<b>Water conservation and water harvesting</b>	795796	9512	2664
<b>Renovation of traditional water bodies</b>	296706	3391	371
<b>Drought proofing</b>	695757	29701	10553
<b>Irrigation canals</b>	133635	2050	2542
<b>Irrigation facilities to SC/ST/IAY/LR</b>	1511796	63676	3951
<b>Land development</b>	450428	4136	792
<b>Other works</b>	77622	9874	4808
<b>Rajiv Gandhi Seva Kendra</b>	9154	62	0
<b>Coastal areas</b>	525	1	
<b>Rural drinking water</b>	113192	457	
<b>Fisheries</b>	3824	352	
<b>Rural sanitation</b>	1046283	7379	

Source: Ministry of Rural Development, Government of India. The Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act 2005, [http://mnregaweb4.nic.in/netnrega/writereaddata/citizen\\_out/wrkstatlink\\_1617.html](http://mnregaweb4.nic.in/netnrega/writereaddata/citizen_out/wrkstatlink_1617.html)

## 4.2. PDS Performance

The expenditure on food and public distribution has increased in absolute terms between 2004–05 and 2013–14 and also marginally as a percentage of the GDP. However, it had declined from 2005–06 but picked up from 2008–09 onwards, which were the years of global financial crises and food price inflation (Table 5).

**Table 5 Trends in Expenditure on Food and Public Distribution as Percentage of GDP in India (2004–05 to 2014–15)**

Years	2004-05	2005-06	2006-07	2007-08	2008-09	2009-10	2010-11	2011-12	2012-13	2013-14
Expenditure as percentage of GDP	0.88	0.69	0.62	0.69	0.84	0.97	0.98	0.88	0.92	0.89

Note: GDP is at current prices.

Source: Union Expenditure Budget, various years.

The incidence of purchases of rice, wheat and sugar from the PDS among all households shows an upward trend between 2004-05 and 2011-12, in rural and urban areas, attesting to the important role that the PDS has played in protecting the real incomes of households during periods of food inflation (NSSO 2015). Drèze and Khera (2013), using the National Sample Survey data from 2009–10 and the Tendulkar poverty line, estimate that the PDS had made for considerable inroads into rural poverty reduction, and accounted for 17.6% reduction in the poverty gap index.

### 4.2.1. Regional Variations

Some states undertook substantive PDS reforms such as the rejection of BPL/APL distinction in entitlements, expansion of coverage at state's expense, reduction in issue price, introduction of pulses and edible oils at subsidised prices, de-privatisation of ration shops, doorstep deliveries and computerisation of PDS transactions (Khera 2011). In 2006, Tamil Nadu universalised the PDS and removed the BPL/APL distinctions in accessing subsidised food grains, and 20 kg of rice was supplied at Re 1/kg. In 2011, Tamil Nadu went even further, and 20kg of rice was given free-of-cost to households who opted for the PDS. There was an expansion of the PDS in Chhattisgarh, Odisha and Rajasthan by increasing the number of BPL cards per fair price shop (FPS). The commission paid to FPS dealers was increased in Rajasthan and Andhra Pradesh, which reduced the incentive for corruption. Furthermore, Tamil Nadu installed end-to-end computerisation of the PDS, which enabled better monitoring (Khera 2011). Regional variations on different aspects of the PDS are thus evident. Table 6 demonstrates the differences in households' access to the PDS. The PDS tends to work well in states that are predominantly rice consuming and particularly among the South Indian states, which have had a long history of a functional PDS. It is also interesting to note that Tamil Nadu, despite relatively lower poverty levels, demonstrated a stronger commitment to food security compared to poorer states; Rajasthan performs poorly on the PDS.

