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16

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'100 Days Work' at the Panchayat Level?
A Study of Birbhum District in West Bengal

**Subrata Mukherjee
Saswata Ghosh**

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INSTITUTE OF DEVELOPMENT STUDIES KOLKATA

**Calcutta University Alipore Campus (Block A, 5th Floor)
1 Reformatory Street, Kolkata - 700 027**

Phone : +91 (33) 2448-1364/8178, Fax : +91 (33) 2448-1364

e-mail : idsk1@vsnl.net, Website : www.idsk.edu.in

What Determines the Success and Failure of '100 Days Work' at the Panchayat Level? A Study of Birbhum District in West Bengal

Subrata Mukherjee¹ & Saswata Ghosh²

Abstract

The National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA), which was introduced in 2006 with the objective of providing hundred days of employment in every financial year to adult members of any rural household willing to do unskilled manual work at the wage rate fixed by the act, has been extended to the entire rural area of India. In spite of many favourable factors, West Bengal is not among the best performing states with regard to NREGA. The average person-days per household and share of women in total person-days generated have remained unsatisfactory in the state during the preceding two and half years. However, the state has done well in terms of distribution of job cards and covering maximum number of households with some work. The performance of all districts in the state is not equally discouraging. Some districts, in fact, have done well in generating good number of average person-days per household or in distributing the benefits of work in favour of the marginalised population (such as Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes). For our detailed case study we have considered the district of Birbhum. Our case study finds high inter-block variations in terms of average person-days created and utilisation of NREGA funds. The blocks which have performed better also show significant variation across the Gram Panchayats within the block. There seems to be no clear relation between utilisation of available funds and average person-days created either at the GP level or at the block level. The weak correlation observed between number of households

¹ Lecturer at Institute of Development Studies Kolkata and, at present, post-doctoral Fellow at University of Montreal, Canada, (Email address: msubrata100@gmail.com).

² Lecturer at Institute of Development Studies Kolkata (Email address: ghosh.saswata@gmail.com).

with job card and availability of NREGA funds at the GP level suggests that GPs are not able to come up with adequate number of NREGA schemes to absorb the labourers demanding employment. There is also no evidence of NREGA getting better implemented in blocks with higher share of agricultural labourers or higher percentage of BPL households, which one would expect. Rather, blocks with higher share of BPL households show lower average person-days created under NREGA. Our primary survey indicates that a lot more have to be done to fully sensitise the rural households about their legitimate entitlement under NREGA, especially the ST households. Lack of technical skills and human resource seem to be the major reasons why the GPs are not able to develop adequate number of schemes under NREGA. Though NREGA allows scope for creating various types of durable productive assets at the community level (such as roads, improving rural infrastructure, drought-proofing, watershed development, water conservation etc), focus has remained on types of works which are easy to design (such as road construction and pond excavation). It is observed that the GPs lack the capacity to design adequate number of schemes under NREGA which can be meaningfully linked with the livelihood and infrastructural development of the local economy. Therefore, greater efforts should be given for the capacity building of the GPs, especially the backward GPs. In addition, ongoing programmes such as Strengthening Rural Decentralisation (SRD) programme of DFID may be utilised as an opportunity to improve the capacity of the GPs (especially the backward GPs) for better implementation of NREGA.

1. Introduction

The National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA) is now in its third year and has been extended to all the rural districts in India. The most striking feature of NREGA is that it is the first tangible commitment to the poor, in the sense that they can expect to earn a living wage by performing unskilled manual work of minimum 100 days and demand this as a *right*. The Act also ensures unemployment allowance if a household is not provided with employment within a specified time period. If effectively implemented, NREGA can not only enhance the income of the rural poor in the short term but also can create durable assets in the villages and thus generate productive infrastructure

in a sustainable manner which is much needed for poverty alleviation in the long run.

Performance in NREGA in terms of generating average person-days per rural household varies widely across states since its inception. There are some studies which basically focused on the how the community level and political factors influence the performance of NREGA across states. For example, analysing the official data Dreze and Oldiges (2007) tried to explore the political reasons behind startling differences regarding the levels of NREGA employment among different states. They suggested a strict implementation of transparency safeguards and firm action against corruption whenever it is exposed in NREGA. Some studies argued that the role of civil society organizations and community based organizations is critical for successful implementation of NREGA (Shah 2007; Khera 2008). The study by Jha, Gaiha and Shankar (2008) based on pilot survey of three villages in Rajasthan found that the disadvantaged groups (Scheduled Tribes and landless households) had significantly higher probabilities of participating in programme. The probability of participation was also high among moderately land owning households or among self-employed in agriculture. But there is hardly any study which has focused exclusively on the micro and macro level factors operating at the GP level, which is responsible for successful implementation of the programme.

It is worth mentioning that *Panchayati Raj Institutions* (PRIs) are the major designated agencies for the implementation of NREGA. Though all three tiers of PRIs are involved in different capacities for the execution of work under NREGA, *Gram Panchayat* (GP), which is the lowest tier of PRI, is responsible for the identification, execution, supervision of NREGA. Therefore, success in the implementation of NREGA depends not only on the basic structure of the local economy (such as level of overall development, workforce composition, incidence of poverty etc.) but also on the capacity and accountability of the PRIs. Presence of vibrant PRIs, particularly the GPs, during the scheme execution has been found in Kerala which claimed to have positive impact on NREGA implementation (Chathukulam and Gireesan 2007).

The state of West Bengal is often cited as a successful case of democratically decentralised participatory governance and strong and effective functioning of the PRIs. The West Bengal Human Development Report (2004) notes that *West Bengal has created a history of participation of common people through the process of decentralisation*. Since PRIs are the crucial agencies for implementing NREGA, one expects an effective implementation of the act in West Bengal as the state seems to have strong functioning PRIs. Apart from strong functioning PRIs, there are other factors which should work in favour of better performance of NREGA in the state. The rural poverty ratio is still significantly high in West Bengal (28.6 percent).¹ The percentage of rural households 'not having enough food every day in some months' is the highest in West Bengal (10.6 per cent)² among the major Indian states.³ The agricultural wage rate in West Bengal is lower than the national minimum wage rate of Rs. 66 (20 rupees less for male and 30 rupees less for females (Government of India, 2007c). Despite all these favourable factors for higher demand for NREGA work by rural households in West Bengal, the available statistics for the last two years bear witness to the state's unsatisfactory performance in generating employment under NREGA.

