



WORKING OF MGNREGA BY PANCHAYATI RAJ INSTITUTIONS IN IMPHAL WEST DISTRICT: PROBLEMS AND PROSPECTS

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ABSTRACT

In the hills and valley regions of Imphal West district where agriculture is the backbone of the economy the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MGNREGA) is more than a welfare program and it is also one of the lifeline of rural villagers not only in Imphal West district or our state Manipur but all over India as a whole where rural employments scheme where geographically India has a vast landscape of India's social welfare architecture, few programmed have been as debated, celebrated and criticised the MGNREGA. This Act was enacted by parliament on 25 August 2005 and it is not only a simple government scheme it is a legal rights. For the first time in the history of rural India rural adults were given a statutory entitlement that the right to demand 100 days of paid unskilled manual work every year and the right to compensation if the government failed to provide the work within 15 days.

Imphal West is one of the five valley district of Manipur which are Imphal West, Imphal East, Bishnupur, Thoubal and Kakching (Aheibam et al., 2025) a small northeast state tucked between Myanmar, Nagaland, Assam and Mizoram. It is also the home of a largely agrarian population whose livelihoods depend heavily on paddy cultivation, horticulture and daily labourer. . MGNREGA has been a lifeline of thousands of rural families in Imphal West where rural people's gets extra meagre farm incomes, reducing distress migration and creating basic public assets like ponds, roads and drainage passages.

From an act to the delivery of this scheme on ground by Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) the elected local bodies at the village, block and district level. In Imphal West district Gram Panchayat registers workers; issues job cards, plans the works and executes projects on the ground (Rural Development Department, n.d.). The Block-level Panchayat Samiti provides oversight and technical support and the Zilla Parishad district level body coordinates broader planning and fund management.

This articles look at how PRI's run MGNREGA in Imphal West district and the problems they face and also looks ahead at the newly enacted Viksit Bharat G RAM G Act, 2025 which replaced MGNREGA and introduces sweeping reforms that will reshape rural employment policy in Imphal West district and across India.

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Understanding MGNREGA: The Law, the Logic and the Promise

Before MGNREGA there are so many old schemes which gave jobs to the rural poor peoples but had no guarantee for to get the job from the schemes and people often waited for months and got nothing in return but it changes when MGNREGA came into actions because it is a demand driven, rights based wage employment programme. This means that the government does not decide in advance how many people will be employed. Any adult members of a rural household can go to their Gram Panchayat and apply in writing for work then the government is legally obligated to provide employment within 15 days. If the work is not provided then the state government must pay an unemployment allowance. This right based design makes MGNREGA unique not just in India but globally.

The key features of the scheme are easy to understand as First every rural household is entitled to 100 days of wage employment annually that too at a statutory minimum wage. Secondly at least one third of the workers must be women. Thirdly Gram Sabha is the assembly of all adult voters in village where it is the principle forum for deciding what kinds of works will be taken up in their particular area. Fourthly all wages must be paid within 15 days of work being done. Fifthly social audits public meetings where expenditures and work records are evaluated and must be held at least once in every six months (Ministry of Law and Justice, 2005).

The types of work permitted under MGNREGA include construction of roads, bunds and embankments, water conservation structures like ponds, check dams and kunds, drainage channels, irrigation canals, land development on farms of poor households belonging to Schedule Castes and Scheduled Tribes, plantation and afforestation, and construction of infrastructure like anganwadi buildings and school playgrounds. The emphasis is on creating durable public assets while simultaneously providing income support to rural workers and strengthening Panchayati Raj Institutions (Ibid., p. 24-26).

The Role of Panchayati Raj Institutions in MGNREGA

The 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act of 1992 created the legal foundation for Panchayati Raj Institutions across India. It mandated a three tier structure in local bodies the Gram Panchayat at village level, the Panchayat Samiti or Block Panchayat at the block level and Zilla Parishad at the district level (The Constitution [Seventy-third Amendment] Act, 1993). These bodies are elected by the people and they carry the constitutional mandate to plan and implement local development programmes which also includes MGNREGA.