**Table 6 Percentage of households reporting consumption from the Public Distribution Systems during 30 Days in India, State-wise, 2011–12**

States		Rice		Wheat		Sugar		Kerosene	
		R	U	R	U	R	U	R	U
<b>North</b>	Haryana	0.8	0.1	19.3	8.9	9.2	5.5	17.0	4.6
	Himachal Pradesh	86.6	36.3	81.0	38.4	90.9	46.9	31.3	7.4
	Jammu & Kashmir	74.8	60.7	56.9	41.6	87.4	76.3	63.2	27.8
	Punjab	0.2	0.2	22.8	7.0	0.6	0.7	18.0	3.9
	Rajasthan	0.8	0.8	28.7	16.9	4.9	2.4	77.6	19.1
	Uttarakhand	61.9	265	66.4	36.4	85.1	56.0	77.2	329
<b>Central</b>	Chhattisgarh	67.0	41.5	25.2	24.7	65.9	35.6	86.1	47.9
	Madhya Pradesh	30.5	17.6	36.2	23.4	31.7	19.3	71.8	31.9
	Uttar Pradesh	24.8	7.2	25.7	16.6	18.2	5.7	85.0	47.7
<b>East</b>	Bihar	45.0	19.0	44.6	18.9	1.9	2.2	88.2	52.6
	Jharkhand	33.3	5.1	0.8	0.5	0.8	0.6	62.3	20.4
	Odisha	54.4	17.9	10.6	12.2	31.4	11.7	77.7	36.7
	West Bengal	35.2	11.4	43.5	19.2	14.9	6.3	91.1	59.1
<b>Northeast</b>	Arunachal Pradesh	73.5	54.3	3.9	5.8	30.7	34.1	26.1	14.8
	Assam	52.7	26.5	6.8	1.4	70.7	40.6	77.9	44.2
	Manipur	5.5	3.8	0	0.1	6.8	3.5	34.6	28.1
	Meghalaya	68.5	31.7	1.7	2.1	62.0	29.6	56.9	8.5
	Mizoram	97.2	85.7	6.7	12.5	80.3	82.7	47.2	39.7
	Nagaland	14.7	8.3	0.1	1.2	1.4	0	7.4	2.4
	Sikkim	56.1	3.4	3.0	0	66.8	40.3	56.5	4.6
	Tripura	86.5	55.8	14.7	15.3	89.8	76.6	95.7	67.3
<b>West</b>	Goa	71.9	45.5	38.2	23.5	0	1.1	52.4	25.9
	Gujarat	34.9	5.0	31.6	5.7	31.7	4.0	64.6	10.3
	Maharashtra	43.3	9.6	40.4	10.0	15.1	2.5	64.7	17.6
<b>South</b>	Andhra Pradesh	86.6	45.2	10.5	6.9	81.8	42.3	80.8	31.9
	Karnataka	75.2	32.7	71.5	30.3	67.1	26.7	79.5	25.7
	Kerala	78.2	60.5	54.3	43.2	28.3	17.4	75.3	55.9
	Tamil Nadu	89.1	66.6	61.8	49.0	90.1	77.3	74.8	35.9
<b>All-India</b>		45.9	23.3	33.9	19.0	33.7	20.6	75.6	30.0

Note: R stands for rural and U for urban

Source: Public Distribution System and other sources of Household Consumption, 2011-12 (NSSO 2015).

### **4.3. Explanations for Regional Variations**

#### **4.3.1. Regional Collective Action**

Apart from inter-state variations in the efficacy and coverage of PDS and employment generated under MGNREGA, there are also variations in the extent and nature of schemes developed and implemented by regional governments. Explanations are to be therefore sought in regional political economy, as suggested by Harriss (1999). Harriss categorised states based on the source of political power that ruling parties draw from and the extent of their stability and argued for the importance of the two factors in shaping social protection policies of sub-national governments. Based on this scheme, he attributes the emergence of more pro-active welfare regimes in states such as Tamil Nadu, Kerala and West Bengal, compared to other states, to the source of political power in lower caste and class mobilisation over a long period. Drèze and Sen (2013) too stress the role of “public action” in explaining Tamil Nadu’s relatively high achievements in the domain of human development and poverty reduction. The role of socialist movements in Maharashtra and Karnataka in the implementation of state-specific employment generation schemes also suggest the importance of collective regional action.

