

See discussions, stats, and author profiles for this publication at: <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/293077539>

# What determines the success of nregs at the panchayat level? a case study of birbhum District in West Bengal

Article · January 2009

CITATIONS

8

READS

623

2 authors:



**Subrata Mukherjee**

IDSK - Institute of Development Studies Kolkata

32 PUBLICATIONS 217 CITATIONS

[SEE PROFILE](#)



**Ghosh Saswata**

IDSK - Institute of Development Studies Kolkata

71 PUBLICATIONS 382 CITATIONS

[SEE PROFILE](#)

Some of the authors of this publication are also working on these related projects:



An Evaluation of Rural Health Care Providers Training Programme [View project](#)



Public Health Nutrition Food Security [View project](#)

## **WHAT DETERMINES THE SUCCESS OF NREGS AT THE PANCHAYAT LEVEL? A CASE STUDY OF BIRBHUM DISTRICT IN WEST BENGAL**

**Subrata Mukherjee and Saswata Ghosh\***

*In spite of many favourable factors, West Bengal is not among the best performing states in the country in terms of the implementation of National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (NREGS). This article, by taking a case study of Birbhum district of West Bengal, attempts to understand the roles of some macro and micro level factors in determining the success and failures of NREGS implementation. The availability of NREGS funds at the Block/Gram Panchayat (GP) level shows a weak connection with the factors which generate the potential demand for NREGS work. Although NREGS allows for various types of works for the community as well as for private benefits, the GPs are not able to create an adequate number of schemes for generating employment. The lack of capacity to design and implement a large number of meaningful schemes on the part of GPs thus seems to be the major limiting factor in NREGS implementation in Birbhum. This necessitates greater emphasis on the capacity building of the GPs, especially the backward ones among them.*

### **I. INTRODUCTION**

The National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (NREGS) is now in its third year and has been extended to all the rural districts of India. Although all the tiers of Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) are involved in different capacities for the execution of work under National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA), the Gram Panchayat (GP)—the lowest tier of PRI—is responsible for the identification, execution and supervision of NREGA. As a result, apart from other factors, the role of the PRIs (especially that of GPs) becomes crucial in the implementation of NREGA.

The state of West Bengal is often cited as a successful case of democratically decentralised participatory governance, and the strong and effective functioning of the PRIs (Government of West Bengal, 2004). There are other factors too which should work in favour of a better performance of the NREGA in the state. The rural poverty ratio is still significantly high in West Bengal at 28.6 per cent (Government of India, 2007). The percentage of rural households 'not having enough food every day in some months' is the highest in the state at 10.6 per cent (NSSO, 2007) among the major Indian states. The agricultural wage rate in West Bengal is lower than the national minimum wage rate and there is evidence of

---

\* The authors are Lecturers, Institute of Development Studies, Kolkata (IDSK), India. They are thankful to the district administration of Birbhum for providing access to the data, and faculty members and M.Phil students of IDSK for participating in the field survey. They are also grateful to Achin Chakraborty, Amit Bhaduri, Amiya Kumar Bagchi, D. Narayana and Pinaki Chakraborty for their comments. The authors alone are responsible for any errors.

gender difference in the wage rate accruing to women (NCEUS, 2007). Despite all these favourable factors for the higher demand for work under NREGS by rural households, the available statistics for the last two years show the state's unsatisfactory performance in the implementation of NREGS as compared to many other states.

During the financial year 2007-08, West Bengal was able to generate only about 25 person-days of employment per rural household, which is lower than the corresponding figures for all the major states except Bihar. Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh and Chhattisgarh are among the top ranking states and generated 76, 63 and 57 person-days of employment, respectively, per rural household in 2007-08. It may be mentioned here that between 2006-07 and 2007-08, Maharashtra and Tamil Nadu showed remarkable improvement in performance in terms of the generation of average number of person-days of employment. In Maharashtra, the average number of person-days per rural household increased from 5 to 39, while in Tamil Nadu, the corresponding figure was augmented from 28 to 51 during the same period. West Bengal's improvement from the average number of 14 person-days of employment in 2006-07 to 25 person-days in 2008-09 is clearly not at par with the figures achieved by these states.

In this backdrop, the present article tries to examine the link between performance of NREGS and a few selected macro and micro level factors, by taking a backward district of West Bengal, viz., Birbhum, as a case study. It also tries to explore ways in which the ongoing Strengthening Rural Decentralisation (SRD) Programme can play a proactive role in expanding the GPs' capacity in order to better implementation of NREGA. The article is divided into the following sections: Section II briefly describes the conceptual framework and data sources. Section III takes up Birbhum district as a case study and attempts to understand the links between various micro and local level factors and NREGA performance using both secondary and primary data. Section IV discusses the crucial link between the capacity of PRIs and the implementation of NREGA, while exploring the potential of the SRD programme for improving the performance of NREGS. Section V concludes the article.

## **II. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK AND DATA SOURCES**

Since the success of NREGA is expected to be crucially dependent on the basic structure of the local economy as well as on the capacity of the local governments, a study attempting to understand the factors affecting the performance of NREGA needs to take into account various micro and macro level factors. In order to facilitate a better understanding of the various local and micro level factors at play in implementation of the NREGA, we have adopted a case study approach besides undertaking an analysis of the available macro data. The Birbhum district of West Bengal, with special emphasis on two GPs in the district, has been selected for the case study. Birbhum is one of the backward districts of West Bengal in terms of human development indicators, rate of urbanisation, concentration of the marginalised population, and the share of agriculture in the district economy (Government of West Bengal, 2004).