The Gram Panchayat is the most crucial tier in MGNREGA. It is responsible for registering households that want to enrolled in the scheme, issuing job cards to eligible workers, identifying and preparing project plans (known as the self of works) in consultation with the Gram Sabha it also executes 50% of all MGNREGA work in its area, including muster rolls daily attendance records and ensuring that wages are distributed on time. The Gram Sabha as the village assembly becomes the democratic heart of the process and approves the annual work plan, selects the kind of works that is going to be done and reviews the expenditures through social audits (Ministry of Law and Justice, 2005, p. 18).

The Block-level Panchayt Samiti provides technical supervision and sanctions projects above a certain cost maximum and coordinates across the Gram Panchayats in its jurisdiction. The Zilla Parishad at the district level oversees the border financial management, reviews district level implementation and coordinates with State government. The Manipur Panchayati Raj Act, 1994 governs the structure, powers and responsibilities of these bodies in Manipur (Ministry of Panchayati Raj, 2026).

MGNREGA in Imphal West District: An Overview

Imphal West is bounded by Imphal East to the east, Bishnupur district to the south, Senapati district to the north and Churchandpur district to the west. Its geographical area is about 519sq. km. and its rural areas of the district are predominantly flat valley land which is suitable for paddy cultivation during the kharif season. Population consisting of 5,17,992 (District Administration Imphal West, n.d.), the rural population which are engaged in agriculture and daily labourers formed the primary

base of MGNREGA beneficiaries in the district. The district has 4 Community Development (CD) Blocks namely Hiyangthang CD Blocks, Lamsang Block, Patsoi Block and Wangoi Block which are operating in the district (District Administration Imphal West, n.d.), each functioning as the administrative unit for MGNREGA implementation at the block level.

The district has 39 of Gram Panchayats (District Administration Imphal West, n.d.) and 178 revenue villages spread across its CD Blocks. Each Gram Panchayat is the frontline delivery unit for MGNREGA in every rural village. Workers in the district including both men and women which are register in their respective Gram Panchayats and issued job cards which is the official identity documents that entitle them to seek work under the scheme.

Performance Data: Person Days and Employment

In FY 2020-2021 MGNREGA performance in Imphal West district is much higher than in coming years up to FY 2023-2024. During FY 2020-21 in Imphal West 37.94 lakh person days were employed and in 2021-22 34.45 lakh person were employed these decline became precipitous in FY 2022-23 where the district generated only 223953 person days employing 30050 house hold (Ministry of Rural Development, n.d.) is a collapse of over 93% after comparing with the previous year. A partial recovery followed by 2023-24 with 922370 lakh person days generated by employing 45465 house hold employed (Ministry of Rural Development, n.d.) even though this remained far below the level of FY 2020-21.

These figures indicate deep systemic problems rather than a mere seasonal fall. The dramatic fall in FY2022-23 coincided with prolonged administrative disruptions, fund release delays including due to not conducting Panchayati Raj Elections in 2022 and the social conflict that has affected parts of Manipur. Even though the recovery of financial year 2023-24 cannot be satisfied as the system is far from achieving its potential in providing the full 100 days of guaranteed employment to every eligible household in the district.

On income impact research involves 203 MGNREGA beneficiaries from Imphal West found that participation in this game lead to measurable income increases for most household with the majority experiencing income gains ranging from rupees 5000 to rupees 15,000 per year while this is significant for low income rural families it also reflects the reality that workers are often getting far fewer than 100 days of employment per year as if the workers have been working for full 100 days then they will get an income of rupees 28,400 per year as a wages for MGNREGA as the state has fixed the rate of daily wages of this scheme as rupees 284 per month in the state of Manipur (Vikaspedia, n.d.) and limiting the income impact of the programme.