As mentioned earlier, the success of NREGA is crucially dependent on the basic structure of the local economy as well as the capacity of the local governments. Therefore, any study attempting to understand the factors affecting performance of NREGA must take into account various local and micro-level factors. In order to have a better understanding of the local and micro-level factors, we have adopted a case study in addition to the analysis of available macro data. Birbhum district of West Bengal has been selected for our case study since it is one of the backward districts of West Bengal in terms of human development

1 See Government of India (2007a).

2 See Government of India (2007b).

3 This factor may or may not work in favour of creating high demand for NREGA work because malnourished people may not be in a position to do hard work.

indicators, rate of urbanisation, concentration of marginalized population, and share of agriculture in the district economy.⁴

The present study has the following objectives: in the first stage, we make an attempt to assess the position of West Bengal in the national context and position of Birbhum in the context of West Bengal, in terms of certain indicators of NREGA implementation. In the next stage, we examine the variations in the performance indicators of NREGA across *Gram Panchayats* and *Panchayat Samitis* (PS) / blocks (the middle tier) of Birbhum. Finally, we make an attempt to identify major factors behind the unsatisfactory performance.

The paper is organised in the following way: after the introduction, Section 2 briefly describes our conceptual framework and data sources. Section 3 shows where West Bengal stands in comparison to other states with regard to NREGA. Section 4 presents performance of different districts of West Bengal in the implementation of NREGA. Section 5 takes up Birbhum district as a case and attempts to identify factors affecting the performance of NREGA using both secondary and primary data. Section 6 discusses the importance of PRIs' capacity in the implementation of NREGA and also explores the possibilities of utilising ongoing programmes for capacity building of GPs so that NREGA can be better implemented. Section 7 concludes the paper.

2. Conceptual Framework and Data Sources

NREGA has well defined objectives and clear guidelines. The prime objectives of the Act are (a) to provide *not less than* one hundred days of guaranteed employment in a financial year to every household in the rural areas whose adult members by application volunteer to do unskilled manual work subject to the conditions laid down by the Act; and (b) to create durable assets

4 The female literacy rate is 51.6 per cent in Birbhum compared to 59.6 in West Bengal (Census 2001). The rate of urban population in Birbhum is significantly lower (8.6 per cent) compared to 28.0 per cent in West Bengal. The combined share of scheduled castes and tribes is 36.2 per cent compared to 28.5 per cent in West Bengal. The per capita income (at 1993-94 constant price) of Birbhum is Rs. 9429 which is much lower than that of West Bengal (Rs. 12271).

and strengthening the livelihood resource base of the rural poor on the other. The Act provides clear guidelines with regard to strategy of the scheme, types of permissible work, registration, job card, employment, unemployment allowance, planning, beneficiary committees, provisions for facilities at worksite, maintenance of assets created, wages to be paid, procedures of disbursement of wages, share of wage and non-wage components etc.

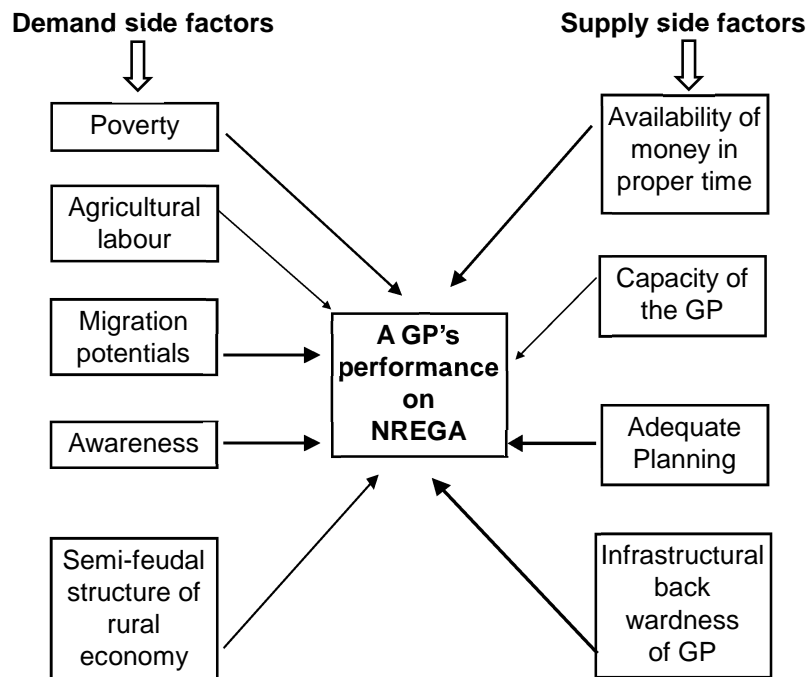
Arguably, one can assess the performance of NREGA not only in terms of its success in achieving the objectives but also in terms of how well the guidelines were followed in the implementation. In view of these guidelines the performance of a GP in implementing NREGA can be assessed by looking into the following indicators: (a) average person-days created per household who demanded employment; (b) how the total person-days created in a GP (during a financial year) are distributed in favour of the vulnerable section of the population (e.g. SC, ST, women); (c) to what extent rural people are aware of the different entitlements of NREGA; (d) whether the GP functionaries are cooperative in helping the potential NREGA beneficiaries; (e) whether the wages are disbursed in stipulated time; (f) whether the GPs pay unemployment allowance in case they fail to provide the work demanded; (g) whether the basic facilities (such as drinking water, rest shade, crèche and first aid box) were provided at the workplace. Among all these the most important indicator of NREGA performance is average person-days created per household, which demanded employment since employment generation for the rural poor is the fundamental objective of the Act.

The factors which are likely to influence a GP's performance with regard to NREGA can broadly be classified into two categories: demand side factors and supply side factors (see Figure 1). Apart from incidence of poverty and large number of agricultural labourers or casual labourers, people's awareness about NREGA (especially their rights and entitlements) contributes to the demand side factors. Factors like migration potential in an area and semi-feudal structure of the local economy can influence the demand for NREGA work in a negative way. Further, since NREGA has

the implicit goal of enhancing the livelihood security of vulnerable population in the rural areas, demand for NREGA is expected to be higher in places with higher share of poor people or agricultural labourers as their incomes are subject to significant seasonal variations.

On the supply side, infrastructural backwardness of the area (which actually creates potential for having higher number of NREGA schemes), physical capacity of the GP in terms of manpower, capacity for planning on the part of the GP functionaries to come up with adequate number of schemes to absorb all labourers demanding work under NREGA, getting NREGA funds in right time are the most important factors. Among these factors, capacity of the GP seems to be most crucial. The capacity of the GP matters in two ways: first, there must be enough avenues to come up with adequate number of schemes in the area so that all those who demand job can be absorbed. The GP needs to

Figure 1: Factors affecting performance of NREGA at GP level



have access to the necessary technical expertise to design appropriate schemes in a timely manner. Second, apart from supervising and monitoring work at the worksites, the GP needs to comply with a lot of official work (paper work) while implementing the schemes. In other words, strict implementation rules and well defined guidelines compel GPs to maintain records related to different aspect of NREGA work. However, capacity of the GP is not the only important supply side factor. A GP should get the schemes approved and receive the NREGA funds in proper time.

