

Employment and Food Security Among Tribal and Dalit Communities: Comparing MGNREGA and PDS in India

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Abstract

This research examines the roles of two major Indian social safety nets — the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) and the Public Distribution System (PDS) — in promoting employment security and food security among tribal (Adivasi) and Dalit (Scheduled Caste) communities. While MGNREGA offers a statutory guarantee of wage employment during lean seasons and shocks, PDS delivers subsidized food grains to eligible households under the National Food Security Act (NFSA). Drawing on national studies, programmed evaluations, and targeted evidence on marginalized castes and tribes, this paper assesses how effectively these schemes reach their intended beneficiaries, identifies implementation challenges, and discusses synergies and policy reforms needed to strengthen livelihood and nutrition outcomes. The analysis suggests that although both programmes improve access to resources and buffer food insecurity, structural inefficiencies, coverage gaps, and social exclusion limit their full potential among tribal and Dalit populations. The paper concludes by recommending convergence strategies, community involvement, and governance reforms to maximize the programmers' impacts on the social and economic well-being of India's most vulnerable groups.

Keywords: MGNREGA, Public Distribution System, food security, employment, Scheduled Tribes, Scheduled Castes, India

INTRODUCTION

Employment and food security constitute the foundation of human development and social justice. In a country as socially stratified as India, deprivation is not distributed evenly; instead, it is deeply structured by caste, tribe, gender, and geography. Scheduled Tribes (STs) and Scheduled Castes (SCs), commonly referred to as tribal and Dalit communities, have historically remained at the margins of economic growth due to land alienation, occupational segregation, social discrimination, and spatial isolation. Despite constitutional safeguards and affirmative action policies, these communities continue to experience higher levels of poverty, underemployment, food insecurity, and malnutrition compared to the national average (Government of India, 2022).

Employment insecurity among tribal and Dalit households is closely linked to their dependence on casual labour, rain-fed agriculture, forest-based livelihoods, and informal work arrangements. Seasonal unemployment, climate variability, and lack of alternative income sources exacerbate livelihood vulnerability. Food insecurity, in turn, manifests through inadequate caloric intake, poor dietary diversity, and chronic malnutrition, particularly among women and children. These vulnerabilities underscore the

importance of state-led social protection mechanisms that provide both income support and access to food. In response to these challenges, the Indian state has developed an extensive welfare architecture, within which the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) and the Public Distribution System (PDS) occupy a central position. MGNREGA, enacted in 2005, represents a paradigm shift from discretionary welfare to a rights-based employment guarantee, legally entitling rural households to wage employment. The PDS, restructured under the National Food Security Act (NFSA) of 2013, aims to ensure food security by providing subsidised food grains to eligible households. Although both programmes are designed to be inclusive and pro-poor, their outcomes vary considerably across regions and social groups. Tribal and Dalit communities often face barriers in accessing entitlements due to administrative inefficiencies, digital exclusions, lack of awareness, and entrenched social hierarchies at the local level. This paper seeks to examine and compare the effectiveness of MGNREGA and PDS in addressing employment and food security among tribal and Dalit communities in India. By synthesising existing literature, government data, and state-level case studies, the paper analyses programme impacts, implementation gaps, and policy challenges.

The central argument advanced in this paper is that while MGNREGA and PDS have made significant contributions to livelihood and food security among marginalised communities, their transformative potential remains constrained by governance deficits and insufficient convergence. Strengthening these programmes requires a caste- and tribe-sensitive approach that recognises structural inequalities and prioritises decentralised, participatory implementation. Conceptual Framework: Employment and Food Security Employment security and food security are interrelated dimensions of human welfare. Employment security refers to stable and adequate access to income-generating opportunities that enable households to meet basic needs and cope with economic shocks. Food security, as defined by the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), exists when all people, at all times, have physical, social, and economic access to sufficient, safe, and nutritious food that meets their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life.

The FAO framework identifies four dimensions of food security: availability, access, utilisation, and stability. For marginalised communities, access and stability are particularly critical, as income volatility and social exclusion frequently disrupt food consumption. Employment-based interventions such as MGNREGA influence food security indirectly by enhancing purchasing power, while food-based interventions like PDS directly affect consumption by lowering the cost of staple foods.