Women's Participation

One of MGNREGA's clearest achievements in Imphal West is the increasing participation of women in 2022 to 2023 there are 18,729 women and 10706 men (Ministry of Rural Development, 2023) whereas in 2025-2026 there are 78310 women and 25382 were men (Ministry of Rural Development, 2026). The scheme mandates that at least one third of the workforce must be women and Imphal West has generally met and exceeded this floor. Out of 203 beneficiaries surveyed in Imphal West in a recent academic study and 141 were women reflecting women's strong engagement with the programme (Devi & Singh, 2023). This is significant in a socio-economic situation where women's access to formal wage employment in rural areas is limited. MGNREGA has offered women a legal entitlement to work, a bank account of their own for receiving wages and exposure to public work spaces all of this have contributed to a steady but meaningful socio-economic empowerment.

Problems and Challenges in MGNREGA Implementation

Irregular Release of Funds and Wage Delays

The biggest problem in MGNREGA implementation in Imphal West and indeed across Manipur is the irregular and delayed released of funds. MGNREGA is a centrally sponsored scheme this means that the Central government releases funds to the state government and the state government distributes them to implementing agencies including gram panchayats. In Manipur this chain of funds release is repeatedly broken down.

Panchayat members and Zilla Parishad representatives from six valley district including Imphal West have been protesting and road blockades regarding the release of funds for MGNREGA in many

occasions (IT Web Admin, 2014). In April 2021, Manipur Panchayat Parishad members held sit-in protests at the District Collector's office at Porompat, demanding the release of Rupees 569.16 crore sanctioned under MGNREGA but not yet released by the state government (ANI, 2021). Workers complained that wages owed for work already completed were pending for months have caused several hardships. The protestors also demanded the release of honorariums for elected panchayat members which have not been paid since October 2019.

At the national level MGNREGA law mandates that wages must be paid within 15 days of work completion. If payment is delayed beyond this period the workers are entitled to delay compensation. In practice this compensation payment are almost never made across India and Manipur. Research and parliamentary committee reports have confirmed that wage delays of several months are common and have turned MGNREGA into a supply driven programme rather than the demand driven rights based system it was designed to be.

Weak Panchayati Raj Institutions and Administrative Capacity

A Comptroller and Auditor General (CAG) audit of Manipur's Panchayati Raj Institutions covering the period 2008 to 2013 found severe structural weaknesses (Office of the Accountant General [Audit], Manipur, 2014). Under the Manipur Panchayati Raj Act, 1994 Gram Panchayats and Zilla Parishads are required to constitute Standing Committees to perform their assigned functions. However, the CAG found that none of the PRIs in Manipur with the sole exception of Imphal West Zilla Parishad had constituted Standing Committees as required. District Planning Committees had formed in the four valley districts, but they were not made functional.

The CAG also found that the state government release of funds to PRIs was constantly lower than what was recommended by the Second State Finance Commission ranging from 25% to 70% shortfall in different years (Ibid., p.8). None of the 30 test checked Gram Panchayats had prepared an annual budget as required by law. The Model Accounting System prescribed by the Ministry of Panchayati Raj had not been adopted in any Gram Panchayat or Zilla Parishad in Manipur. This absence of basic financial management systems means that PRIs in Imphal West have historically operated without the institutional discipline needed to manage larger public funds effectively.

Beyond formal audit findings the day to day capacity of Gram Panchayats in Imphal West to implementing MGNREGA is constrained by severe staff shortages, limited computer and internet access, inadequate training for elected members on technical matters like geo-tagging of assets and poor record keeping. There are 1868 Gram Rozgar Sevaks (GRS) in Manipur (Ministry of Rural Development, 2010) and it functions as the frontline functionaries at the grassroots level and its staff are often overburdened, underpaid and insufficiently trained.

Ghost Workers and Fake Job Cards

A frequent problem in MGNREGA implementation nationally and in Manipur also is the existence of fictitious or ghost job cards as this kind of job cards registered in the name of people who do not exist, have migrated or are deceased. These cards are used by unscrupulous officials and intermediaries to draw wages for work never done (Qadir, 2015). The muster roll of the daily attendance register maintained at the worksite has been manipulated in some cases to show names of workers who were not actually present. Parliamentary Standing Committee reports on MGNREGA have been explicitly flagged the problem of irregularities and malpractices in job card management as a systemic concerns across Indian states. In Manipur, the non-reconciliation of old scheme funds like Sampoorna Grameen Rozgar Yojana with MGNREGA accounts in 28 out of 28 tested Gram Panchayats have been found by the CAG (Office of the Accountant General [Audit], Manipur, 2014, p. 15) that indicates a border problem of financial opaqueness has creates space for misappropriation.