The following data sources have been used for the present study: information available on the official website of NREGA (www.nrega.nic.in), data provided by the District NREGS Cell (Birbhum district, West Bengal), Census 2001 and a primary survey which interviewed 219 households and more than 20 GP members and sachibs in two GPs in Birbhum district.

3. West Bengal in the National Context

A simple “fact sheet” on the performance of NREGA based on the official data from the NREGA website is presented in Table 1. States’ performance with regard to NREGA in terms of average person-days generated per rural household during the second financial year (2007-08) is expected to be more than the previous year (2006-07) since the first year was essentially a “learning phase” for NREGA. Comparing employment generation in terms of average person-days per rural households between two successive years reveals that hardly there is any notable increase of average persondays per rural household between 2006-07 and 2007-08, though wide variations across the states have been noticed.

Rajasthan has been the best performer during both the years among the major states with respect to the aforesaid indicator. As Dreze and Oldiges (2007) noted employment guarantee has been a lively political issue in Rajasthan for quite a few years, and the state had a high level of preparedness for the Act, having organized massive public works programmes almost every year. Other states which were at the top of the scale in 2006-07 were Assam, Madhya Pradesh, Orrisa and Chattisgarh. The performance in 2007-08 is not satisfactory in these states except Chattisgarh. Notable

progress had been made by Maharashtra and Tamil Nadu in 2007-08 compared to 2006-07. Though some progress has also been observed in Bihar and West Bengal, the performance of these states has been unimpressive for both the years. Dreze and Oldiges (2007) argued that “*ambivalent attitude towards NREGA from the beginning*” of the Government of West Bengal is plausibly responsible for the failure.

It is a well recognized fact that the economic independence of women is an important aspect of women’s empowerment in rural India, and in this respect, NREGA may be viewed as an imperative tool for social change in the long run. Possibly for this reason, the Act has ensured that one-third of the total work has to be shared by women. It is quite encouraging to notice from Table 1 that women’s share of NREGA employment is about 43 percent in 2007-08 at the all-India level, which increased by 2 percentage points between 2006-07 and 2007-08, rising to an astonishing figure of more than 80 percent in Tamil Nadu in both the years. However, many states such as Jammu and Kashmir, Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, and West Bengal etc. have not been able to share one-third of total person-days created with women during both the years. It is worth noting that almost in every state the mandatory provision of crèche facilities at worksites has been ignored so far. Studies have shown that though participation in NREGA has brought about major changes in the lives of rural women, near absence of crèche facility childcare is a problem in many places in the country, especially for the young mothers (Narayanan 2008). It can be argued that to increase participation of women in NREGA, better arrangement of childcare is urgently required and this might have a wider implication on social acceptance of childcare arrangements for working women.

4. Inter-district Variation in West Bengal

Currently NREGA is operating in all the rural regions of West Bengal. When the programme was launched in 2006, it covered 10 most backward districts. Seven more districts were included in the second phase in 2007 and the district of Howarah was included in April 2008. In West Bengal 73.35 percent of the total rural

households were provided with job cards in the first phase districts during 2006-07. Though these figures might look very impressive, average person-days created per household was only 14 days, which was far below than the promised minimum of 100 days. However, as far as the coverage of households is concerned, highest number of households has been provided with employment in West Bengal under NREGA amongst all the states during 2006-07. It is important to observe that the average number of person-days per rural household was only 25 in 2007-08, which is a significant improvement given its poor beginning, but still unimpressive compared to the performance of many other states and the minimum target of 100 days.

On the whole, average person-days generated per rural household increased from 14 days to 25 days in the first phase districts mainly due to the notable increase in average person-days in three districts (namely, Bankura, Jalpaiguri and Purulia, see Table 2). Bankura has generated so far the highest person-days per rural household among all the districts in both the years. In other districts, some increase of average person-days creation per rural household has been observed between 2006-07 and 2007-08. Among the first phase districts, the lowest person-days have been generated in Murshidabad in both the years. Malda, which is also another first phase district and backward in terms of human development indicators, has failed to show considerable progress in generating employment for the rural poor during both the years. Among the second phase districts, the performance of NREGA is also unimpressive. Only about 25 person-days have been generated per rural household in these districts with little variations among districts. Average person-days creation per rural household is the lowest in Coochbehar and East Medinipur and the highest in North 24 Parganas among the second phase districts.

Table 3 shows the combined shares of SC and ST in total population as well as total person-days created under NREGA during 2007-08. In order to examine how much share of NREGA benefits has gone to the SC and ST communities in comparison to their share in population, we have computed a ratio – called

'favour ratio'. It is a ratio between percentage share of a population sub-group in total person-days generated under NREGA and its percentage share in total population. Higher the value of the favour ratio from 1, more it indicates the share of NREGA work in favour of that population sub-group. The districts which have done exceptionally well in distributing the benefits of NREGA in favour of SC & ST communities are Hoogly and Burdwan. Though less than what Hoogly and Burdwan achieved, other districts also provided higher share of NREGA work to the marginalised communities with the exception of Nadia.

5. The Case Study of Birbhum District

Evidence from Secondary Data

Let us now turn our focus on to the implementation of NREGA in Birbhum district. According to the latest NREGA statistics available on the official website, number of households provided employment under NREGA is about 5.47 lakhs.⁵ According to the latest available figures, fund utilisation under NREGS in Birbhum is 68 per cent which is higher than the state average.⁶ It is observed from the data that not all households which had applied for the job card finally demanded work. For example, during the financial year 2006-07, about 85 per cent of households having the job cards finally demanded employment. In Birbhum there was difference between the number of households which demanded work and were actually provided with work for the financial year 2006-07, though such difference existed for the state as a whole.

Table 4 shows block-wise figures on average person-days created per household and percentage utilisation of NREGA funds for the year 2006-07. The same table also shows minimum and maximum average person-days per household and utilisation of funds at the GP level under each block. There is a considerable variation across blocks in terms of average person-days per

5 See http://nrega.nic.in/writereaddata/citizen_out/Dist_MPR_emp_reg_3203_0809.html (accessed on August 10, 2008).

6 According to data provided by District NREGS Cell, fund utilisation for the year 2005-06, 2006-07 and 2007-08 (till October) are 43 per cent, 77 per cent and 78 per cent respectively.

household. Out of 19 blocks in Birbhum, only 6 blocks could provide more than 25 days of work on an average. Performance of NREGA in terms of person-days per household is extremely poor in 6 blocks of Birbhum with average person-days per household less than 15. It is to be mentioned that the blocks which performed better also showed considerable inter-GP difference within the block.

Similar inter-block difference is found in the case of utilisation of NREGA funds. On the one extreme, we have Bolpur-Sriniketan block which spent nearly 97 per cent of the available funds, on the other extreme we have a block like Suri I which could spend only 78 per cent of the available funds during the financial year 2006-07. Out of 19 blocks, only 8 blocks could spend more than 90 per cent of the available funds under NREGA. Like average person-days, similar inter-GP difference within blocks is found in the case of utilisation of available funds. For example, in Labhpur block, there is a GP which could utilise only 53 per cent of the available funds, at the same time there is another GP which utilised the entire available funds.

