

MGNREGA and Rural Women's Livelihood Security: A Comparative Study of Demographic and Land-Tenure Dynamics in West Tripura

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Abstract : This article examines the demographic targeting efficiency and equity of the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) across intersectional lines, including caste, religion, poverty status, and geographic localization. Utilizing a comparative cross-sectional micro-study of 100 female-headed or female-participating households across the Belabar and Dukli Gram Panchayats in West Tripura, India, this study analyzes how socio-legal factors dictate access to rights-based public works. The empirical findings reveal that while the scheme maintains high inclusivity for Below Poverty Line (BPL) households (69%) and Scheduled Caste (SC) communities, systemic variations persist between regions. Notably, the border-adjacent geography of Belabar features an overwhelming concentration of informal land tenures (Khas land) used by households lacking formal documentation due to cross-border migration patterns, which structurally accelerates their reliance on manual public wage labor. Conversely, Dukli exhibits a higher rate of formalized land ownership (Own land), providing a different baseline of economic security. The study concludes that geographic location and land tenure security act as primary structural determinants of program dependency, requiring targeted policy adaptations for border-zone implementation.

IndexTerms - MGNREGA; Below Poverty Line; Belabar and Dukli Gram Panchayats

I. Introduction

The Indian economy has expanded rapidly over recent decades, yet more than one-fourth of the rural population historically falls below the poverty line due to seasonal fluctuations in employment opportunities and depressed wage rates. To mitigate rural destitution and foster inclusive growth, the Government of India enacted the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) in September 2005, which officially came into force in February 2006. As a historic statutory intervention, the primary intent of the scheme is to enhance rural livelihood security by providing a legal guarantee of at least 100 days of unskilled manual wage employment in every financial year to rural households whose adult members volunteer to work.

Beyond providing a safety net, MGNREGA is designed as an inclusive framework aimed at empowering marginalized groups, particularly rural women who have traditionally been suppressed by male-dominated agrarian structures, limited education, and chronic poverty. In a developing state like India, women constitute a disproportionately major share of the chronically poor. MGNREGA disrupts this marginalization by offering local employment under strict gender-equity mandates, including equal wage parity between male and female workers—a provision virtually unprecedented in casual rural labor markets.

However, the aggregate success of MGNREGA masks substantial sub-regional and local variations in terms of registration, inclusivity, and participation. The state of Tripura presents a highly compelling case for micro-level evaluation. Tripura is a land-locked state surrounded by Bangladesh along an 856 km international boundary. It features high population density and has historically recorded substantial percentages of populations living below the poverty line. Despite these constraints, Tripura has frequently ranked among the top performers nationally in MGNREGA implementation. Yet, within the state, localized factors such as border proximity, land tenure configurations (*Khas* versus *Own* land), and communal distributions heavily mediate *who* accesses the program and *why*. This study presents a comparative cross-sectional analysis of demographic targeting across two Gram Panchayats—Belabar and Dukli—to evaluate the intersectional dynamics governing women's inclusion under MGNREGA.

II. Statement of the Problem

The Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) is one of India's most significant rights-based social protection programmes, designed to enhance rural livelihood security through guaranteed wage employment. Although numerous studies have examined its implementation and socio-economic outcomes, limited attention has been given to how localized factors such as geographic location, land tenure security, and demographic characteristics influence women's participation in the programme. In border regions like West Tripura, where communities differ in terms of migration history, land ownership patterns, and socio-economic vulnerability, the effectiveness of MGNREGA may vary considerably. Existing literature largely overlooks these micro-level structural differences, particularly the interaction between border geography, informal (*Khas*) land tenure, poverty, and social inclusion. Therefore, there is a need for a comparative empirical investigation to understand how these contextual factors shape women's access to and dependence on MGNREGA, thereby providing evidence for more equitable

and context-specific policy interventions. Hence the Statement of the problem is “*MGNREGA and Rural Women's Livelihood Security: A Comparative Study of Demographic and Land-Tenure Dynamics in West Tripura*”.

III. Review of Literature

Systemic evaluations of rural development policy indicate that legislative enactments do not automatically translate to equitable social justice unless accompanied by structural awareness and contextual alignment. The National Commission for Women studied judicial decisions and legal frameworks, concluding that over 400 million women in India lack robust social, economic, or legal attributes to independently overcome systemic poverty. They observed that gender justice depends fundamentally on grassroots awareness and the targeted execution of government developmental plans rather than mere legislative presence.