The factors which are likely to influence a GP's performance with regard to NREGA can be classified into two broad categories: demand side factors and supply side factors. The extent of poverty, size of the agricultural/casual labour force and people's awareness about

NREGA (especially their rights and entitlements under NREGA) contribute to the demand side factors. Since the implicit goal of the NREGA is to enhance the livelihood security of the vulnerable population in the rural areas, the demand for NREGA is expected to be higher in places with a higher share of poor people and agricultural/casual labourers. Factors like the migration potential of an area and the semi-feudal structure of the local economy can have an adverse influence and lead to a reduction in the demand for NREGA work. On the supply side, the infrastructural backwardness of the area (which actually creates the potential for designing a higher number of schemes under NREGA), capacity of the GP (in terms of adequate manpower to plan and execute works), and the timely receipt of NREGA funds are the most important factors determining the efficiency of implementation. The capacity of the GP can matter in two ways: first, during the planning stage, the GP needs to have access to technical and skilled manpower in order to design an adequate number of schemes; second, while executing the work, the GP needs enough manpower to undertake supervision, monitoring and maintenance of information and monetary accounts. The strict implementation rules and well-defined guidelines make it mandatory for the GPs to maintain various records related to different aspects of NREGA work on a regular basis.

The secondary data sources used for the study include the information available on the official website of NREGA ([www.nrega.nic.in](http://www.nrega.nic.in)), and the data provided by the District NREGS Cell (Birbhum district, West Bengal), District Planning Office and Census, 2001. The primary data used in this study has been obtained through a field survey, which covered 219 households and more than 20 GP members and *Sachibs* (Secretaries) in two selected GPs. The process of selection of GPs and households within the GPs is described below:

First, the performance of a GP was measured by using three indicators: (i) the average number of person-days created per job card issued; (ii) the percentage of completed schemes out of the total number of schemes proposed; and (iii) the utilised funds as a percentage of the available funds for NREGA. All these indicators were considered for the financial year 2006-07. These indicators were then converted into scores by using the UNDP's Human Development Index construction method. During the next stage, three individual scores were added up to obtain the final scores by giving 50 per cent weights to the first indicator, and 25 per cent weights to each of the other two indicators. The GPs were then ranked in ascending order of the composite index of performance, and the ten best performing and ten worst performing GPs were shortlisted. Finally, two GPs (one each from the lists of ten best and ten worst performing GPs) were picked up by considering two additional criteria: (a) backwardness assessed in terms of concentration of the socio-economically backward population and remoteness or distance from the district headquarter or sub-division; and (b) the high incidence of migration perceived by the block and district level functionaries. This resulted in the selection of Chandrapur and Talowan as representatives of the advanced and backward GPs, respectively. Apart from notching up a good performance in NREGA, Chandrapur also has the advantages of close proximity to the Sadar sub-division (Suri) and a comparatively lower degree of backwardness as compared to the other states. Unlike Chandrapur, Talowan, on the other hand, is a backward GP, which is quite remotely located and poorly connected to other areas in the district by road transport.

Since it was not feasible to procure a stratified list of all households based on caste/religion for the entire GP, we selected one or two representative *sansads* from each GP. The household lists of the representative *sansads* were stratified into four population sub-groups: Schedule Castes (SCs), Scheduled Tribes (STs), Muslims and others. Although we targeted to select 30 households randomly from each stratum in a GP, due to an unavoidable situation, the survey ended up covering 102 and 117 households in the Talowan and Chandrapur GPs, respectively. A structured questionnaire with a number of open-ended questions was used for the survey. While questions relating to household details were posed to the head of the household or his/her spouse, NREGA-related questions were posed to persons who had participated in the NREGA work during a period of one year preceding the survey. Although attempts were made to ensure that at least 30 per cent of the respondents for the NREGA-related questions would be women, in reality we could get only a little more than 20 per cent women respondents. Since the share of each population sub-group was different in the sample and in the GP population, inflation-factor weights were used to take care of the varying probability of inclusion of each type of household in the sample.<sup>1</sup> Therefore, all the estimates presented below are weighted estimates. In addition to interviewing the selected households, we also interviewed the available GP members and GP *Sachibs* (secretaries) of both the GPs. Separate structured questionnaires with a number of open-ended questions were used for GP members and GP *Sachibs*. A total of 19 GP members (11 in Talowan and 8 in Chandrapur) and 2 GP *Sachibs* were interviewed. The survey was carried out during the period November-December 2007.

### III. BIRBHUM DISTRICT IN THE CONTEXT OF WEST BENGAL

When the programme was launched in West Bengal in 2006, the ten most backward districts including Birbhum were covered, while seven more districts were included in the second phase in 2007, and the district of Howrah was included in April 2008. Although West Bengal's performance does not look impressive in terms of the number of average person-days of employment generated, the state has succeeded in providing job cards and at least a few days of work to a large number of households. In West Bengal, the increase in the average number of person-days of employment from 14 in 2006-07 to 25 in 2007-08 has been possible due to two factors: (a) the second phase districts did not perform as poorly as most of the first phase districts did in the first year of NREGA implementation, and (b) three first phase districts (namely, Bankura, Jalpaiguri and Purulia) experienced a notable improvement over the two phases (see Table 1). Among the first phase districts, the lowest number of person-days were generated in Murshidabad during both the years. Malda, which is also another first phase district and backward in terms of human development indicators, has failed to show any noticeable progress in generating employment for the rural poor during both the years. In the second phase districts too, the performance of NREGA is ordinary. Only about 25 person-days were generated per rural household in these districts with little variations among the districts. The creation of an average number of person-days of employment per rural household is the lowest in the Coochbehar and Purba Medinipur, and the highest in North 24 Parganas, among these districts.