Is there any positive relationship between the utilisation of available NREGA funds and average person-days created at the block level? In other words, had those blocks which finished most of the available funds under NREGA generated higher average person-days? We have explored this relationship through a scatter diagram at the block level (see Figure 2). Apparently, there is no clear relationship between percentage utilisation of available funds and average person-days. However, if we exclude the blocks Suri I, Suri II, Saithia, Khoyrasole and Labhpur, it can be seen that rest of the blocks are positioned in a way to exhibit a positive relationship (Pearson correlation coefficient = 0.70). On the other hand, by ignoring the blocks of Rajnagar, Bolpur and Md Bazar, one could envisage a negative relationship (Pearson correlation coefficient = -0.60). Given the divergent performance of GPs within a block, one may reasonably question the appropriateness of exploring this relationship at the block level. For this reason, we have explored the same relationship at the GP level too (Figure 3). It is evident from the figure that there is no strong positive

relationship between average person-days and percentage utilisation of funds (Pearson correlation coefficient = 0.27); which means that a GP may exhaust all its funds and be still unable to provide longer days of employment to households who are in need of employment. It can be inferred that hardly any GP could come up with enough number of schemes to absorb all the households demanding work.

What could be the possible reasons for the low average person-days per household? There seems to be two possible reasons. **First**, there is little evidence that availability of NREGA funds at the block/GP level is closely correlated to either number of job cards or number of households demanding employment, though such connection is stronger at the block level than GP level. We found the (Pearson) correlation coefficient between number of households that demanded work and amount of available fund is only 0.34. At the block level the coefficient between funds available and number of households that demanded employment is 0.57.⁷ These findings indicate that the availability of funds under NREGA is weakly related to the number of households demanding work under NREGA, especially at the GP level. Why availability of funds at the block or GP level is not enough to cover all the households demanding work is a question crucially related to the capacity of the PRIs, in general and GP, in particular.

Second, enough people might not be available for longer periods of time at a wage rate offered by NREGA. If people have the opportunity to work at higher wage rate or have more stable work at the same wage rate or even at marginally lower wage rate, they may not be interested in NREGA work, especially when the timings of NREGA work come in conflict with their alternative

7 At the GP level, the correlation coefficient between amount of available funds and number of job card issued is 0.17 and at the block level it is 0.43. Looking at the values of correlation coefficients between amount of available funds and job card issued or between amount of available funds and households demanding work, it seems that though availability of funds has got some weak positive connection with requirement at the block level, such connection is totally missing at the Panchayat level.

work. NREGA is expected to be better implemented in places with large number of agricultural labourers or large number of poor households, since working opportunities of the agricultural labourers or poor people are subject to seasonal variations.⁸ However, there is no evidence supporting this argument (see Figure 4). There is no clear association between percentage of agricultural labourers in the total labour force and average person-days created. NREGA is also expected to be better implemented in places with higher concentration of poor people. In Figure 5 the average person-days per household is plotted against the percentage of BPL households across blocks. Strikingly, instead of a positive relationship, the figure shows a clear negative relationship (Pearson correlation coefficient (excluding Murarai II = -0.57).⁹ In other words, NREGA has been better implemented in places with lower concentration of poverty. Two factors could have contributed to this apparently reverse finding. First, *the number of projects/schemes*: if backward GPs with greater need for NREGA work are not able to come up with enough number of schemes to absorb the labour force demanding work, they are expected to end up with fewer days of work per household and secondly, the poor people in poverty-stricken areas may not be able to take advantage of NREGA owing to poor nutritional health that affects physical capacity needed to perform unskilled manual work.

Evidence from Primary Survey

We selected two GPs (namely Chandrapur and Talowan) of contrasting nature for our detailed primary survey based on the following three criteria: (a) their performance in the implementation of NREGA; (b) backwardness assessed in terms of concentration of socio-economically backward population, remoteness -

8 For example, the Action Plan section of the NREGA Guidelines clearly suggests that for the purpose of identification of sufficient quantity of work the likely estimation of the below poverty line population, number of marginal agricultural labourers, migration figures and other parameters as may be decided by the district for each Gram Panchayat could be considered.

9 Such a negative relationship still holds even if we exclude Murarai II block. Murarai II shows 78 percent of its households are below poverty line – which seems to be an overestimation.

measured by the distance from the district head quarter or the nearest sub-divisional office; and (c) high incidence of migration as perceived by the block and district functionaries.

Chandrapur and Talowan are among the best and worst performing GPs respectively in terms of NREGA implementation (see Appendix A1). Talowan is a backward GP which is quite remotely located from district headquarter (Suri) and poorly connected by road transport. Apart from good performance in NREGA, Chandrapur has close proximity to district headquarter (Suri) and is not as backward as Talwan. While Chandrapur GP belongs to Rajnagar block, Talowan GP belongs to Mayureswar I block. There are anecdotal evidences of incidence of migration in both the blocks.

In this section we shall try to see the contrasts between Chandrapur and Talowan with respect to different aspects of NREGA performance. Since by our selection Chandrapur is an advanced GP and Talowan is a backward one, our comparison should not merely be understood as a description of how bad Talowan is doing in comparison to Chandrapur. Rather, the purpose of our comparison is to highlight how different factors at the GP level facilitate and/or come in conflict with GP's performance with regard to NREGA.

Since it was not feasible to get a stratified list of all households for the entire GP, we selected one or two representative sansad(s). The household lists of the representative sansads were stratified into four population sub-groups: Schedule Castes, Scheduled Tribes, Muslims and others. Although attempts were made to select 30 households randomly from each stratum in a GP, we ended up with interviewing 219 households instead of 240. Since the shares of these aforementioned four population sub-groups substantially differ from each other, we used weights to take care of their different probabilities of inclusion in the selected sample.¹⁰ Therefore, all the estimates presented below are weighted

¹⁰ Weight of a sample household belonging to a particular population sub-group (ST, SC, Muslim or others) in a GP is defined as a ratio between the group's share in GP's total number of households and it's share in the sample for that GP.

estimates. In addition to interviewing the selected households, we also interviewed the available GP members and sachibs (secretary) of both the GPs. The survey was carried out during November-December 2007.

In both the backward and the advanced GPs almost everybody knows about NREGA, which is often known to the people as *100 days work*. Many individuals, who have worked under NREGA, know very little about the application procedure for job card and work, unemployment allowance in case job was not provided in time, the provisions of getting compensation in case there was delay in getting wages. In both the GPs majority of the households applied for job card and job cards were provided to all who had applied.

