

## MGNREGA IN NEED

Relevant for: Indian Economy | Topic: Issues Related to Poverty, Inclusion, Employment & Sustainable Development

A record 4.89 crore persons belonging to 3.44 crore households sought work under the [Mahatma Gandhi](#) National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) in May. This is against 3.18 crore persons from 2.26 crore households for the same month last year, when large parts of India were experiencing drought-like conditions. The current surge in MGNREGA work demand reflects a drought, not of water, but of jobs and incomes. And it seems to be coming mainly from migrant workers returning to their villages from cities and industrial centres post the COVID lockdown. Proof of it is the states where the number of households registering demand has shown the highest increase: Uttar Pradesh (299.3 per cent in May 2020 over May 2019), West Bengal (214.5 per cent), Odisha (113.5 per cent), Chhattisgarh (68.9 per cent), Madhya Pradesh (65.1 per cent) and Bihar (62.1 per cent). These are all labour exporting states. What's now being seen is an extraordinary phenomenon of distress reverse migration from city to village. The lockdown hasn't hit the rural economy, more so agriculture, that badly.

The MGNREGA has been generally viewed as a scheme that provides employment during the lean period for agriculture, thereby reducing seasonal labour migration from rural to urban areas. The demand for work, too, typically peaks in May-June before falling in the subsequent months coinciding with the main kharif cropping season. But this conventional pattern may not hold in the present scenario, where the primary demand driver will not be the landless agricultural labourer who would have little work after the kharif or rabi crop has been harvested. If the laid-off auto worker from Gurgaon-Manesar or erstwhile hotel employee in Mumbai is the one seeking employment under MGNREGA — and there is no way to gainfully engage them in agriculture — the scheme's scope will have to be widened. To start with, the number of days of guaranteed employment to adult members of any rural household needs to be expanded beyond the existing 100 days. The returning migrant workers may, at some point, want to go back to jobs that paid better. But those jobs aren't going to come back soon either.

This is where a rethink on the MGNREGA's basic design might be called for without compromising its objective. If the idea is to provide work to anybody demanding it, there should, in principle, be no restrictions on the kind of activities allowed under the scheme. The stipulation of a 60:40 wage-to-material cost ratio can also be relaxed. If higher material component helps in building more assets with durable quality, why cannot these projects qualify under the MGNREGA? Why tie it down to particular "permitted works"? What stops MGNREGA labour from being used even to undertake railway or national highway work? Any public work ultimately requires labour and so long as it is given on demand, the MGNREGA has fulfilled its purpose.

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