#### **4.3.2. Regional Political Imperatives**

Chopra (2015) suggested a political framework that provides agency to regional political elites by privileging the “motivations” and “interests” of the implementing actors. She emphasised the agency and motivation of dominant political actors within a region to explain regional differences in implementation. Discussing the case of MGNREGA, she attributed variations in the extent of implementations across four states to political motivation of state level elites. While the bureaucratic will could be observed in the set of implementation practices that were put in place, the practices need to be ensured through political elites and party functionaries.

Maiorano (2014) illustrated this dynamic at work through the case of the Andhra Pradesh chief minister who was keen on utilising the MGNREGA as a means to secure political power, even as there were accusations of corruption and rent-seeking against him. While the state had performed quite badly with respect to previous public employment schemes, there has been a shift which, according to him, came about primarily due to the ability of the leadership to perceive a possibility for political mileage. That the scheme was better implemented in constituencies where ruling party MLAs were in power, lends more credence to this argument. Agency, according to this perspective, lies more among regional political elites than with the poor.

Mooij (1998) too alluded to electoral considerations as the prime mover of food policies in the southern states, although she does not discount the role of collective action in the context of Kerala. In the other South Indian states, according to her, food policy became an instrument of political clientelism. Aiyar and Walton (2014) highlighted a combination of regional political economy and judicial activism in explaining improvements in delivery under PDS in Chhattisgarh, a state that ranks poorly on most other parameters. They pointed out that state level reforms had been implemented prior to the Supreme Court ruling (Aiyar and Walton 2014).



### 4.3.3 Variations in State Capacity

State capacity is another major factor in better implementation. Based on an analysis of unit level NSSOs' 66th round data, Datta *et al* (2012) suggested that unmet demand was higher in poorer states due to fiscal constraints, poor administrative capacity and lower degree of empowerment among the poor. Among all the states, Tamil Nadu has the highest number of government staff per 1000 population at 14 per 1000 (Interview with NC Saxena, March 2016), indicating the importance of such capacity. Lack of skills to ensure quality of assets created is another area of concern cited in interviews. This in fact largely explains the phenomenon of work completion. In order to beef up capacity, there has been an increase in the share of MGNREGA budget from 2% to 6% for employing additional staff. Another important issue that needs to be factored is that not all states may have the fiscal leeway to expand their social welfare programmes, hinting at the importance of revenue mobilisation as a constraining factor in instituting such state-level welfare measures.

In the case of PDS too, the importance of fiscal capacity to ensure provisioning more than that allowed for by the central government becomes critical, even in instances where there is a strong political demand for such provisioning. The central government supplies a fixed quantum of grains to the states at subsidised rates, which, however, may be insufficient if the regional government wants to move from a targeted to a universal PDS. To understand the sources of regional variations better, we explore some of these issues in the case of two states through primary fieldwork among national and state-level bureaucrats as well as civil society and political actors.

## 5. Tamil Nadu and Rajasthan: Understanding Regional Variations

Tamil Nadu and Rajasthan are two states located at either ends of the spectrum of human development. While Tamil Nadu ranks third among all Indian states, going by the parameters developed for the 2015 global human development report, Rajasthan's human development index is below the all-India average, and is the fifth lowest among the 17 major states.<sup>7</sup> Rajasthan is also home to the Mazdoor Kisan Shakti Sangathan (MKSS), a strong civil society movement among the rural poor. Key actors from the MKSS were involved in the design of the MGNREGA and NFSA. Rajasthan, with a long history of periodic droughts and a tradition of drought relief from the 1940s, was in many ways well positioned to implement the MGNREGS (Interview with journalist, April 2016; Jenkins and Manor 2017). Both the Right to Information (RTI) and MGNREGS, in fact, had their origins in drought relief public works in the state (Interview with Nikhil Dey, April 2016). Tamil Nadu, on the other hand, is known for its long-term politics around food, having been a pioneer in the case of offering free meals in public schools. Attributed to a combination of a long history of lower caste mobilisation and resultant collective action and "competitive populism" engaged in by the two dominant political parties (Wyatt 2013; Srinivasan 2010), Tamil Nadu is seen as a model for its ability to combine economic growth with relatively high levels of human development. The state has one of the best social security nets with arguably the best public distribution system in the country.