Low Wages Rates

The rate of MGNREGA is notified annually by the Central government under Section 6(1) of the Act. For Manipur wages rates have been modest annually increases but these increase have constantly been among the lowest in the country. In 2023 to 2024 Manipur was also one of the states in India that had registered some of the small percentage wage hikes. For 2024-2025, Manipur again fell in the group of states receiving below 5% wage increases (Mukherjee, 2024). As a result, MGNREGA wages in Manipur remained significantly below what would be needed for genuine income security.

The Parliamentary Standing Committee on Rural Development has pointed out that MGNREGA wages are inadequate relative cost of living. The Anoop Satpathy Committee on minimum wages had

recommended that MGNREGA wages should be at least Rupees 375 per day nationally (Press Information Bureau, 2019) and a figure considerably higher than the actual wages rates of 284 per day prevailing in Manipur. When wages are too low relative to alternative employment options or subsistence costs, workers lost interest in seeking MGNREGA work, which in turn gives local officials and middlemen greater control over who works and who gets paid and there are so many unreported incident about members using middle man for taking 50% of wages of the workers even though the money was transferred through their personal bank account the worker had to withdraw the money from the bank and give 50% of their wages to the middle men.

Insufficient Social Audit and Accountability Gaps

Social audits are the primary accountability mechanism under MGNREGA. Even Gram Panchayat is required to conduct a social audit in a public meeting at which all work records, muster rolls, wage payment details and expenditure figures are read out in front of the assembled community at least once every six months. This is meant to allow workers to verify whether records match reality or whether the work shown as done was actually completed, whether wages recorded were actually received and whether materials used match what was procured.

In practice social audits in Imphal West are across much of India and are either not held regularly or are held as mere formalities. Parliamentary committee reports have found that in several states there was no audit conducted in any Gram Panchayat in an entire financial year (Standing Committee on Rural Development and Panchayati Raj, 2025). Anecdotal evidence suggests that workers in Imphal West rural areas are often not adequately informed about social audit processes and fear that complaining or raising objections could result in being excluded from future MGNREGA work allocations.

Centralisation and Erosion of Panchayat Authority

One of the ironies of MGNREGA is that while the law designates PRIs as the primary implementing agencies but the actual experience on the ground has often involved the erosion of Panchayat authority through excessive centralisation. The real time Management Information System (MIS) the digital platform on which all MGNREGA data must be entered has in many cases shifted power away from elected panchayat members to technical functionaries and block-level officials who operate the system (MG-NREGA, n.d.). In Imphal West, where many Gram Panchayats lack reliable internet connectivity and trained staff to operate the NREGA soft platform this digital divide has future marginalised elected representatives.

National assessments have found that with too much centralisation in decision making, elected representatives of Panchayati Raj Institutions are left with little meaningful role in implementation, monitoring or grievance redress. Projects decided at higher levels of government are sometimes imposed on Gram Panchayats without genuine participation of the Gram Sabha violating the bottom up planning ethos that MGNREGA was designed to promote.

Conflict and Disruption in Manipur

Manipur has been affected by periods of inter-community conflict and civil unrest in recent years which have directly disrupted MGNREGA implementation in affected areas. Road blockades, shutdowns and administrative disruptions have interrupted fund flow, prevented technical personnel from visiting worksites and created an environment in which maintaining proper records and accountability is extremely difficult. The dramatic drop in person days generated in Imphal West FY 2022-23 from 34.45 lakh to just 2.24 lakh is consistent with the broader disruptions experienced in the state during this period.