The survey data show that 81 per cent of the households in the backward GP and 74 per cent in the advanced GP applied for job card (see Table 5). Out of those who had applied for job card, 33 per cent in the backward GP and 35 per cent in the advanced GP reported that they applied for job, though work was provided to almost all households who asked for job. When people first came to know about *100 days work*, 41 per cent households in the backward GP and 10 per cent in the advanced GP went to the Panchayat office to enquire about it. In the backward GP, 34 per cent of the households reported that Panchayat was not cooperative when they went to enquire about 100 days work. In the advanced GP such percentage is only 16. One wonders why the attitudes of the GP functionaries towards people would be different in backward and advanced GPs. It is also true that poor and deprived people, especially in the backward GP, may have more complaints against the Panchayat as they may feel that Panchayat is not doing enough for them.

During our survey we came across households with job card, which were not as poor as to apply for unskilled manual work. This has happened because when NREGA was introduced, a misconception about job card developed in people's mind as they thought it was similar to employment exchange card. Expectation for unemployment benefits also added to this confusion in case of many households.

In both the GPs, the coverage of NREGA in terms of providing job cards to households belonging to vulnerable socio-economic groups appears to be quite inclusive as well as impressive. However, if we move from 'issuance of job card' to 'creation of person-days of work', then the results show a different reality. For example, in the backward GP, workers belonging to the landless households have, on an average, worked for only about 11 days. The workers belonging to the households of the marginal farmers have worked for about 9 days. There is no significant variation in average person-days for different socio-economic groups. For example, the average number of days worked by the SC, ST, Muslim and other communities are 9, 10, 11 and 11 days respectively. The situation is much better in the advanced GP. On an average the landless households reported to have worked for 38 days and the marginal farmers for 30 days. Average number of days worked by SC, ST, Muslims and others are 38, 23, 33 and 33 days respectively.¹¹ Large inter-class difference is found in both GPs in terms of indicators like 'percentage of households applied for job card', 'percentage of households applied for work', and 'percentage of households which continuously worked for more than two weeks' (see Table 6). The table clearly shows that scheduled tribes are at the most disadvantaged position and the relative position of the disadvantaged group is better in advanced GP. It is worth mentioning that large percentage of households (46 percent in the backward GP and 66 percent in the advanced GP) do not keep job card in their house (see Table 5). Conversation with the respondents reveals that in most of the cases job cards were either lying in the panchayat office or with the GP members.

Inability to provide minimum amount of work as promised in the Act is not the only failure in the implementation of NREGA.

11 Averages are calculated based on households' reporting of number of days they have worked under NREGS. We are aware of the possibility that households may have the natural tendency to understate the number of days they have got employment, especially in a situation when they are not happy with the work of the Panchayat. Another problem is households' reporting may not be confined to a single financial year. However, the estimates on an average are fully in line with the data we have gathered from the Panchayat with minor difference.

There are other failures too, such as failure to provide unemployment benefits in case households were not provided with job within the stipulated time. Delays were also reported for disbursing wages beyond the maximum prescribed time (see Table 5). In the advanced GP, 37 per cent of the respondents said that employment was provided within 15 days after applying for work, whereas such percentage is only 15 for the backward GP. It has been found that, even in Kerala, no unemployment allowance was provided to the eligible non-beneficiaries and majority of the non-beneficiaries were eligible for either work or unemployment allowance (Chathukulam and Gireesan 2007).

Clause 7.5 of NREGA (which is based on Payment of Wages Act 1936) entitles the beneficiaries to demand compensation in case there is delay in payment of wages beyond the stipulated time of two weeks. Though a significant number of respondents reported delay beyond 14 days in getting wages, none of them reported receiving any compensation. It was surprising to observe that none in two study GPs was familiar with this particular clause. Sachibs of the Panchayat admitted that the delay was due to delay in receiving of funds and longer time taken by the bank to encash cheque. Hence it was no fault on the part of the Panchayat.

One of the implicit objectives of NREGA is to curb distress migration, especially the migration which takes place among agricultural labourers during the lean season. The migration potential of a GP is sometimes regarded as a counter-factor against success of NREGA, as migration opportunities may reduce supply of labour for NREGA work in that area. Since it was beyond our scope to examine the two-way causality between NREGA and migration in the present study, we have tried to gather indirect evidences of impressionistic nature from the household respondents and panchayat members to explore the connection between NREGA and migration.

It has been observed that migration is not only confined to the unskilled agricultural labourers but also to the skilled or semi-skilled labourers (especially, stonemasons and bricklayers). Apart from other places within Birbhum, the districts of Burdwan and Medinipur are the most frequently cited places of destination for

the agricultural labourers. Outside West Bengal, people go to Mumbai, Bangalore, Surat, Benaras and Delhi to do semi-skilled and skilled work in the construction sector. In the advanced GP most of the people who migrated belong to the SC community and majority of them are agricultural labourers, whereas in the backward GP a sizeable number of migrant workers are from Muslim community. They are mostly skilled and semi-skilled workers and migrate to the distant cities as mentioned above. It is, therefore, less likely that a GP's performance with regard to NREGA is affected by migration of labour outside GP. Works under NREGA and work of the migrated labour should not come in conflict because agricultural labourers migrate only during sowing and harvesting seasons and NREGA work is supposed to be provided during the lean season.

Opinions of the households and GP members suggest that there is not much visible impact of NREGA on migration, though the impact seems to be marginally positive in the advanced GP. Uncertain and fewer days of work under NREGA and higher wages at the migrated places are major reasons why unskilled and semi-skilled workers still continue to migrate. In the backward GP, NREGA could not generate adequate number of person-days to absorb the labour force who demanded work. Therefore, it was obvious that it would have little impact on the seasonal migration. In the advanced GP too, despite its success NREGA could not significantly bring down distress migration. Most of the GP members are of the opinion that NREGA is unlikely to bring down distress migration as it does not offer regular job. However, experience of other states (such as Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan, Chattisgarh and Andhra Pradesh) show that migration has drastically reduced in places which implemented NREGA successfully (Mathur 2007).

It is important to note that the official guidelines on NREGA allow a GP enough flexibility to link its work with other schemes/programmes such as Indira Awas Yojana (IAY), Pradhan Mantri Gram Sadak Yojana (PMGSY), any type of water conservation / water harvesting / drought proofing work / minor and micro irrigation work benefiting scheduled castes/scheduled tribes, bargadar,

pattadar, below poverty line, small and marginal farmer households. This means a GP has the flexibility to design adequate number of schemes in different areas. Our field experience in both the GPs suggests that they have not yet acquired the skill of combining funds from two different schemes and work towards a single project. When they tried to carry out irrigation, flood control and protection work from NREGA alone, fixed wage and material components of NREGA funds posed a constraint as the permissible material component of the NREGA funds was not enough to meet the carriage cost.