<sup>7</sup><http://www.livemint.com/Politics/3KhGMVXGxXcGYBRMsmDCFO/Why-Kerala-is-like-Maldives-and-Uttar-Pradesh-Pakistan.html> downloaded on 7, July 2016.

## 5.1. MGNREGA in Tamil Nadu and Rajasthan

Both Tamil Nadu and Rajasthan have witnessed a decline in total households worked, person days generated and percentage of workers who received wages within 15 days during this period (Table 7). This can be attributed to reduction of central outlays till 2014–15. Tamil Nadu does better than Rajasthan on most parameters except in the case of timely payment of wages. While it did well in the initial years of MGNREGS, Rajasthan's performance is consistently poorer than that of Tamil Nadu. The fall in person days generated in Rajasthan, according to a key state government official, was not caused by a lack of demand but by centre-state fund flow problems. Although there is talk of declining demand for MGNREGS in Rajasthan, it is more a question of how one captures demand rather than the absence of it (Interview with Government Official, April 2016). Furthermore, delayed payments have discouraged workers, which has affected demand and the state government was not proactive in obtaining money from the centre (Interview with MKSS activists, April 2016). Problems of incentives were also cited earlier because of the need for better monitoring mechanisms to reduce rent-seeking, which may have also contributed to this decline (Jenkins and Manor 2017).

**Table 7 MGNREGS indicators in Tamil Nadu and Rajasthan, 2008-09 to 2015-16**

Indicators	2008-09	2009-10	2010-11	2011-12	2012-13	2013-14	2014-15	2015-16
<b>Average days of employment provided per household</b>								
Tamil Nadu	16.28	54.67	54.05	47.51	57.8	58.67	47.36	60.9
Rajasthan	16.53	68.97	51.64	46.6	52.25	50.86	45.74	55.47
<b>Percentage of payments generated within 15 days (%)</b>								
Tamil Nadu	-	-	-	-	99.14	78.27	27.43	32.05
Rajasthan	-	-	-	-	53.07	14.95	40.62	46.48
<b>Percentage of work completed (%)</b>								
Tamil Nadu	19.82	38.71	45.61	19.82	54.95	32.64	30.66	35.83
Rajasthan	7.79	45.39	26.25	7.79	22.92	20.48	38.44	14.25
<b>Percentage of person days worked by women (%)</b>								
Tamil Nadu	76.77	82.91	82.59	74.02	74.15	83.94	85.36	85.2
Rajasthan	63.81	66.89	68.34	69.17	68.95	67.76	68.26	69.02
<b>Percentage of person days worked by scheduled caste (%)</b>								
Tamil Nadu	27.85	59.07	57.71	28.88	31.37	29.66	28.94	28.28
Rajasthan	5.02	26.53	25.5	16.76	19.67	19.85	19.71	20.84
<b>Labour cost (%)</b>								
Tamil Nadu	100	100	100	99.75	98.9	98.35	95.81	90.11
Rajasthan	70.65	67.65	72.44	63.05	70.66	69.39	68.48	77.98

Source: MoRD, MGNREGA MIS

In Rajasthan, the scheme is demand driven in the lean season (Interview with Sarpanch and Project Officer, April 2016). The farmers' lobbies have been influential in suppressing MGNREGS work during peak agricultural season, in agriculturally advanced

districts like Tonk, as farmers perceive a labour shortage during peak seasons (Interview with large farmer/Congress party member, Sikar, April 2016). In fact, they persuaded the government to issue an order to stop MGNREGS work during peak season, as they needed labour to work on their farms (Interview with Mohan Kumar, IDS Jaipur, April 2016).