From a political economy perspective, caste and tribal identity shape access to resources, markets, and state institutions. Historical exclusion from land ownership and formal employment has confined SC and ST households to precarious livelihoods. Social safety nets, therefore, play a redistributive role by compensating for structural disadvantages. Narayanan and Gerber (2017) argue that employment and food security programmes are most effective when they operate in tandem, smoothing consumption across seasons and mitigating livelihood risks. This study adopts a rights-based approach to social protection, viewing MGNREGA and PDS not merely as welfare schemes but as legal entitlements. Such an approach emphasises accountability, transparency, and citizen participation, which are particularly important for empowering historically marginalised group.

India's commitment to social protection includes large-scale interventions that aim to reduce poverty, hunger, and livelihood insecurity among disadvantaged populations. MGNREGA guarantees 100 days of unskilled manual work annually to rural households, providing wage income that can alleviate

consumption gaps, especially in lean agricultural seasons. PDS, under NFSA, supplies subsidised food grains through an entitlement-based distribution network intended to uphold food security by ensuring access to staples at affordable prices. Both interventions are particularly relevant for communities historically marginalised by caste and geography — notably Scheduled Tribes (STs) and Scheduled Castes (SCs), whose socio-economic indicators lag behind national averages. This paper compares the employment and food security outcomes facilitated by these schemes among tribal and Dalit households.

Background: Social Safety Nets in India

MGNREGA: Employment and Livelihood Security for Marginalised Group

India's development trajectory has been marked by persistent challenges of poverty, unemployment, food insecurity, and social exclusion, particularly among rural households, Scheduled Castes (SCs), Scheduled Tribes (STs), landless labourers, and other marginalized communities. In response, the Indian state has adopted a welfare-oriented approach through rights-based and entitlement-based social protection programmes. Among these, the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) and the Public Distribution System (PDS) represent two of the most significant interventions aimed at ensuring livelihood security and food security, respectively. Together, these schemes form the backbone of India's social safety net by addressing both income poverty and hunger.

Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA)

The Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act was enacted in 2005 and came into force in 2006. It is a landmark rights-based legislation that legally guarantees at least 100 days of wage employment in a financial year to every rural household whose adult members are willing to undertake unskilled manual work. Unlike earlier employment schemes, MGNREGA is demand-driven, meaning that employment must be provided within 15 days of demand, failing which the state is liable to pay unemployment allowance. This legal enforceability distinguishes MGNREGA from previous welfare programmes and strengthens accountability mechanisms.

The primary objective of MGNREGA is to enhance livelihood security in rural areas by providing wage employment while simultaneously creating durable assets that strengthen the rural resource base. Works undertaken under the scheme include water conservation, drought proofing, irrigation canals, rural connectivity, flood control, land development, and works on individual land of SC/ST and small and marginal farmers. Thus, the programme integrates short-term income support with long-term rural development.

MGNREGA places special emphasis on social inclusion and equity. The Act mandates that at least one-third of the beneficiaries should be women, and equal wages are to be paid to men and women. In practice, women's participation has often exceeded statutory requirements, making MGNREGA one of the largest public employment programmes for women in the world. Similarly, a substantial proportion of beneficiaries belong to SC and ST communities, reflecting the scheme's role in addressing historical disadvantages and promoting social justice.

Institutionally, MGNREGA is implemented through a decentralized governance structure, with Gram Panchayats playing a central role in planning, execution, and monitoring of works. The Gram Sabha is empowered to identify projects, prioritize local needs, and conduct social audits. Social audits are a key transparency mechanism under MGNREGA, enabling community oversight and reducing leakages and corruption. Additionally, provisions such as job cards, worksite facilities, time-bound wage payments,

and direct benefit transfers aim to ensure workers' rights and dignity.

Despite its achievements, MGNREGA faces several challenges, including delayed wage payments, inadequate allocation of funds, uneven implementation across states, and issues related to work availability. Nonetheless, numerous studies have highlighted its positive impact on poverty reduction, income stabilization, reduction in distress migration, and empowerment of women, especially during periods of agrarian distress and economic shocks.