6. Is the ability of GP the most important tool in NREGA implementation?

Since a GP is the prime agency for implementing NREGA, the capacity of the GP becomes the most fundamental element for the successful implementation of the programme. Capacity of the GP indicates both the physical capacity (i.e. more technical and skilled manpower) as well as the capacity to produce meaningful plans in sufficient numbers so that those who demand work can be provided employment.

The views expressed by the GP Pradhans, members and sachibs during our field survey clearly point out that GPs need more support from technical staff (such as from engineers in designing the schemes, and overseers and data entry operator for implementing the schemes). "Too much paper work for NREGA" was cited by many GP members including the Sachibs as a problem. As per NREGA guidelines, a GP is required to prepare an annual report containing the facts and figures and achievements relating to the implementation of the programme and a copy of the same is to be made available to the public on demand.¹² The shortage of human resources is a problem in the effective implementation of NREGA has also been pointed in the contemporary writings on NREGA. For example, the editorial of the Economic and Political Weekly (January 26, 2008) observes

12 All accounts and records relating to NREGA are to be made available for public scrutiny. Also a copy of the master rolls of each scheme or project under NREGA must be made available in the office of the GP for inspection.

that *the gross neglect of the staffing needs of the NREGA programme by the state administrations needs immediate rectification if the scheme is to be carried forward*. Even in its report on NREGA, the Comptroller and Auditor General (CAG 2007) has categorically pointed to the lack of administrative and technical staff as factors preventing its effective implementation in many places. For example, most of the states have entrusted the responsibility of NREGA to the Block Development Officers (BDOs) as an additional charge, who are already overburdened with implementation of other projects/schemes and handling other administrative responsibility at the block level. The problem of staff shortages has its strongest consequences at the GP level, which is the most important layer of local government engaged in the implementation of NREGA.

However, lack of skilled human resources is not the only reason for the weak implementation of NREGA in the GPs we have studied, especially in the backward GP. It has been observed that in the backward GP, the entire planning process for NREGA was completely missing. The factors which facilitate effective implementation of a programme (such as leadership, coordination and efficiency of GP administration) may often be missing in the backward GPs in general. As a result, though NREGA allows scope for creating various types of durable productive assets at the community level, it has been observed in other studies including our own that more focus has been given to rural connectivity and wells (as they are easy to design) and more meaningful projects for rural transformation remained neglected in many places (Dutt 2008). In a survey in the states of Chattisgarh and Madhya Pradesh, Ambasta, Vijay Shankar and Shah (2008) have found that programmes are focused mainly on activities for which standardised estimates are available and also plans are made and approved at the top and sent downwards for implementation by the GPs, in absence of annual plans.¹³ The varieties and potential volume of NREGA work indicate that PRIs (especially

13 Their suggestions include appointing staff in the following areas: district programme coordinator dedicated only to NREGA, constitution of technical resource support group at the panchayat level, appointment of full-time

the GPs) need to have regular and timely access to technical expertise as mentioned earlier. Moreover, well coordinated planning in advance is also crucial for successful implementation (see Appendix A2).

Thus, in order to facilitate the planning process and proper implementation of NREGA by GPs a comprehensive training on various issues during the process of implementation is of utmost importance. The components of the training need to include correct identification and conceptualisation of the project(s) based on their usefulness in the community, marking out various steps while executing the projects in view of the availability of unemployed labour force, and techniques of supervision and review of the project at the various stages of implementation for quality control, convergence of funds for single project etc. To what extent support from local NGO/CBO could be sought also needs to be considered. In addition, training on various aspects such as maintenance of records and registers, administrative procedures involved at GP level, grievance handling mechanisms, process of conducting social audit, awareness generation at the village level about entitlements of NREGA etc. are also particularly important. It must be mentioned that capacity building in the backward GPs is essential because the members and the functionaries in these GPs have a low voice and less bargaining power with the block or district level administration.

In this context, one can also explore the possibility of making the best use of the ongoing Strengthening Rural Decentralisation (SRD) programme of DFID for improving the capacity of the PRIs in West Bengal. The SRD can indicate how more programmes can be implemented efficiently with the same (or marginally more) human resources so that the underlying objective of optimum employment generation can be fulfilled. Already there are a few interesting cases of implementation of NREGA through SHG cluster

programme officer at the block level dedicated only to NREGA, appointment of three civil engineers in each block, appointment of one technical assistant for a group of 5 GPs, appointment of one assistant programme officer for a group of five GPs to undertake the task of social mobilisation, appointment of employment guarantee assistants in each village.

in Purulia and Malda districts where the SRD has given a helping hand.¹⁴ This positive outcome encourages us to suggest that the SRD could be more utilised to strengthen the NREGA programme.

7. Conclusion

In the present study an attempt has been made to examine the possible factors operating at the PRI level, which could contribute to the successful implementation of NREGA. Through the case study of Birbhum district of West Bengal, the present study tries to underscore the fact that effective functioning of PRIs (especially the GPs) is the most important element for the successful execution of NREGA. The findings from primary and secondary data reveal that capacity building - both physical capacity in terms of human and technical resources and capacity in conceptualization, planning, execution and monitoring of projects among PRI functionaries are of absolute necessity in overcoming the shortfall and in achieving the desired goal of NREGA. It must be mentioned that apart from overcoming technical and managerial constraints, there are various political constraints, which also have to be taken care of for successful implementation of the Act.

There is a great scope for improving the performance of NREGA. A new programme of such complexity like NREGA, would naturally take some years to take-off effectively. As envisaged earlier, the 'facilitators' such as government officials, GP functionaries including elected representatives, NGOs and community groups together can play a critical role in this respect. Our study suggests that the skill of converging different programmes / schemes at the GP level needs to be developed at the earliest for the successful implementation of NREGA.

14 A GP in Purulia district entrusted a cluster of 23 Grade I women SHGs with the implementation of an NREGA programme of re-excavation of a water harvesting structure. The cluster managed and supervised implementation of the work by observing all necessary formalities including provision of notice board for displaying schematic details. The labourers, villagers and GP functionaries expressed satisfaction at the quality and quantity of the work done. This inspired SHGs in the locality to take up the responsibility of implementation of other activities included in GS and GP plans.

Appendix

A1: Performance of a GP in the implementation of NREGA was measured using three indicators (i) average person days created per job card issued; (ii) percentage of completed schemes out of total number of schemes proposed; and (iii) utilised funds as a percentage of available funds. All these three indicators were considered for the financial year 2006-07. These indicators were then converted into scores using the method that UNDP uses for ranking the countries according to their human development indicators. In the next stage, three individual scores were added up to get the final scores giving 50 percent weightage to the first indicator and 25 per cent weightage to each of the other indicators. Finally, GPs were ranked in the ascending order according to the value of the total scores. Once all 167 GPs were ranked, we picked up 10 best performing GPs and 10 worst performing GPs. Two GPs were selected from these 10 best and 10 worst performing GPs taking into account other factors.