Importantly, the presence of the MKSS and its long-term engagement with such programmes ensured some innovations that led to better implementation. A key example is the appointment of “female mates” or female work supervisors that reduced harassment or other barriers for women to participate (Jenkins and Manor 2017). When the scheme began, there were no women work site supervisors in Rajasthan, but by 2016 there were 38,000 of them due to the government’s efforts to encourage women’s participation in MGNREGS (Interview with Government Official, April 2016). Further measures of accountability, like provision of work within 15 days after demand receipt is issued, has created pressure among state officers to perform (Interview with Government Official, April 2016). Rajasthan has therefore witnessed a reduction in delayed wage payments from nearly 85% in 2013–14 to nearly 54% by 2015–16. The material component in Rajasthan was within the government norms, though it was higher than that of Tamil Nadu, which is due to Rajasthan’s focus on building quality assets. This emphasis on quality community assets has translated into benefits for rural households in Rajasthan. A special survey by the NSSO on MGNREGA in three states, namely Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh and undivided Andhra Pradesh, showed that 99.9% households in Rajasthan used community assets created through MGNREGA work (NSSO 2012). Jenkins and Manor (2017) also pointed that the activist movements helped ensure quality and nature of assets created in Rajasthan, as it was more demand driven and the choice of work reflected the needs of the population. Since the creation of good quality assets necessitates a higher than mandated expenditure on the material component, the expenditure is borne by other departments. The category of works under which convergence was higher in Rajasthan are construction of anganwadis, food godowns, large playgrounds in government schools, information technology centres and soil and water conservation. (Interview with Government Officials, April 2016). In Rajasthan, the government decided to encourage MGNREGS work on one lakh women SHG members’ land, as it was felt that women would not mind working on each other’s lands (Interview with Government Official, April 2016). However, the foray into creation of durable assets which involve the use of machines have seen a fall out in workers’ interest and are inimical to the rights-based nature of the scheme. The use of earth moving equipment (JCBs) has reduced employment opportunities for workers, as they have very little work to undertake. While in the earlier phase, people waited from 4 am to demand work, they are found to be less inclined according to activists (Interview with Nikhil Dey, April 2016).

Despite some resentment among large farmers, the programme is seen in a positive light by small and marginal farmers, given the prevalent agrarian distress. It has benefitted them through soil and water conservation works like deepening of wells, renovation of water bodies and contour bunding, and increasing agricultural productivity. Nearly 200–300 farms in the area have benefitted from contour bunding, and farmers were able to cultivate moong and bajra even though rainfall was poor (Interview with MKSS activist, April 2016).

In the case of Tamil Nadu, there was less enthusiasm initially for the scheme as it was a central scheme but soon the regional party in power realised the political mileage that it can bring. The state is recognised to be endowed with a good bureaucratic capacity, and this helped the political elites to drive the programme. Going by estimates that 29% of rural households were BPL families, the government pushed to enrol at least 30% of the

households in the scheme. Although the initial response was lukewarm, there was a belief that getting a job card also was essential to get a television set that was promised by the newly elected government in its poll manifesto. A crucial decision made was to take up only 100% labour intensive works to reduce corruption in terms of material procurement, and because there was enough labour-intensive public works that could be undertaken without material investments. The state government had already started a programme for creating village ponds for rainwater storing and ground water repletion, and MGNREGA work could easily be dovetailed into that scheme. Furthermore, there are several minor canals in the state meant for irrigation that require desilting which could be done primarily with labour. Finally, since the entire wage bill for unskilled workers is to be borne by the central government, it would not affect the budget of the state government and this was important given the number of social assistance programmes that the state had undertaken.

Efforts were also taken to ensure that all habitations are covered in every village. This meant that caste discrepancies within villages could be addressed by ensuring that work sites are distributed across all habitations. The state was the first to conduct time and motion studies to fix up work completion norms for wage payment. While in many states wages were paid on a time-rate basis, the state's development of standards for piece-rates was then picked up by the centre and adapted. The state also put in place one of the best monitoring systems in the country that allows high level officials to keep track of any delays in offering employment. Social audits as a means of monitoring has however not taken off in the state as much as it has happened in neighbouring Andhra Pradesh.