Public Distribution System (PDS) Food Security Outcomes

The Public Distribution System is one of the world's largest food-based welfare programmes and has been a central pillar of India's food security framework. It evolved from wartime rationing measures during the colonial period and was later expanded in independent India to stabilize food prices and ensure access to essential commodities for vulnerable populations. The PDS involves the procurement of food grains such as rice and wheat by the government at minimum support prices (MSP), their storage in public warehouses, and distribution to eligible households through a network of Fair Price Shops (FPS). The PDS underwent a major transformation with the introduction of the Targeted Public Distribution System (TPDS) in 1997, which aimed to focus benefits on poor households. Under TPDS, households were classified into categories such as Below Poverty Line (BPL), Above Poverty Line (APL), and Antyodaya Anna Yojana (AAY), with differential entitlements and prices. This targeting was intended to improve efficiency and reduce subsidy leakages, although it also introduced issues of exclusion and identification errors.

A significant milestone in India's food security regime was the enactment of the National Food Security Act (NFSA), 2013, which converted food security into a legal entitlement. Under the NFSA, approximately two-thirds of India's population is entitled to subsidized food grains—5 kg per person per month for priority households and 35 kg per household for AAY beneficiaries. The Act also includes provisions for nutritional support to pregnant women, lactating mothers, and children through schemes such as the Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS) and the Mid-Day Meal Scheme.

The objectives of the PDS are multi-dimensional. First, it aims to ensure food security by providing affordable access to staple food grains. Second, it seeks to stabilize prices and protect consumers from market volatility. Third, it supports farmers by ensuring assured procurement at MSP. In this way, the PDS links producers and consumers within a state-supported framework.

In recent years, the PDS has undergone significant reforms driven by digitalization and technology. Measures such as Aadhaar-based identification, electronic Point of Sale (e-PoS) machines, online allocation systems, and the "One Nation, One Ration Card" (ONORC) initiative have been introduced to enhance transparency, portability, and efficiency. These reforms have been particularly beneficial for migrant workers, allowing them to access subsidized food grains outside their home states.

However, the PDS continues to face challenges, including leakages, diversion of food grains, quality concerns, and exclusion of deserving beneficiaries due to documentation issues. Regional disparities in implementation remain significant, with some states performing better due to stronger administrative capacity and political commitment.

Complementarity of MGNREGA and PDS

While MGNREGA and PDS address different dimensions of deprivation, they are complementary in nature. MGNREGA provides income security through wage employment, enabling households to

purchase food and meet basic needs, while the PDS ensures direct access to essential food grains at subsidized prices. Together, they reduce vulnerability to hunger, seasonal unemployment, and economic shocks.

For marginalized communities such as SCs, STs, and landless labourers, the combined impact of wage employment under MGNREGA and food entitlements under PDS plays a critical role in improving household food security and resilience. During crises such as droughts, pandemics, or economic downturns, these schemes have functioned as crucial buffers against extreme deprivation.

Empirical Evidence and Case Studies

Tribal Communities in Odisha and Chhattisgarh

Studies from Odisha and Chhattisgarh indicate that MGNREGA has played a crucial role in reducing seasonal migration among tribal households by providing local employment during agricultural lean periods (Jose & Dhamodharan, 2025). Wage income from MGNREGA is often used to purchase food, repay debts, and meet health expenses. However, work availability remains uneven, and wage delays in these states, PDS coverage among tribal populations has improved following the implementation of NFSA. Yet logistical challenges, poor infrastructure, and limited access to fair price shops continue to affect regular grain distribution.

Dalit Households in Tamil Nadu and Rajasthan

Tamil Nadu demonstrates relatively strong implementation of PDS, with near-universal coverage and additional state-level entitlements. Dalit households in the state benefit from reliable access to subsidised food grains, which has contributed to improved caloric intake and consumption stability (Kumar et al., 2018). In contrast, evidence from Rajasthan shows that while MGNREGA participation among Dalit households is high, the average number of days of employment remains below the guaranteed threshold. Social discrimination at the village level and administrative bottlenecks constrain effective access (Manjula & Rajasekhar, 2015).

Jharkhand: Interlinkages Between Employment and Food Security

Jharkhand, with a high concentration of tribal populations, illustrates the interdependence between MGNREGA and PDS. Studies reveal that disruptions in either programme—such as Aadhaar-related exclusions in PDS or delayed MGNREGA wages—directly exacerbate food insecurity (George & McKay, 2019).