A2: The government notification clearly lists the types of work that can be undertaken under NREGA: (1) Water conservation and water harvesting in the form of excavation and construction of tanks, check dams, percolation tanks, underground dykes, ponds, rain water harvesting structures on public lands and on the lands of SC and ST, beneficiaries of land reforms, public buildings, below poverty line houses, small and marginal farmers (last in priority). (2) Drought proofing including all the components of watershed development, afforestation and tree and tree plantation, labour intensive fencing, nursery raising and other related activities. (3) Irrigation canals including micro and minor irrigation works in the form of feeder channels, filed channels, command area development, creation of labour intensive irrigation structures and other durable irrigation assets. (4) Provision of irrigation facility to land owned by households belonging to the SC and ST, beneficiaries of land reforms (i.e. pattaholders and recorded bargadars), the beneficiaries under the Indira Awaas Yojana (IAY) and small and marginal farmers (last in priority). (5) Renovation of traditional water bodies including de-silting of tanks including community drinking water wells, dug wells, bore wells and de-silting or excavation of tanks and also including the renovation of water retention capacity of private tanks if the owner is willing to share the increased quantity of retained water for public use ensured through an agreement between PRIs or the water user association and the owner. (6) Development of land owned by households belonging to the SC and ST, beneficiaries of land reforms, the beneficiaries under the IAY, the small and marginal farmers (last in priority) including

development of layouts for beneficiaries of rural housing schemes, development of playgrounds, development of land for village markets and for creating other durable community assets. (7) Flood control and protection works including drainage in waterlogged areas including creation of temporary drainage structures during rainy season. (8) Rural connectivity to provide all-weather access including earthwork on the roads to be covered in the Pradhan Mantri Gram Sadak Yojana. (9) Any other work, which may be notified by the Central Government in consultation with the state government.

While selecting the works two conditions have to be borne in mind: (a) first priority shall be given to works of community benefits and thereafter to the works of individual benefits. (b) All the works mentioned above shall also be identified on the watershed approach as far as possible.

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Tables

Table 1: Performance indicators of NREGA in major states in India

States	Average person-days per household		Share of women in total person-days	
	2006-07	2007-08	2006-07	2007-08
Andhra Pradesh	33	42	55	58
Assam	72	39	32	31
Bihar	16	23	17	27
Chattisgarh	54	57	39	42
Gujarat	44	35	50	47
Haryana	48	49	31	34
Himachal Pradesh	47	36	12	30
Jammu & Kashmir	35	8*	4	1
Jharkhand	37	46	40	27
Karnataka	38	36	51	50
Kerala	21	33	66	71
Madhya Pradesh	68	63	43	42
Maharashtra	5	39	37	40
Orissa	57	37	36	36
Punjab	49	39	38	16
Rajasthan	85	76	67	69
Tamil Nadu	28	51	81	82
Uttarakhand	30	42	30	43
Uttar Pradesh	39	34	17	15
West Bengal	14	25	18	17
India	43	42	41	43

Note : * could not be calculated since number of households were not available.
Source : www.nregs.nic.in

Table 2: Average person-days created under NREGA per applicant household in the districts of West Bengal

Districts	2006-07				2007-08			
	Average person-days created per household				Average person-days created per household			
	SC	ST	Other	Total	SC	ST	Other	Total
South 24-Parganas	11	11	11	11	18	19	19	19
Bankura	20	39	24	24	34	36	58	41
Birbhum	25	26	18	22	30	39	29	31
South Dinajpur	19	26	11	16	22	20	22	21
North Dinajpur	10	9	11	10	15	15	23	19
Jalpaiguri	8	10	8	8	27	33	29	29
Maldah	13	23	12	13	10	16	21	16
Murshidabad	7	6	8	8	14	15	16	16
West Medinipur	14	13	21	16	20	20	32	24
Purulia	13	14	11	12	28	29	31	30
North 24-Parganas	—	—	—	—	29	38	32	32
Burdwan	—	—	—	—	30	26	26	28
Coochbehar	—	—	—	—	27	E*	16	23
Darjeeling	—	—	—	—	20	24	29	25
Hoogly	—	—	—	—	25	25	25	25
Nadia	—	—	—	—	16	16	27	24
East Medinipur	—	—	—	—	23	21	23	23
Total	14	16	12	14	25	29	24	25

Note : *811 households created 625000 person-days means more than 770 average person-days per household as found in www.nrega.nic.in. This is virtually impossible.

Source : Calculated from www.nregs.nic.in

Table 3: The combined percentage share of SC and ST in total population and person-days created per household (April 2007- March 2008)

Districts	Share of (SC+ST) in total Population* (1)	Share of SC+ST in total person-days ** (2)	Favour ratio [(2)/(1)]
South 24-Parganas	33	41	1.24
Bankura	42	59	1.40
Birbhum	36	52	1.44
South Dinajpur	45	61	1.36
North Dinajpur	33	37	1.12
Jalpaiguri	56	72	1.29
Maldah	24	36	1.50
Murshidabad	13	18	1.38
West Medinipur	33	52	1.58
Purulia	37	58	1.57
N 24-Parganas	23	41	1.78
Burdwan	33	67	2.03
Coochbehar	51	59	1.16
Darjeeling	29	55	1.90
Hoogly	28	64	2.29
Nadia	32	22	0.69
East Medinipur	15	19	1.27

Note : * population figures correspond to Census 2001; ** figures on person-days are pertaining to 2007-08.

Source : Census of India, 2001 and www.nrega.nic.in

Table 4: Average person-days created per household and utilisation of NREGA funds across blocks of Birbhum (2006-07)

Block*	Person-days per household **			% Utilisation of NREGS funds**		
	Min	Max	Average	Min	Max	Average
Suri I (SUR1)	10	32	27	54	87	78
Suri II (SUR2)	18	43	27	78	99	86
Md Bazar (MB)	6	48	25	74	100	95
Saithia (SAI)	12	35	20	68	93	82
Rajnagar (RAJ)	20	38	28	83	97	92
Dubrajpur (DUB)	10	23	14	70	98	88
Khoyrashole (KHO)	13	66	30	72	92	84
Bolpur-Sriniketan (BOL)	18	57	33	94	100	97
Illambazar (ILL)	11	28	17	82	100	93
Labhpur (LAB)	15	54	24	53	100	84
Nanoor (NAN)	9	38	19	92	80	87
Rampurhat I (RAM1)	7	35	14	74	100	90
Rampurhat II (RAM2)	6	27	12	73	100	87
Mayureswar I (May1)	11	16	14	87	97	93
Mayureswar II (MAY2)	11	32	20	72	100	89
Murarai I (MUR1)	9	18	11	70	100	90
Murarai II (MUR2)	6	27	13	79	100	91
Nalhati I (NAL1)	9	25	17	71	100	89
Nalhati II (NAL2)	8	11	10	62	100	85

Note: * : These abbreviated names of the blocks are used in the scatter diagram; **: min (or max) shows the minimum (or maximum) value of person-days / utilisation of available NREGA funds of the GP under a particular block.