Table 1  
Average Person-days Created under NREGA per Applicant Household in the  
Districts of West Bengal

District	2006-07				2007-08			
	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
Dakshin Dinajpur	19	26	11	16	22	20	22	21
Uttar 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
Paschim 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	-	16	23
Darjeeling	-	-	-	-	20	24	29	25
Hoogly	-	-	-	-	25	25	25	25
Nadia	-	-	-	-	16	16	27	24
Purba Medinipur	-	-	-	-	23	21	23	23
Total	14	16	12	14	25	29	24	25

Source: Calculated from data provided on [www.nregs.nic.in](http://www.nregs.nic.in)

Table 2 shows the combined shares of SCs and STs in the total population as well as the total number of person-days of employment created under NREGA (2007-08). In order to examine the extent of the share of NREGA benefits accruing to the SC and ST communities in relation to their share in the population, we have computed a ratio called the 'favour ratio'. It is a ratio between the percentage share of a population sub-group in the total number of person-days created under NREGA and its percentage share in the total population. The higher that the value of the favour ratio exceeds 1, the greater is the share of NREGA work that it indicates in favour of that particular population sub-group. The districts in the state, which have done exceptionally well in distributing the benefits of NREGA in favour of the SC and ST communities, are Hoogly and Burdwan. All the other districts also succeeded in providing a larger share of NREGA work to the marginalised communities (though to a lesser degree), except Nadia.

### 1. Birbhum District: Block Level Analysis

The data on households in Birbhum that hold job cards and that demanded employment under NREGA shows that during the financial year 2006-07, 85 per cent of the job cardholder households applied for work. Although there is no difference between the number of households that demanded employment and those that were provided employment in the district, such a difference does exist for the state. The block-wise figures on the average number of person-days created per household and the percentage utilisation of NREGA

Table 2  
**Percentage Share of SC and ST in Total Population and  
 Person-days Created per Household, 2007-08**

<i>District</i>	<i>Share of (SC+ST) in total population* (1)</i>	<i>Share of SC+ST in total person-days** (2)</i>	<i>Favour ratio [(2)/(1)]</i>
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
Malda	24	36	1.50
Murshidabad	13	18	1.38
P 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
P 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

funds for the year 2006-07 have been presented in Table 3. The same table also depicts the minimum and maximum number of average person-days per household and the utilisation of funds by the GP under each block. There is a considerable variation across blocks in terms of the average number of person-days per household. Out of 19 blocks in Birbhum, only 6 blocks could provide more than 25 days of work, on an average. The performance of NREGA in terms of the number of person-days per household is extremely poor in 6 blocks of Birbhum with the average number of person-days per household being less than 15. It has been observed that even the blocks which performed better than the others showed considerable inter-GP variation within the block. A similar inter-block difference was found in the case of utilisation of NREGA funds. On the one hand is a block like Bolpur-Sriniketan, which had spent nearly 97 per cent of the available funds, while on the other hand is 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. As in the case of the average number of person-days, a similar intra-block difference was also found in the case of utilisation of the available funds. For example, in the Labpur block, one of the GPs could utilise only 53 per cent of the available funds, while at the same time, another GP in the same block managed to utilise the entire funds.

Is there any positive relationship between the utilisation of the available NREGA funds and the average number of person-days created per household at the block level? In other

Table 3  
Average Person-days Created per Applicant Household and  
Utilisation of NREGA Funds across Blocks of Birbhum, 2006-07

Block	Person-days per household			% Utilisation of NREGA funds		
	Min	Max	average	Min	Max	average
Suri I (SUR I)	10	32	27	54	87	78
Suri II (SUR II)	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
Labpur (LAB)	15	54	24	53	100	84
Nanoor (NAN)	9	38	19	92	80	87
Rampurhat I (RAM I)	7	35	14	74	100	90
Rampurhat II (RAM II)	6	27	12	73	100	87
Mayureswar I (MAY I)	11	16	14	87	97	93
Mayureswar II (MAY II)	11	32	20	72	100	89
Murarai I (MUR I)	9	18	11	70	100	90
Murarai II (MUR II)	6	27	13	79	100	91
Nalhati I (NAL I)	9	25	17	71	100	89
Nalhati II (NAL II)	8	11	10	62	100	85

*Note:* Min (or max) shows the minimum (or maximum) value of person days / utilisation of available NREGA funds of the GP under the each block. Abbreviated names of blocks are given in brackets.

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

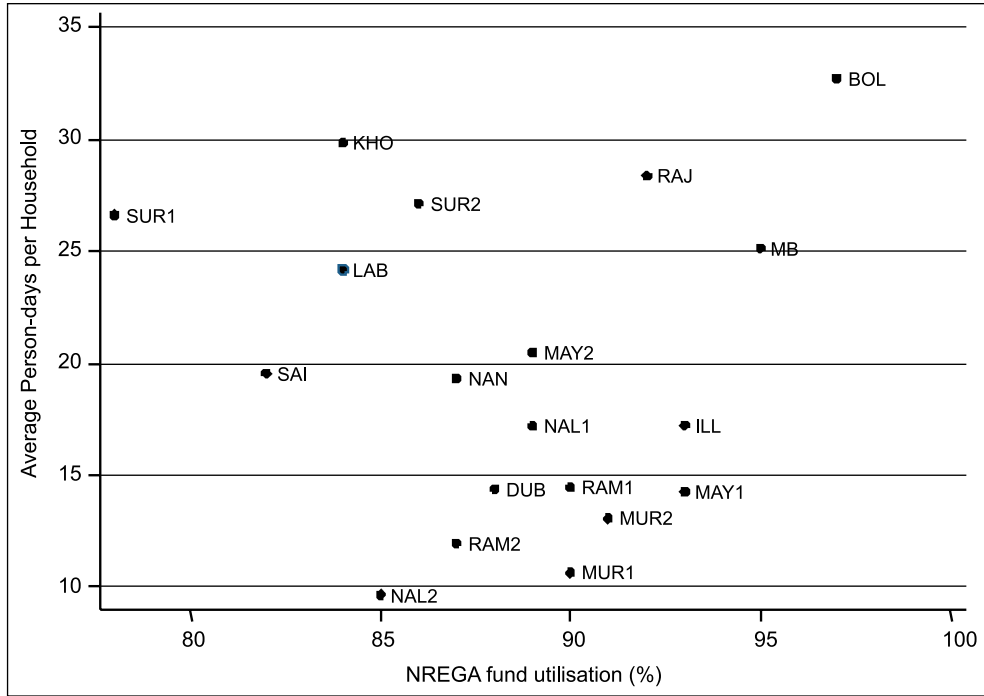
words, had the blocks which spent most of the available funds under NREGA succeeded in creating a higher number of average person-days? Apparently, there is no clear relationship between the utilisation of available funds and the average number of person-days created (Figure 2). However, if one excludes blocks like Suri I, Suri II, Saithia, Khoyrasole and Labpur, it can be visualised that the rest of the blocks are positioned in a way to exhibit a positive relationship (Pearson correlation coefficient = 0.70). On the other hand, ignoring the blocks of Rajnagar, Bolpur and Md. Bazar, one can 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. Therefore, the same relationship is also explored at the GP level (Figure 3). The figure does not exhibit any clear positive relationship (Pearson correlation coefficient = 0.27). It is also evident from Figure 3 that a GP may exhaust all its funds and still be unable to generate an average number of person-days anywhere close to 100 days. These findings provide an indication that hardly any GP was able to come up with an adequate number of schemes to absorb all the households demanding work under the NREGA.