Comparative Analysis of MGNREGA and PDS

MGNREGA and PDS differ fundamentally in their design, objectives, and mechanisms of impact, yet both address complementary aspects of poverty and vulnerability. MGNREGA targets income poverty by guaranteeing wage employment, thereby enhancing households' purchasing power and reducing dependence on exploitative labour arrangements. PDS, on the other hand, targets consumption poverty by ensuring access to subsidised food grains, directly addressing hunger and caloric deficiency.

For tribal and Dalit communities, MGNREGA offers several advantages. It provides local employment, which is particularly important in remote tribal regions where migration often involves high social and economic costs. The programme also has the potential to create community assets such as water conservation structures and rural infrastructure, which can support long-term livelihood sustainability. However, its effectiveness is undermined by irregular work availability, delayed wage payments, and administrative bottlenecks.

PDS has been instrumental in reducing hunger and food expenditure among poor households, including

SC and ST communities. Studies consistently show that PDS contributes to improved caloric intake and consumption stability. Nevertheless, its focus on cereals limits nutritional outcomes, and exclusion errors disproportionately affect marginalised groups lacking proper documentation or digital access.

A comparative assessment suggests that neither programme alone is sufficient to ensure comprehensive food and livelihood security. While MGNREGA strengthens income security, its benefits are contingent on effective implementation. PDS ensures minimum food access but does not address broader livelihood vulnerabilities. Convergence between the two programmes—such as aligning wage payments with food distribution cycles and integrating nutrition-sensitive components—can enhance overall impact.

Synergies, Challenges, and Policy Implications

Synergies between MGNREGA and PDS

MGNREGA (Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act) and the Public Distribution System (PDS) together form the backbone of India's rural social protection framework. Their core synergy lies in addressing income security and food security simultaneously. MGNREGA provides wage employment to rural households, enhancing purchasing power, while PDS ensures access to subsidized food grains, stabilizing consumption even during periods of unemployment or distress.

During agricultural lean seasons, MGNREGA wages help households meet non-food expenses, whereas PDS prevents hunger and malnutrition by guaranteeing basic food supplies. In times of economic shocks, droughts, or pandemics (as seen during COVID-19), the combined functioning of both schemes reduces vulnerability, prevents distress migration, and supports livelihood resilience. Together, they contribute to poverty reduction, nutritional security, and social inclusion, especially for SC/ST communities, women, and marginal farmers.

Challenges in Implementation

Despite their potential, both schemes face structural and operational challenges. In MGNREGA, issues such as delayed wage payments, inadequate work availability, lack of skilled supervision, and political interference reduce effectiveness. Asset quality and sustainability of works also remain concerns.

PDS, on the other hand, struggles with problems like leakage, corruption, exclusion errors (eligible households left out), inclusion errors (ineligible beneficiaries included), and uneven implementation across states. Dependence on outdated beneficiary lists and inadequate grievance redress mechanisms further weaken the system.

A key challenge is the lack of convergence between the two schemes. Poor coordination between departments results in missed opportunities to link employment generation with food security planning. Digital mechanisms such as Aadhaar-based authentication, while improving transparency, sometimes exclude vulnerable populations due to technical failures.

Policy Implications

To maximize impact, stronger policy convergence between MGNREGA and PDS is essential. Timely payment of MGNREGA wages and assured availability of work can reduce overdependence on food subsidies, while an efficient PDS can complement income support during periods of job scarcity.

Policy reforms should focus on:

- Strengthening transparency and accountability through robust monitoring systems

- Updating beneficiary databases regularly
- Improving inter-departmental coordination at the local level
- Enhancing decentralization and community participation
- Integrating nutrition goals by linking MGNREGA works with food and livelihood security initiatives

A coordinated, rights-based approach can transform MGNREGA and PDS.

Both MGNREGA and PDS serve as social safety nets that can mitigate income and food insecurity, often complementing each other. Researchers argue for synergistic implementation — for instance, aligning PDS support with last seasons of MGNREGA work to smooth consumption patterns.

Conclusion

MGNREGA and PDS are foundational to India’s social protection architecture. Their potential to uplift tribal and Dalit communities is substantial: MGNREGA secures livelihood incomes, while PDS directly counters food hunger. Yet, structural and administrative hurdles continue to weaken their effectiveness at scale. Strengthening governance, promoting transparency, and designing caste-sensitive implementation strategies are essential to realise long-term gains in employment security and food security for marginalised populations in India.

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