In Tamil Nadu, apart from the pressure from the top to ensure enrolment, there were also efforts by political parties, like the Communist party, who saw in this an opportunity to engage with the rural poor and enlist their support by helping them enrol. In the state, ground level political mobilisations cannot thus be ignored in explaining this process. Furthermore, senior officials in the bureaucracy point out that since lower level bureaucracy increasingly comprise members of lower castes due to effective implementation of affirmative action policies, they are in a better position to respond to ground level issues in terms of implementation and ensuring better reach among the poorer sections.

The state is also the first to include persons with physical and mental disabilities in MGNREGA work with reduced work norms. While key informants cite the role of a top-level official in pushing this change, the official was again responding to feedback from the lower level officials on the need to open up employment to this marginalised group. At present, the state is also taking advantage of the call for convergence among various rural welfare schemes to take up projects with significant material components. The state, however, was relatively late in doing this, compared to Rajasthan, as the officials perceived the programme in the initial phases as more an employment generating one. While there are no systematic studies looking into the asset creation side of MGNREGA employment in the state, interviews with senior officials involved in implementing suggest instances of successes in creating rainwater harvesting structures. In one dry district, creation of ponds has led to reclamation of lands for cultivation. It is said that 12,000 ponds have been dug and handed over to the agricultural engineering department to deepen and broaden them with machinery. In the recently concluded elections, political parties campaigned with promises of increasing the number of days of employment to 150. This suggests that the culture of "public action" in the state has fed into innovations of this kind, despite the absence of formal civil society mobilisations. However, there are complaints that asset creation has not been given due importance, compared to states like

Rajasthan, which may be due to a lack of active engagement by civil society groups, as it happened in Rajasthan. In Tamil Nadu, according to key informants, allowing cultivation on private lands can lead to negative political fall-out in a context of growing divide between the land owning OBCs and MBCs and SC agricultural labourers. Hence, the state did not extend the MGNREGA work on private lands in the initial years.

## **5.2. PDS in Tamil Nadu and Rajasthan**

Even though the MGNREGA implementation in the two states exhibit differences, the variations are much more acute in the case of the PDS. In the earlier discussion, we saw that the incidence of PDS consumption of rice was much higher in rural (89.1%) and urban (66.6%) areas of Tamil Nadu when compared to rural (0.8%) and urban (0.8%) areas in Rajasthan. According to Dreze and Khera (2015), leakages from the PDS were much higher in Rajasthan (60.9%) than in Tamil Nadu (11.9%). While the PDS in Tamil Nadu contributed to reduce the poverty gap index (using the Tendulkar line) by 61.3%, in Rajasthan, it contributed to only 11.7% (Dreze and Khera 2013). What can explain this difference?

Food has been central to politics in Tamil Nadu, with efforts to provide mid-day meals to school children beginning even in the colonial period. Offer of subsidised food grains has been part of the politics of the state for over half a century, and this found its way into creating a well-functioning PDS in the state. In the domain of PDS in Tamil Nadu, the key institution involved in implementation was the Tamil Nadu Civil Supplies Corporation (TNCSC) started in 1972 with the purpose of procuring, storing and distributing essential commodities in the state. It is linked to over 33,000 FPS that distribute food items to citizens and to godowns for storage, and to private dealers as well for procuring certain items like kerosene.<sup>8</sup> An important aspect of PDS in the state is the dominance of cooperatives in running these FPS, with more than 90% being run by them apart from the ones run by the TNCSC and SHG – promoted by the Tamil Nadu Women's Development Corporation. At present, extensive use of information and communication technologies allow for close monitoring of the distribution systems and has brought down leakages considerably. A combination of mobilisation around quantity and quality of supplies under the PDS and the state's response by way of creating better institutional architecture to reduce leakages, has led to the programme being a highly effective one. The state introduced a universal PDS by removing the APL/BPL distinctions in entitlements and expanded the range of commodities supplied through the PDS to lentils, spices and cooking oil.

In the context of Rajasthan's long tryst with droughts, one would expect that there would be strong state intervention in the distribution of food grains through the PDS, similar to public works programmes. However, even during drought years, like in 1986–87, the NSSO data shows that incidence of PDS use was low at less than 9% (Sagar 2000). Moreover, food insecurity is transitory in Rajasthan and animal husbandry ensures some degree of livelihood security (Sagar 2000).