The World Bank's evaluation of rural women's development initiatives highlighted that institutionalized linkages and qualified staffing are critical bottlenecks in rural project execution. Similarly, Sharma Sheetal observed that the realities confronting rural Indian women are deeply tied to asset deprivation. Relegated to domestic spheres or exploited as cheap agrarian labor, women without independent property or secure land rights find their economic voices silenced. Reddy Vinayak emphasized that improved delivery systems require participatory development, transparency, and the direct involvement of Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) to achieve true inclusive growth.

In the context of MGNREGA, Shah noted that the act builds a unique institutional space to activate PRIs and mobilize the most disadvantaged segments who traditionally lack a voice in local *Gram Sabhas*. While monitoring reports across states like Chhattisgarh, Orissa, and Tamil Nadu emphasize infrastructural and connectivity improvements, the demographic drivers of participation vary drastically. For instance, reports from Uttar Pradesh highlighted cases where women's participation remained well below national averages due to systemic social blockades.

In contrast, Roy Sanjoy demonstrated that in Tripura, MGNREGA significantly lessened the incidence of poverty and emboldened the confidence of rural laborers, aged women, and widows who previously could not leave their villages to seek employment. This article builds upon this foundation by investigating how localized socio-legal and geographic dynamics define the demographic profile of MGNREGA participants.

IV. Significance of the Study

This study contributes to the growing body of literature on the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) by examining the demographic, socio-economic, and geographic determinants of women's participation at the grassroots level in West Tripura. Unlike many macro-level evaluations that focus on employment generation and programme performance, this research highlights how border location, land tenure security, poverty status, caste, and religion collectively influence access to and dependence on MGNREGA. By comparing Belabar and Dukli Gram Panchayats, the study provides empirical evidence that geographic context and legal ownership of land significantly shape livelihood vulnerability and programme utilization.

The findings are valuable for policymakers, rural development planners, and local governance institutions in designing location-specific strategies for strengthening the implementation of MGNREGA. The study also underscores the need for flexible administrative mechanisms in border areas where informal land tenure is prevalent and households face greater economic insecurity. Furthermore, it enriches the academic discourse on rural employment, gender inclusion, and social equity by demonstrating the importance of intersectional analysis in evaluating rights-based welfare programmes. The research serves as a useful reference for future studies on rural livelihoods, public employment schemes, and inclusive development, particularly in geographically sensitive and socio-economically marginalized regions of India.

V. Objectives of the Study

To examine the demographic and socio-economic determinants of women's participation in MGNREGA in selected Gram Panchayats of West Tripura.

VI. Research Methodology

This study utilizes a comparative, cross-sectional empirical design to analyze the demographic and socio-economic attributes of female workers enrolled under MGNREGA.

- a) **Study Area Selection:** The field survey was executed within the Dukli R.D. Block of the West Tripura district. Two Gram Panchayats were purposively selected based on their distinct geographic and socio-legal characteristics:
 - **Belabar Gram Panchayat:** Situated 8 km from the capital city of Agartala, directly adjacent to the Indo-Bangladesh international border.
 - **Dukli Gram Panchayat:** Located 9 km from Agartala, situated in close proximity to the main Block Development Office (BDO), representing an interior rural community.
- b) **Sampling Technique:** A multistage, purposive sampling method was deployed. From the total registration lists provided by local panchayat officials, 100 households (N = 100) were selected for intensive survey, comprising 40 households from Belabar and 60 households from Dukli.
- c) **Data Collection Tools:** Primary data was gathered using a structured questionnaire administered via personal face-to-face interviews with female participants, supplemented by peer group and participatory discussions. Secondary data was compiled from the Dukli R.D. Block office, local Gram Panchayat records, published academic journals, and census reports.

- d) **Analytical Framework:** The data were processed using tabular methods, comparative cross-tabulations, absolute value distribution, and percentage-based descriptive statistical measures to draw comparative inferences.

VII. Empirical Data and Demographic Analysis

a) Religious and Caste Composition

The social fabric of the participating workforce showcases important variations across the two studied entities.