Source : Calculated from data provided by NREGA Cell, Birbhum district

Table 5: Households' response to different aspects of NREGA implementation in backward and advanced GPs.

	Backward GP	Advanced GP
Percentage of people who came to know about '100 days work' for the first time		
Media	17	17
Panchayat Office or Panchayat Member	44	66
Others	39	16
Percentage of households who applied for job card	81	74
Percentage of job card holder who actually applied for work	33	35
Percentage of people who went to enquire with Panchayat	41	10
Attitude of the GP staff in providing necessary information and other help		
Very cooperative	25	41
Moderately cooperative	41	43
Not cooperative	34	16
Who filled up the form		
Applicant / somebody from applicant's family	31	16
Panchayat officials or members	50	62
Others	19	22
Percentage of households keeping job card in the house	46	66
Percentage of respondents who continuously worked for 15 days	7	21
Percentage of respondents who reported delay in disbursing wage beyond 15 days	57	49
Percentage of respondents who said work was provided within 15 days of applying for work	15	37

Source : Primary Survey (2007)

Table 6: Some selected indicators of NREGA performance from households' point of view

	Backward GP	Advanced GP
Percentage of households who applied for job card		
SC	90	68
ST	67	71
Muslim	81	73
Others	79	80
Percentage of households reported to have applied for work		
SC	26	43
ST	21	24
Muslim	45	26
Others	33	35
Percentage of job card holders keeping the job card at home		
SC	73	70
ST	5	35
Muslim	29	81
Others	68	72
Percentage of households who worked continuously for two weeks		
SC	5	28
ST	6	21
Muslim	8	40
Others	9	11

Source : Primary survey 2007

Table 7: Percentage views of households, members and Sachibs about the effect of NREGS on Migration

Views	Talowan		Chandrapur	
	Households	Members	Households	Members
Substantial or some effects	17	27	57	51
Insignificant or no effect	75	63	39	26
No idea/ No response	8	9	5	25

Source : Primary Survey

Figure 2: Scatter showing the association between utilisation of NREGA funds and average person days created per household (at the block level).

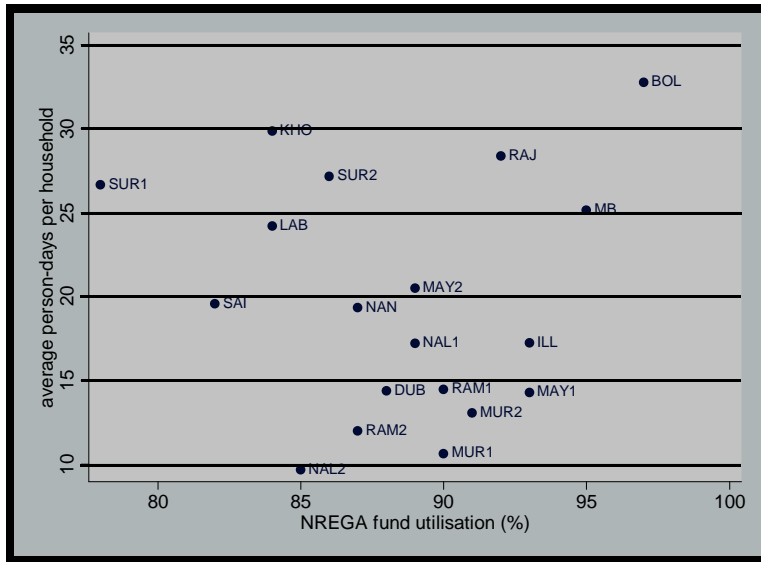


Figure 3: Scatter showing the association between utilisation of NREGA funds and average person days created per household (at the GP-level).

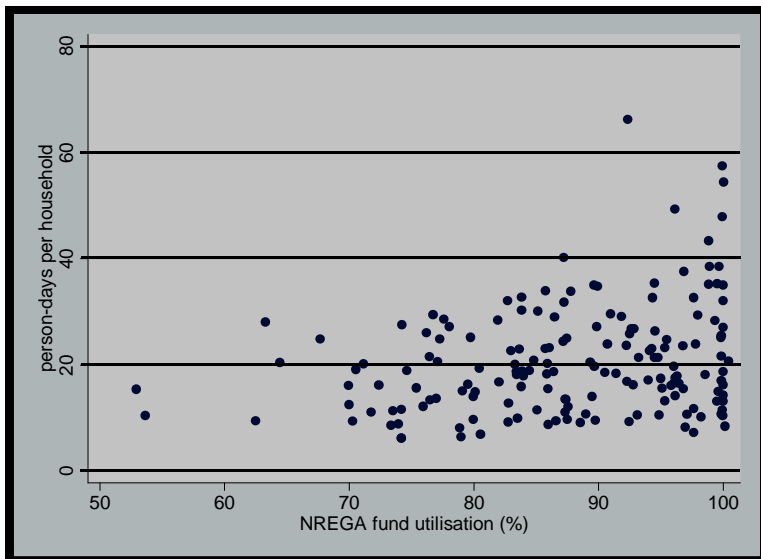


Figure 4: Scatter showing the association between average person-days per household and percentage of agricultural labourers in total workforce (at the block level).

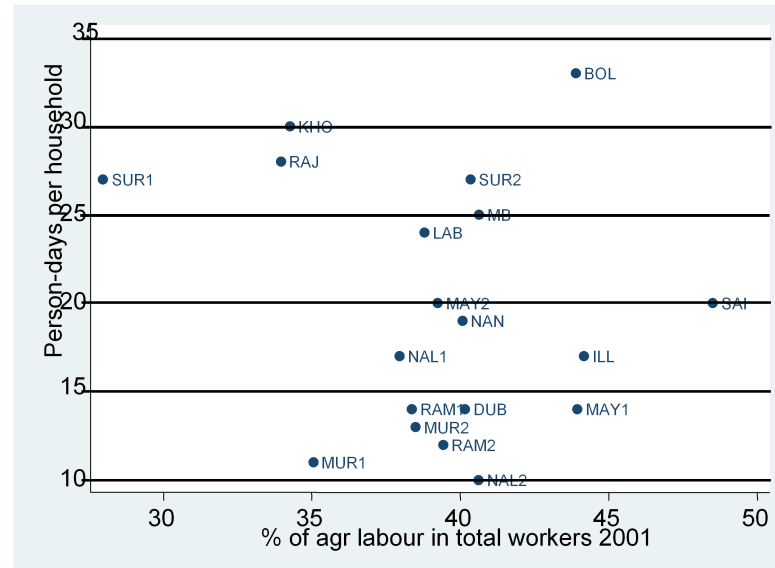


Figure 5: Scatter showing the association between percentage of BPL households and average person-days per household (at the block level).