Importantly, unlike in the case of Tamil Nadu where a long history of electoral mobilisation around food has driven the process, in Rajasthan, it was the CSOs, social movements and judicial intervention that played a part. But the PDS in the state has been undermined by corrupt practices. In 2009, Justice Wadhwa's committee submitted its

<sup>8</sup> <http://www.tncsc.tn.gov.in/html/pds.htm> accessed on 11 July 2016.

report on the PDS in Rajasthan, where they found that it was mired in rampant diversion of food grains, existence of a large number of ghost ration cards, low level of accountability, inadequate vigilance mechanisms, poor computerisation and problems in transportation of food grains.<sup>9</sup> As the government does not cover the entire transportation expenses, cooperative societies, which undertake wholesale distribution, indulge in various cost cutting measures like not employing labour to weigh the grains. The committee found high prevalence of exclusion and inclusion errors, as outdated surveys conducted in 1997 in rural areas and in 2003 in urban areas were used for exclusion and inclusion. The committee also found that as the commission paid to dealers was not adequate, it encouraged them to resort to unethical practices. As nearly 90% of the FPS are private dealers, unlike in the case of Tamil Nadu, they have a free run of the PDS. In order to reduce leakages, technology in the form of point of sale (PoS) machines have been introduced, though there have been several reports of it being dysfunctional in Rajasthan, which leads to denial of ration (Interview with Nikhil Dey, April 2016).

A group discussion with activists associated with the MKSS on 23 April 2016, highlighted five major reasons for poor performance of the PDS in Rajasthan. First, the BPL/APL distinction divided people and there was no collective unity in mobilising for entitlements. Second, the government introduced arbitrary exclusion and inclusion criteria. Third, eliminating people from the list is easy but adding them is difficult. Fourth, the introduction of technology like PoS machines gave dealers an excuse to cite problems with the machine to avoid distributing grains. Finally, political understanding in Rajasthan is supposed to be relatively low when compared to a state like Kerala.

## 6. Some Inferences

This paper mapped the evolution and outcomes of two of India's most comprehensive poverty reduction strategies, the MGNREGA and the PDS, with a special focus on the factors that have shaped them over time and across regions. In doing so, we stress the importance of a few institutions in incentivising the implementation of these programmes. First is the institution of electoral democracy; competitive politics means that parties attempt to capture the electoral imagination through promises of new welfare programmes, particularly poverty reduction programmes. However, it must be mentioned that despite such incentives, it may not necessarily lead to radical or structural reforms, such as land reforms. Rather, given the elite bias of most political parties, the incentives are translated into specific welfare enhancing or poverty reduction programmes that do not engage adequately with more 'durable' structures of poverty. An increase in income inequality in post-reform India accompanied by a growth in scope and range of poverty alleviation measures, therefore, best characterise the evolution of the social welfare regime in India. Importantly, employment generation, one of the two major programmes discussed here, was launched during a period that generated fewer jobs per unit output than ever before.

Nevertheless, political parties are varied and draw their sources of power from different social and economic groups. The constellation of interests shapes the variations in political commitment to investments in social welfare, and this explains not only the shifts over time in such commitment but, more importantly, explain differences across regions. Based on a detailed study of the experiences of two sub-national regions, we sought to

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<sup>9</sup> <http://www.prsindia.org/uploads/media/Food%20Security/Justice%20Wadhwa%20Committee%20Report%20on%20PDS.pdf> accessed on 1 November 2016.

demonstrate the importance of regional political economy in shaping incentives for the dominant political parties to invest in poverty reduction measures.