Prospects and Positive Developments

Despite many challenges faced by MGNREGA has been a genuine instrument of women's empowerment in Imphal West. Women constitute a dominant share of the workforce in the district's MGNREGA works. Having their own bank accounts mandatory for wage payment has given many women their first experience of independence financial transactions. The regular income from MGNREGA has enhanced women's decision making power within households, improved their social status and reduced their dependence on male breadwinners. Research on Imphal West has documented that income increases from MGNREGA participation have had measurable positive impacts on household welfare mostly in families where women are the primary participants.

The women's self-help group (SHG) ecosystem in Manipur nurtured through schemes like the National Rural Livelihoods Mission has significant overlap with MGNREGA beneficiary communities. Combining the income from MGNREGA wages with SHG linked credits and enterprise support creates a powerful model for rural women's economic advancement one that holds considerable potential for Imphal West.

Asset Creation and Rural Infrastructure

When MGNREGA works is properly implemented than valuable public assets will be created. Water conservation structure like ponds, check dams and embankments have improved moisture retention in agricultural fields and provided drinking water sources for livestock. Village connectivity with roads has reduced the distance farmers have to travel to reach markets. Imphal Valley is one of the prone to seasonal flooding where it can helped mitigate flood damage by constructing drainage channels and bunds. The potential for MGNREGA to contribute in rural infrastructure in Imphal West is real and substantial. The district's agricultural landscapes with flat paddy fields depending on water availability in the district is ideally suited to the kinds of water security works like conserve, harvest, and manage water resources in rural Imphal West that MGNREGA permits. If implementation is improved then the scheme can simultaneously provide income to rural families and build the water management infrastructure that agriculture in the valley needs.

Digital Tools and Transparency Initiatives

The government has introduced several digital tools aimed at improving transparency and accountability in MGNREGA. The NREGA soft MIS platform allows real time tracking of fund flows, work completion and wage payments. The Aadhaar based Payment System (ABPS) links wage payments to workers Aadhaar numbers, making it harder to divert wages to fake accounts. The NMMS (NREGA soft Mobile Monitoring System) App is used by Mates and designated supervisors at worksites have to record daily attendance using geo-tagged photographs, reducing scope for fraudulent muster roll manipulation.

While these digital tools face implementation challenges in areas with poor connectivity that represent a genuine concern in the accountability of infrastructure. As mobile network coverage improves across Imphal West rural areas then a trend driven by a national digital connectivity missions has got the benefits of these tools and are likely to become more widely accessible.

The Viksit Bharat – G RAM G Act, 2025

India enacted a landmark legislation replacing MGNREGA in December 2025 with the Viksit Bharat Guarantee for Rozgar and Ajeevika Mission (Gramin) Act, 2025 (VB-G RAM G Act) (PRS Legislative Research, 2025). President Draupati Murmu gave assent to the Act on 21 December 2025 and the Manipur government launched a six week public outreach campaign called the Jan Samvad Programme called to promote awareness of the new law across the state including Imphal West District.

The New Act introduces several significant changes like the guaranteed employment entitlement has been raised from 100 days to 125 days per rural household per year and a 25% increase in the statutory guarantee. Wage payment timelines have been tighten up so that the wage must now be paid on a weekly basis or at the very least within 15 days of work completion. A 60 day 'no work' period has been incorporated during peak agricultural sowing and harvesting season ensuring that rural labour is available for farming activities and not diverted entirely to public works.

Under the new Act the planning process is now being reformed where the Gram Panchayat will now prepare Vikshit Gram Panchayat Plans and development plans that will integrate local priorities with national infrastructure goals through the PM Gati Shakti National Master Plan. All assets created will be entered into Viksit Bharat National Rural Infrastructure Stack and a unified national database of rural infrastructure assets (Press Information Bureau, 2026). This integration aims to improve coordination and avoid the problem of works being planned in silos without connecting to broader development priorities.