Seen from another perspective, the above findings suggest that there are two reasons for the low level and large inter-block/inter-GP variation in the average number of person-



Figure 2

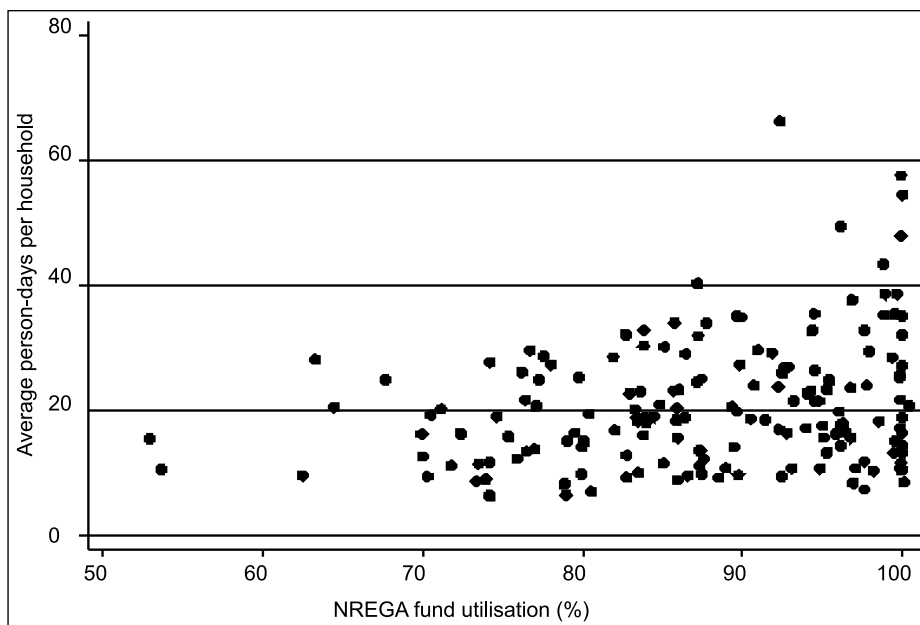
Utilisation of NREGA Funds and Average Person-days per Household (Block-Level Scatter)



Source: NREGS Cell, Birbhum district.

Figure 3

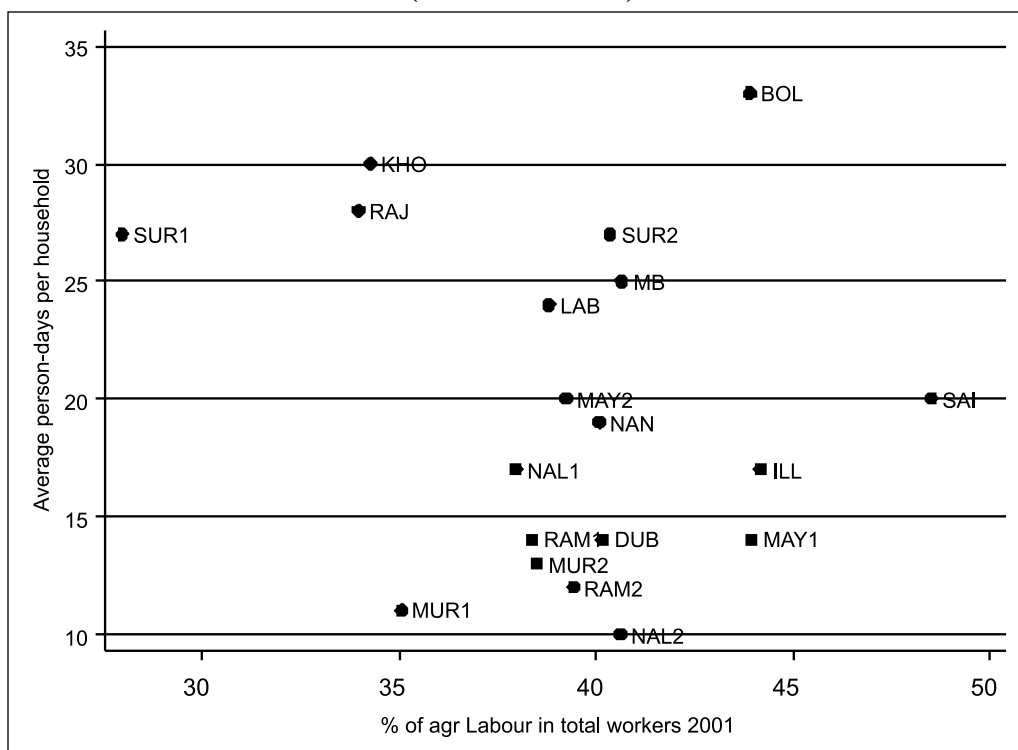
Utilisation of NREGA Funds and Average Person-days per Household (GP-Level Scatter)



Source: NREGS Cell, Birbhum district.