Religion	Belabar (Absolute)	Dukli (Absolute)	Total Sample
Hindu	19	36	55
Muslim	21	24	45
Total	40	60	100

Source: Field Survey

Caste Category	Belabar (Absolute)	Dukli (Absolute)	Total Sample
Unreserved	2	7	9
Other Backward Classes	4	11	15
Scheduled Caste	18	23	41
Minority	16	19	35
Total	40	60	100

Source: Field Survey

The empirical data demonstrates that Scheduled Castes (41%) and religious minority groups constitute the overwhelming majority of the active MGNREGA workforce across both locations. In Belabar, the Muslim community represents the absolute majority (52.5%), which directly correlates with its location along the international border, historically a primary zone for cross-border settlement. Conversely, Dukli exhibits a higher concentration of Hindu participants (60%). The low participation of Unreserved (UR) caste segments (9% overall) confirms that the program successfully attracts socio-economically vulnerable communities.

b) Poverty Classification and Educational Profiles

Socio-economic layering was captured by classifying participants based on official poverty line metrics and formal education levels.

Poverty Status	Belabar (Absolute)	Dukli (Absolute)	Total Sample
Above Poverty Line (APL)	11	20	31
Below Poverty Line (BPL)	29	40	69
Total	40	60	100

Source: Field Survey

Educational Attainment	Belabar (Absolute)	Dukli (Absolute)	Total Sample
Primary (Class-V)	17	26	43
Upper Primary (Class-VIII)	13	13	26
Secondary (Madhyamik)	5	15	20
Higher Secondary (HS +2)	5	6	11
Total	40	60	100

Source: Field Survey

The poverty matrix proves that the program serves a targeted welfare role: 69% of all participating women originate from verified BPL households. These families lack secure, salaried income sources and are highly reliant on casual daily labor. Educational analysis reveals that 43% of the workers possess only primary school exposure (Class-V). Interestingly, Belabar presents a higher educational enrollment ratio at the Higher Secondary level compared to its smaller sample size, though its foundational tier remains heavily saturated with low-literacy individuals.

c) Land Tenure Configurations: The Khas vs. Own Land Paradigm

A major finding of this research concerns the intersection of poverty status, geographic location, and legal land tenure.

Land Holding Type	Belabar (Absolute)	Dukli (Absolute)	Total Sample
Khas (Government/Informal)	21	27	48
Own (Legal Title)	19	33	52
Total	40	60	100

Source: Field Survey

To unpack this dynamic, land holding were cross-tabulated against economic status (APL/BPL) for both locations:

Belabar Land Matrix	APL Holders	BPL Holders	Total
Khas Land	6	15	21
Own Land	5	14	19
Total	11	29	40

Source: Field Survey

Dukli Land Matrix	APL Holders	BPL Holders	Total
Khas Land	6	21	27
Own Land	8	25	33
Total	14	46	60

Source: Field Survey

The structural variance between the two Gram Panchayats is evident here. In Belabar, the majority of the households utilize *Khas* land (52.5%). Because Belabar is directly adjacent to the international border, a significant portion of its population consists of historical migrants from Bangladesh who do not possess formal legal deeds (patta or ownership documents) for the land they inhabit. This lack of legal land tenure limits their ability to engage in commercial agriculture or leverage land for institutional credit. Consequently, their economic vulnerability forces an intense, structural reliance on public manual wage labor under MGNREGA.

In contrast, the majority of households in Dukli operate on *Own* land (55%) with formal legal documentation, allowing them a more stable domestic asset base. Across both regions, BPL households show the highest concentration on *Khas* lands, highlighting a clear link between landlessness, lack of legal titles, and poverty line classification.

VIII. Discussion and Conclusion

The empirical data demonstrates that MGNREGA in West Tripura functions with strong inclusivity toward marginalized sub-groups, successfully capturing high concentrations of SC, minority, and BPL households. However, this study underscores that targeting efficiency is fundamentally mediated by localized geographic and legal parameters.

The stark difference in land tenure models between the border-adjacent Belabar and the interior Dukli reveals that vulnerability is multi-dimensional. For border communities, the high prevalence of *Khas* land tenure introduces a structural push factor. Lacking formal deeds, these families are highly vulnerable to economic shocks, meaning public wage guarantees like MGNREGA shift from being a supplementary seasonal income to a vital survival safety net.

Based on these findings, it is recommended that policy frameworks for rights-based rural employment programs integrate geographic and land-title flexibility. In border regions where *Khas* land dominates, local governments should align MGNREGA public works with local land development and environmental stabilization initiatives to improve the productivity of informal land holdings. Furthermore, administrative processes within Gram Panchayats must account for low literacy levels by implementing simplified, language-accessible procedures for job card verification and wage distribution. This ensures that structural exclusion does not compromise legal entitlements.

IX. References

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