We also highlight the role of judicial and civil society activism that has sought to use the judicial route to pressure the government to implement certain programmes. Using the guarantees of the Constitution as a normative standard to evaluate state action and compel the state to take certain redistributive measures, this institution has played an important role in pressurising governments to implement key programmes. Such action has been primarily responsible for the emergence of a series of rights-based legislations for poverty reduction, including the MGNREGA and the NFSA. Such pressures, however, do not necessarily ensure effective implementation. It is here that the public or collective action is critical to translation of legislative measures into actually enforceable interventions. The paper has stressed this aspect through the sub-national cases that have witnessed divergent trajectories of centrally legislated poverty reduction measures. A related point concerns the efficacy of rights-based legislations in a context where the judicial infrastructure is inadequate to actually ensure that the state fulfils its obligations. In the absence of such judicial capacity, and in the absence of institutional complementarities such as strong political mobilisation, rights-based measures may not be effective.

Third is the continued salience of traditional political parties and politics in driving the process. As Harriss (2005, 2007) argued, unlike in the case of Latin America where new collectivities have gained prominence, conventional political parties continue to be the primary route for making claims in India. In the case of Rajasthan, for example, despite the presence of a strong civil society movement such as the MKSS, inadequate support from the political class, among other factors, has dampened the demand for MGNREGA related employment. Furthermore, in the case of PDS, political corruption and collaboration between local political elites and private dealers have undermined the possibilities of reducing leakages in the state. Tamil Nadu, on the other hand, despite the absence of a visible “new civil society”, has delivered better on account of its long history of lower-class mobilisation by its two main political parties and competition between the two to deliver welfare.

Technological innovation too has been critical to better implement welfare programmes. There are several instances where issues of leakages and corruption have been addressed without necessarily encouraging collective action. It has also been used to undermine resistance from local elites. In the case of Andhra Pradesh, for example, sensing that a complete decentralised model will not work, the leaders decided to adopt a top-down model, and use online tracking in real time and mobile interface to monitor attendance in case of the MGNREGA workers. Taking data entry to the lowest level allowed them to undermine the influence of local elites. While this may enhance efficacy, the possibility of such measures depoliticising and technocratising poverty reduction is ever present. However, this is to not deny the possibility that better implementation, in turn, may allow for new political articulations. An associated factor that emerges to be critical in better implementation is administrative capacity. It has been recognised that Tamil Nadu, which has had a long tradition of efficiently administering social protection schemes, has the operational bandwidth to implement such programmes (Bonner *et al.* 2012).

The paper also highlights the need for a more local-sensitive approaches to policy design, as opposed to a one-size-fits-all approach, particularly in the context of the PDS. By emphasising distribution of rice and wheat, it may lead to perverse incentives both in the domain of production and consumption. The extension of water intensive rice cultivation in water resource poor regions, due to unsustainable extraction of ground water, illustrates

the same. At the consumption end, the NFSA, as it stands now, is believed to subvert normal consumption as it incentivises farmers to shift to cereal production, due to MSP incentives, and emphasises calories rather than food diversity (Interview with Sonalde Desai, March 2016). One reason cited by key informants for poor public action in the domain of the PDS in Rajasthan may have to do with a mismatch between the dietary preferences of the people and the food grains distributed by the PDS. More importantly, the presence of malnutrition, even in a state like Tamil Nadu, highlights the need to reorient PDS to ensure better nutrition security. While such criticisms have also led to demands for replacing such programmes with direct cash transfers, we have sought to highlight other positive developmental outcomes emanating from employment generation programmes or food transfers. Apart from the generation of employment, the MGNREGA has also contributed to generation of productive assets and, more importantly, the renewal and installation of water harvesting structures and flood control mechanisms that are critical to sustained rural development. The MGNREGA has also undermined traditional relations of power and has enabled a new kind of collective action, particularly among women and other marginalised members. In the case of the PDS, a survey showed that people preferred getting food grains rather than cash in regions where leakages are low, and the distribution system works better. Demand from civil society organisations to use the PDS to reorient consumption practices and agro-food systems are to be noted in this regard. Therefore, it opens up opportunities to reorient agricultural production to ensure more sustainable food production practices. In this context, it also remains to be seen how long India will be protected by the “peace clause” of the World Trade Organisation (WTO), which eventually seeks to limit farm subsidies to 10% of the aggregate production.



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