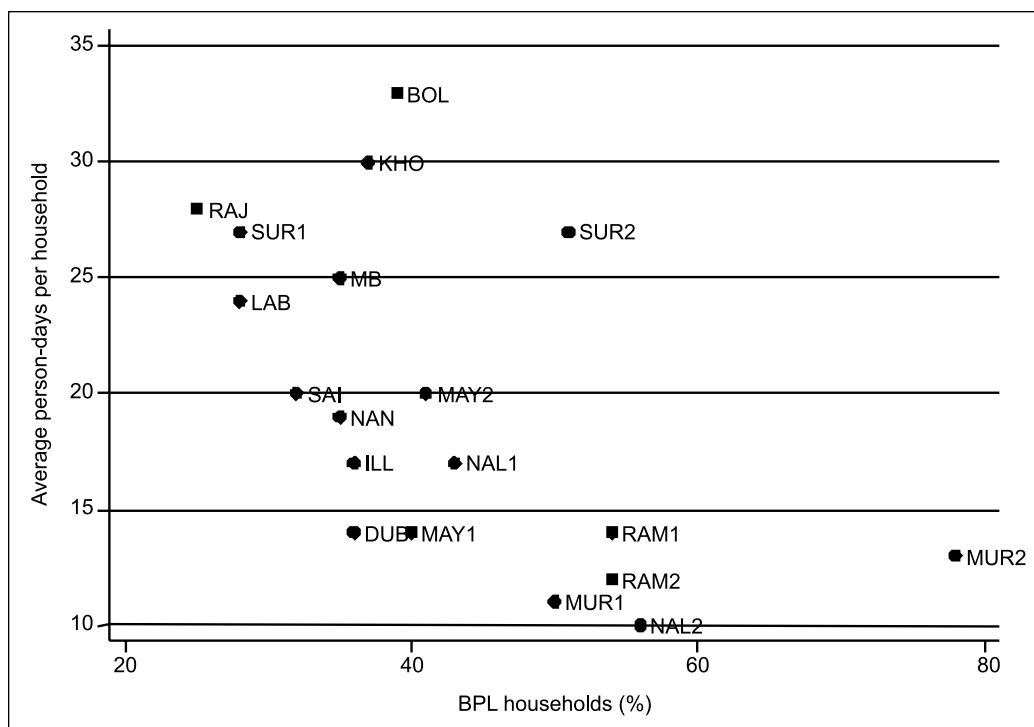
days generated per household. First, the amount of NREGA funds available at the block/ GP level has a weak connection either with the number of job cards or with the potential demand for work. The (Pearson) correlation coefficients between the number of households that demanded work and the amount of available funds are 0.34 and 0.57 at the GP and block levels, respectively.<sup>2</sup> It is worth observing that the connection between the available funds and the households demanding employment is weaker at the GP level than at the block level. Second, the administrative personnel involved in the NREGA usually explain this by claiming that not enough people are available for undertaking NREGA work. It seems plausible that if people have the opportunity to work at higher wage rates or have more assured work at the same (or even a little lower) wage rate, they may not be interested in undertaking NREGA work, especially when the timings of NREGA works clash with those of their alternative works. NREGA, therefore, needs to be better implemented in places inhabited by a large number of agricultural labourers or poor households, since their earning opportunities are subject to seasonal variations.<sup>3</sup> However, there is no evidence to support this argument (see Figure 4). There is no clear association between the percentage of agricultural labourers in the total labour force and the average number of person-days created. NREGA also needs to be better implemented in places with a higher concentration of poor people.

Figure 4  
Share of Agricultural Labour in Total Work Force and Average Person-days per Household  
(Block-Level Scatter)



Source: Census 2001, NREGS Cell, Birbhum district.

Figure 5  
Percentage of BPL Households and Average Person-days Created per Household  
(Block-Level Scatter)



Source: Birbhum District BPL survey, NREGS Cell, Birbhum district.

In Figure 5, the average number of 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].<sup>4</sup> In other words, NREGA has been better implemented in places with a lower concentration of poverty. There could be several reasons for these unexpected or reverse findings. The first reason pertains to the number of projects/schemes. If backward GPs with a greater need for NREGA work are not able to come up with a sufficient number of schemes to absorb the labour force demanding work, they are expected to end up with fewer days of work per household. It is observed that the population density (or population pressure on land) is high in backward pockets, which makes it difficult to find enough land-space to work on (many NREGA projects are highly earth-based). Second, the poor people in poverty-stricken areas may not be able to take advantage of NREGA owing to their poor nutritional health, which affects the physical capacity needed to perform unskilled manual work. Third, the availability of enough non-agricultural works in the local areas or at places inhabited by migrants may act against the people's interest in NREGA work. In Birbhum, it is observed that migration is restricted not only for unskilled agricultural works but also for semi-skilled labour works such as stone masons and bricklayers (Government of West Bengal, 2009).

## 2. Birbhum District: Evidence from Primary Survey

The analysis of our primary survey data intends to examine the contrasts between Chandrapur and Talowan with respect to different aspects of the NREGA performance. However, our comparison should not merely be understood as a description of how poorly Talowan is doing in comparison to Chandrapur, but we will instead try to highlight how different factors facilitate and/or come into conflict with NREGA performance in both an advanced GP (Chandrapur) and a backward GP (Talowan).