The Manipur state government's State Monitoring Cell of the Rural Development and Panchayati Raj Department has been actively conducting awareness programmes on the VB-G RAM G Act specifically in Imphal West District. The Commissioner for Rural Development has emphasised that the new scheme provides a legal entitlement to employment and focuses on sustainable rural

infrastructure development including water security, rural connectivity, livelihood assets and climate resilient works. The district's Gram Panchayats are expected to prepare Viksit Gram Panchayat Plans that reflect local priorities like irrigation needs, road connectivity and flood management in line with the Act's in four thematic domains.

Recommendations for Strengthening PRI-led Implementation

Timely Release of Funds

The most urgent reform needed in Imphal West is the timely and predictable release of MGNREGA funds from the state government to implementing agencies. Fund delays are the root cause of wage delays and wage delays destroy worker confidence in the scheme. The state government must establish an automatic rule based fund release mechanism that ensures Gram Panchayats receive money before they have to make wage payments and months after the work is done.

Building Panchayat Capacity

Gram Panchayats in Imphal West need sustained investment in capacity building. This includes training elected members and staff on financial management, use of digital tools, project planning and social audit procedures. Every Gram Panchayat should have at least one trained and adequately compensated Gram Rozgar Sevak. Panchayat buildings should have reliable internet connectivity and basic computer equipment. Block-level technical staff must be present on the ground regularly visiting worksites and supporting Gram Panchayats with technical oversight.

Strengthening Social Audits

Social audits must be conducted as genuine community accountability exercises and not as bureaucratic formalities. The State Social Audit Unit in Manipur should be adequately staffed and funded and also social auditors should be trained with independent community members and not government officials. Workers must be informed of their rights to participate in social audits and to raise complaints. Grievance redressal mechanisms must be accessible and workers who raise legitimate complaints must be protected from retaliation.

Improving Women's Participation and Benefits

Women's participation in MGNREGA in Imphal West should be consolidated and worksites must provide creche facilities for women with young children as mandated by the Act. Drinking water and toilet facilities for women must be ensured. Women should be represented in the planning process through the Gram Sabha and not just as workers but as decision makers who shape what works are taken up in their villages. Connecting women MGNREGA workers with SHG networks and livelihood support programmes can multiply the impact of their participation.

Effective Implementation of VB-G RAM G Act

The Transition from MGNREGA to the new VB-G RAM G Act 2025 presents both an opportunity and a risk. If the new Act's provisions of 125 days of employment with weekly wages and Viksit Gram Panchayat Plans are implemented with genuine commitment, rural workers in Imphal West stand to benefit significantly. However, if the new Act's more centralising planning framework is not implemented with real community participation then it will risk further marginalising local elected bodies and reducing the scheme to a top down infrastructure delivery program. The key is to ensure that Gram Sabhas in Imphal West are empowered to shape their Viksit Gram Panchayat Plans based on genuine local needs.

Conclusion

MGNREGA's story in Imphal West District is a story of promise, partial fulfilment and persistent struggle. The legal framework is sound and it guarantees employment as a right which mandates Panchayat led implementation requires social accountability and insists on women's participation. On paper the district should have thousands of rural families working productively every year, earning fair wages, building water conservation assets and participating in decisions about their own development.

In reality this scheme is more complicated as there is irregular fund release, administrative capacity, weak social audit, low wage rates and the disruptive effects of social conflict have combined to make MGNREGA's implementation in Imphal West deeply inconsistent. The dramatic collapse in person-days generated in FY 2022-23 and the slow recovery in FY 2023-2024 are symptoms of a system

under stress.

Women's participation has grown and income support has reached many poor households. Public assets have been created. And now with the VB-G RAM G Act, 2025 India is embarking on a new chapter in rural employment policy the one that promises more days of guaranteed work for 125 days, faster wages and better integration of employment with infrastructure development.

The challenges faced by this district is to translate this legal promise into lived reality that requires financial discipline from the state government, institutional strengthening of Gram Panchayats, genuine community participation in planning, robust accountability of mechanism and the political will to prioritise the welfare of the rural poor. If these conditions are met then the PRIs of Imphal West district can become what the Constitution intended them to be genuine institutional of local self-government that deliver development and dignity to every rural house hold.

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