In both the backward and the advanced GPs, almost all the people know about NREGA, which is mostly known to the people as '100 days work'. Many individuals, who have worked under NREGA, know very little about the application procedure for obtaining job cards and work, unemployment allowance, and compensation in case of a delay in getting wages. The survey data shows that 81 per cent of the households in the backward GP and

Table 4  
Households' Response to Different Aspects of NREGA Implementation

	<i>Backward GP (Talowan)</i>	<i>Advanced GP (Chandrapur)</i>
% of respondents came to know about '100 days work' for the first time [n(T) = 102; n(C) = 117]		
Media	17	17
Panchayat Office or Panchayat Member	44	66
Others	39	16
Percentage of households applied for job card [n(T) = 102; n(C) = 117]	81	74
Percentage of job card holder who actually applied for work* [n(T) = 83; n(C) = 86]	33	35
Percentage of respondents who went to enquire with Panchayat [n(T) = 102; n(C) = 117]	41	10
Attitude of the GP staff in providing information [n(T) = 42; n(C) = 12]		
Very cooperative	25	41
Moderately cooperative	41	43
Not cooperative	34	16
Who filled up the form [n(T) = 83; n(C) = 86]		
Applicant / somebody from applicant's family	31	16
Panchayat officials or members	50	62
Others	19	22
Percentage of households keeping job card at home [n(T) = 83; n(C) = 86 ]	46	66
Percentage of respondents continuously worked for 15 days [n(T) = 80; n(C) = 79 ]	7	21
Percentage of respondents reported delay in disbursing wage beyond 15 days [n(T) = 80 ; n(C) = 79 ]	57	49
Percentage of respondents who said work provided within 15 days of applying for work 15 [n(T) = 80; n(C) = 79]		37

*Note:* for each estimate: n(T) = effective sample size of Talowan and n(C) = effective sample size of Chandrapur; \* work was provided to more households than those who knowingly applied for work.

*Source:* Primary Survey (2007).

74 per cent in the advanced GP applied for job cards (see Table 4). Out of those who had applied for job cards, 33 per cent in the backward GP and 35 per cent in the advanced GP reported that they had applied for jobs, though work was provided to all the households that had asked for jobs. When people first came to know about 100 days work, 41 per cent respondents 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 respondents reported that the Panchayat was not cooperative when they went to enquire about 100 days work. In the advanced GP, the percentage of such people is only 16. One wonders why the attitudes of the GP functionaries towards the people would be different in backward and advanced GPs. It is also true that the poor and deprived people in the backward GP may have more complaints against the Panchayat as they may feel that Panchayat is not doing enough for them. Inability to provide a minimum amount of work as promised in the Act is not the only failure in the implementation of NREGA. There are other failures too, such as the failure to provide unemployment benefits in case the concerned households were not provided with jobs demanded by them within the stipulated time frame. Delays were also reported in the disbursement of wages beyond the maximum prescribed time (see Table 4). In the advanced GP, 37 per cent of the respondents said that employment was provided to them within 15 days after applying for work, whereas the corresponding percentage was only 15 for the backward

Table 5  
Some Selected Indicators of NREGA Performance from Households'  
Point of View in the Selected GPs in Birbhum

	<i>Backward GP (Talwan)</i>	<i>Advanced GP (Chandrapur)</i>
Percentage of household applied for job card [n(T) = 102; n(C) = 117]		
SC	90	68
ST	67	71
Muslim	81	73
Others	79	80
Percentage of households reported to have applied for work* n(T) = 83; n(C) = 86]		
SC	26	43
ST	21	24
Muslim	45	26
Others	33	35
Percentage of job card holders keeping the job card at home [n(T) = 83; n(C) = 86 ]		
SC	73	70
ST	5	35
Muslim	29	81
Others	68	72
Percentage of households worked continuously for two weeks [n(T) = 80; n(C) = 79]		
SC	5	28
ST	6	21
Muslim	8	40
Others	9	11

*Note:* for each estimate: n(T) = effective sample size of Talwan and n(C) = effective sample size of Chandrapur; \* work was provided to more households than those who knowingly applied for work.

*Source:* Primary Survey, 2007.

GP. Clause 7.5 of NREGA (which is based on the Payment of Wages Act 1936) entitles the beneficiaries to demand compensation in case there is a delay in the payment of wages beyond the stipulated time of two weeks. Although a significant number of respondents reported a delay beyond 14 days in getting wages, none of them reported receiving any compensation. It was surprising to observe that no one in the two GPs under study was familiar with this particular clause. The *Sachibs* of the Panchayat admitted that the delay in payment of wages was due to a delay in the receipt of funds and the longer time taken by the bank to encash the cheque, and not because of any fault on the part of the Panchayat.

During our survey, we came across households which had job cards but which were not so poor as to apply for unskilled manual work. This situation has occurred because when NREGA was introduced, in its initial stage, there was a common misconception about job cards among many rural people, who thought that it was similar to an employment exchange card. The expectation of obtaining unemployment benefits also added to the confusion in many households. In both the GPs, the coverage of NREGA in terms of provision of job cards to households belonging to the vulnerable socio-economic groups appears to be quite inclusive as well as impressive. However, if we move from the 'issuance of job card' to the 'creation of person-days of work', then a different reality comes to the fore. 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 not much variation in the average number of person-days for different socio-economic groups. For example, the average number of person-days for the SC, ST, Muslim and other households are 9, 10, 11 and 11 days, respectively. In the advanced GP, the landless and marginal farmer households have worked for 38 and 30 days, respectively. The average number of days worked by the SC, ST, Muslim and other households are 38, 23, 33 and 33, respectively.<sup>5</sup> A large inter-class difference is found in both the GPs in terms of indicators like the 'percentage of households that applied for job cards', 'percentage of households that applied for work', 'percentage of households keeping job cards at their homes', and the 'percentage of households that continuously worked for more than two weeks' (Table 5). It is observed that STs are in the most disadvantaged position in both the GPs, but the relative position of this disadvantaged group is better in the advanced GP.

One of the implicit objectives of NREGA is to curb distress migration among the agricultural labourers during the lean seasons. The migration potential of a GP is considered as a counter-factor against the implementation of NREGA, as migration opportunities may reduce the supply of labour for NREGA work in that area. In the absence of any direct evidence, we have tried to gather indirect information on the impact of NREGA on migration in the form of the impressions of households and GP members. It has been observed that migration is not only confined to the unskilled agricultural labourers but also occurs among the skilled or semi-skilled labourers (especially, stone masons and bricklayers). Contrary to the experience of other states (Mathur, 2007), we have found that NREGA is less likely to reduce migration to a significant level because of the simple reason that agricultural labourers generally migrate during the sowing and harvesting seasons, whereas NREGA work is supposed to be provided during the lean season. NREGA work is thus not attractive to the skilled and semi-skilled labourers for obvious reasons. The findings from the primary

Table 6  
**Views of Households, Members and Sachibs about the Effect of NREGS in Curbing Migration  
(in per cent) in the Selected GPs in Birbhum**

Views	Backward GP (Talwan)		Advanced GP (Chandrapur)	
	Households n=102	Members n=11	Households n=117	Members n=8
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, 2007.

survey corroborate this ground reality. The 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 (see Table 6). Uncertain and fewer days of work under NREGA and higher wages at the migrated places are the major reasons why unskilled and semi-skilled workers still continue to migrate. In the backward GP, NREGA could not generate an adequate number of person-days to absorb the labour force that 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.

#### IV. 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 crucial factor for the successful implementation of the programme. The capacity of the GP indicates both the physical capacity ( that is, 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, including engineers for designing the schemes, overseers for monitoring the schemes and skilled computer assistance with a knowledge of accounts for maintaining the data relating to scheme implementation and fund utilisation). “Too much paper work for NREGA” was cited by many GP members including the *sachibs* as a problem. As per the 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 has to be made available to the public on demand.<sup>6</sup> The fact that the shortage of human resources is a problem in the effective implementation of NREGA has also been pointed out in the contemporary writings on NREGA (EPW, 2008). 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 the implementation of other projects/schemes

and handling of other administrative responsibilities 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 governments in the implementation of NREGA. The mismatch between the timings of receiving NREGA funds and people's need for NREGA works was mentioned by GP members and *sachibs* several times during our survey and conversations with them. However, it was difficult to empirically capture with a structured questionnaire the degree of resistance offered against the NREGA by big farmers. Any mention of a resistance by big farmers was not made by GP members or *sachibs*.

The lack of skilled human resources is not the only reason for the weak implementation of NREGA in the GPs that 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 the GP administration) may often be missing in the backward GPs, in general. As a result, though NREGA allows the scope for creating various types of durable productive assets at the community level, it has been observed in studies including our own that greater focus has been directed towards rural connectivity and creation of wells/ponds (as they are easy to design) and more meaningful projects for rural transformation have remained neglected in many places (Dutt, 2008). In Chhattisgarh and Madhya Pradesh, Ambasta, Vijay Shankar and Shah (2008) have found that the programmes are focused mainly on activities for which standardised estimates are available, and also plans made and approved at the top and sent downwards for implementation by the GPs, in the absence of annual plans. The varieties and potential volume of NREGA work indicate that PRIs (especially the GPs) need to have regular and timely access to technical expertise, as mentioned earlier. Moreover, well-coordinated advance planning is also crucial for the successful implementation of the programme.

Thus, in order to facilitate the planning process and proper implementation of NREGA by GPs, 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 projects based on their usefulness in the community, marking out of various steps during the execution of the projects in view of the availability of an unemployed labour force, and techniques of supervision and review of the project at various stages of implementation to facilitate quality control and convergence of funds for a single project, among other things. The extent to which support from local NGOs/CBOs (community-based organisations) can be sought also needs to be considered. In addition, training on various aspects such as maintenance of records and registers, administrative procedures involved at the GP level, grievance handling mechanisms, process of conducting social audit, and awareness generation at the village level about the entitlements of NREGA, are also particularly important. It must also be mentioned that capacity building in the backward GPs is essential because the members and functionaries in these GPs have feeble voices and less bargaining power with the block and district level administrations.

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 a greater number of programmes can be implemented efficiently by using the same (or marginally higher) 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 the self-help group (SHG) cluster in Purulia and Malda districts, wherein the SRD has offered a helping hand.<sup>7</sup> This positive outcome encourages us to suggest that the SRD can be utilised to a greater extent for strengthening the NREGA programme.

## V. CONCLUSION

In spite of many favourable factors, West Bengal's performance in the NREGS is not comparable to that of the best performing states in the country. This article, by taking a case study of Birbhum district, has made an attempt to understand the roles of some macro and micro level factors in determining the success of the NREGA. Our case study of Birbhum district shows considerable inter-block variations in the average number of person-days created per household and the utilisation of NREGA funds. The blocks that have performed well also show high inter-GP variation in performance. The availability of NREGA funds at the block/GP level shows a weak connection with the factors that generate the potential demand for NREGA work. Although NREGA allows for various types of works (benefits for community, private benefits of marginalised households), GPs are not able to draft an adequate number of schemes to absorb the labour demanding NREGA work. It is observed that the GPs' lack of capacity to design and implement a large number of meaningful schemes is the major limiting factor in the efficient implementation of the NREGA. This suggests that greater efforts need to be made for the capacity building of the GPs, especially the backward GPs. We suggest that the ongoing SRD programme can be fine-tuned to enable a higher number of schemes to be accomplished efficiently while using the same (or marginally higher) human resources so that the underlying objectives of the NREGA are fulfilled.

### *Notes*

1. Household weight ( $w_{ij}$ ) is defined as a ratio between the number of households belonging to the  $i$ th social class in the  $j$ th GP and the number of sample households belonging to the  $i$ th social class in the  $j$ th GP. ( $i = ST, SC, Muslim$  and others.  $j = Talowan$  GP and Chandrapur GP).
2. The (Pearson) correlation coefficients between the amounts of the available funds and the number of job cards issued are 0.17 and 0.43 at the GP and block levels, respectively.
3. The NREGA guidelines clearly suggest that these aspects (marginal agricultural labour and below poverty households) need to be taken into account during the preparation of the Action Plan.
4. Murarai II reports an exorbitantly high incidence of poverty (78 per cent), which is questioned by the district administration itself.
5. The averages are calculated on the basis of the households' reports. We are aware of the possibility that the households may have the natural tendency to under-state the number of days, especially in a situation wherein they are not happy with the Panchayat. Another problem is that the households' reports may not be confined to a single financial year. However, the estimates, on an average, are fully in line with the data that we have gathered from the Panchayat offices, with only minor differences.
6. All accounts and records relating to the NREGA are to be made available for public scrutiny. Also a copy of the master rolls of each scheme or project under the NREGA must be made available in the office of the GP for inspection.

7. 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 the necessary formalities including provision of a 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 the Gram Sabha (GS) and GP plans.

### *References*

- Ambasta, P.; Vijay Shankar, P.S. and Shah, M. (2008), "Two Years of NREGA: The Road Ahead", *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 43, No. 8, pp. 41-50.
- Comptroller and Auditor General (2007), *Draft Performance Audit of Implementation of NREGA*, Office of the Principal Director of Audit, Economic and Service Ministries, New Delhi.
- Dutt, R. (2008), "Dismal Experience of NREGA: 'Lessons for the Future,'" *Mainstream*, Vol. 46, No. 17. (Accessed from <http://www.mainstreamweekly.net/article641.html> on May 19, 2008).
- EPW (2008), "Editorial: Wake-up Call on Rural Employment Guarantee," *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 43, No. 4, pp. 5-6.
- Government of India (2007a), *Planning Commission Poverty Estimates for 2004-05*, Press release of Press Information Bureau, New Delhi.
- Government of West Bengal (2004), *West Bengal Human Development Report*, Department of Planning and Development, Government of West Bengal.
- (2006), *Notification No. 684-RD/NREGA/18S-1/06 dated 02/02/2006*, Department of Panchayats and Rural Development, Government of West Bengal.
- (2009), *Birbhum District Human Development Report*, Department of Planning and Development, Government of West Bengal.
- Mathur, L (2007), "Employment Guarantee: Progress So Far," *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 42, No. 52, pp. 17-20.
- National Sample Survey Organisation (NSSO) (2007), *Level and Pattern of Consumer Expenditure, 2004-05: NSSO 61<sup>st</sup> Round (Report No. 508)*, Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation, Government of India, New Delhi.
- NCEUS (2007b), *Report on Conditions of Work and Promotion of Livelihoods in the Unorganised Sector*, National Commission for Enterprises in the Unorganised Sector, Government of India, New Delhi.

**INDIAN JOURNAL OF AGRICULTURAL ECONOMICS**  
(Organ of the Indian Society of Agricultural Economics)

Vol. 63

OCTOBER-DECEMBER 2008

No. 4

**CONTENT**

**ARTICLES**

- |   |   |
|---|---|
| Livestock Production System in India: An Appraisal Across Agro-Ecological Regions   | <i>Anjani Kumar and<br/>Dhiraj K. Singh</i> |
| Farm Specific Economic Efficiency of Fish Production in South Tripura District: A Stochastic Frontier Approach                        | <i>Kehar Singh</i>                          |
| Socio-Economic Heterogeneity and Distributional Implications of Joint Forest Management (JFM): An Empirical Investigation from Orissa | <i>Naresh Chandra Sahu</i>                  |

**RESEARCH NOTES**

- |  |   |
|--|---|
| Technological Change in Paddy Production: A Comparative Analysis of Traditional and SRI Methods of Cultivation | <i>H. Basavaraja,<br/>S.B. Mahajanashetti and<br/>P. Kumaresan</i>          |
| Performance of Large Scale Farming in Sericulture – An Economic Analysis                                       | <i>R.G. Geetha Devi<br/>S. Rajadurai, N.G. Selvaraju and<br/>H. Jayaram</i> |
| Measurement of Efficiency of Shrimp ( <i>Penaeus mondon</i> ) Farmers in Andhra Pradesh                        | <i>G.P. Reddy, M.N. Reddy,<br/>B.S. Sontakki and<br/>D. Bala Prakash</i>    |

**BOOK REVIEWS \***

**PUBLICATIONS RECEIVED \***

**PH.D THESES IN AGRICULTURAL ECONOMICS COMPLETED IN UNIVERSITIES IN INDIA: 2007-08 \***

**NEWS \***

**INDICATIVE OUTLINES OF SUBJECTS SELECTED FOR DISCUSSION AT THE 69TH ANNUAL CONFERENCE OF THE ISAE \***

**INDEX TO IJAE, Vol. 63, 2008 \***

**Annual Subscription Rates**

Individual Membership Fee	: Rs. 300.00; £ 35.00; \$ 75.00.
Life Membership Fee	: Rs. 3,000.00; £ 350.00; \$ 750.00.
Institutional Subscription	: Rs. 600.00; £ 54.00; \$ 125.00.

Please address correspondence to the Hon. Secretary and Treasurer, The Indian Society of Agricultural Economics, Krishi Vikas Sadan, First Floor, (Near Dr. Antonia Da Silva Technical High School), Veer Savarkar Marg (Cadell Road), Dadar (West), Mumbai – 400 028 (India).

Telephone : 022-24374789; Fax : 091-022-24374790; email : [isae@bom7.vsnal.net.in](mailto:isae@bom7.vsnal.net.in)  
website: [www.isaeindia.org](http://www.isaeindia.org)