

**The Impact of NREGA on Rural-Urban Migration:  
Field survey of Villupuram District, Tamil Nadu**

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**CCS Working Paper No. 202  
Summer Research Internship Programme 2008  
Centre for Civil Society**

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## INTRODUCTION

The National Rural Employment Guarantee Act, the flagship welfare programme of the UPA Government was passed by the Parliament in August 2005 and came into effect on 5th September 2005. It has been derided by many as yet another instance of a large chunk of public money being flushed down the drain in pointless rural development works. Reports of schemes consisting of the NREGA workers digging ditches and then re-filling them at work sites, of workers not being paid their wages, of inflated muster rolls with non-existent workers and large amounts being swindled out of the programme which is amply funded by the Centre, and most recently, the gruesome murder of Lalit Mehta, a social activist whose work had exposed corruption in the NREGA scheme in Jharkhand do nothing to change the negative image of the programme. There is an article every week pointing out the regions where NREGA has failed miserably. However, though the picture is certainly not as rosy as the Bharath Nirman advertisements would like us to believe, there are some places where NREGA is being implemented very well, where it is a life-line for its workers, and the success stories in these places should be highlighted more to serve as a model for the rest of the country.

The National Rural Employment Guarantee Act of 2005 covered 200 districts-known as Phase I districts, and in 2006-07 this was extended to cover 130 additional districts known as the Phase II districts. During 2006-07 against the total available funds of Rs. 12073.56 Crore with the states, Rs. 8823.36 Crore was utilised.<sup>1</sup> The average fund utilisation per district was Rs. 44.12 Crore in 2006-07. For 2007-08 the government made a budget provision of Rs 12000 Crore. Out of this Rs. 8303.82 Crores have been released up to 14th November 2007. Out of this, Rs. 5365.99 Crore have been released to the Phase I 200 districts and Rs. 2937.92 Crore have been released to the Phase II 131 districts.

During 2006-07, 2.12 Crore households had demanded employment, out of which 2.10 Crore households were provided employment. During the year 90.51 Crore person days of employment was provided under the programme. Averages of 45.2 lakh person days of employment per districts have been generated. Out of total 90.51 Crore person days, the share of Scheduled Castes was 22.95 Crore person days (25.36%) and Scheduled Tribes was 32.99 (36.45%) constituting a total of 55.94 Crore person days for SCs/STs which comes to about 62%. As per the NREGA, the share of women person days should be 1/3rd and the same was 36.79 Crore person days, which is about 41%. During 2007-08 (up to September 2007), 1.97 Crore households have demanded employment and 1.88 Crore households have been provided employment. A total of 56.14 Crore person days of employment has been

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<sup>1</sup> Centre for Science and Environment: NREGA Implementation Status, Jan 2008 update: [http://www.cseindia.org/programme/nrml/update\\_january08.htm#NREGA](http://www.cseindia.org/programme/nrml/update_january08.htm#NREGA) facts from The Union Rural Development Ministry

generated under the Programme. Out of this, the share of Scheduled Castes is 14.70 Crore person days (26.18%) and Scheduled Tribes is 18.44 Crore person days (32.84%) constituting a total of 33.14 Crore person days, which is about 59.03% of total. The share of women is 26.61 Crore person days, which is 47.40%.

## **THE NREGA ACT-A BRIEF OVERVIEW**

The NREGS offers hundred days of work to unemployed families in rural areas. The two conditions for the adults of a household to apply are:

1. They must be living in a rural area.
2. They must be willing to undertake unskilled manual labour for which they would receive the minimum wage.

The details that need to be furnished are their name, age and address. These are submitted to the Gram Panchayat, which issues the household their job card, which contains details of adult members of the household. All registered members of the household are then entitled to a maximum of 100 days employment for the entire household in a given financial year. Applicants who are provided with employment are informed in writing, by means of a letter sent to the address given in the job card and by a public notice displayed at the Panchayat Offices at the district, intermediate or village level.

As far as possible, the work site is to be within a five km radius of the applicant's village- in case it is not, it must be provided within the Block and the labourers must be paid 10 % of their wages as extra wages to meet the additional travel and living expenses. Facilities of safe drinking water, periods of rest, first-aid box with adequate material for emergency treatment for minor injuries and other health hazards connected with the work being performed are to be provided at the work site. In case the number of children below the age of six years accompanying the women working at any site is five or more, provisions shall be made to depute one such woman to look after the children. She will be paid the wage rate. The wages are to be paid within 14 days. Working hours are from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. with a lunch break from 1 p.m. to 2 p.m.

The Officials responsible for implementing the NREGA are:

1. The District Programme Coordinator who is the Chief Executive Officer of the District Panchayat or the Collector of the District.
2. The Programme Officer-a person who is not below the rank of Block Development Officer. The Programme Officer shall be responsible for matching the demand for employment with the employment opportunities

- arising from projects in the area under his jurisdiction.
3. The Gram Panchayat, which shall be responsible for identification of the of the projects in the Gram Panchayat area to be taken up under a Scheme as per the recommendations of the Gram Sabha and the Ward Sabhas and for executing and supervising such works. The Gram Panchayat shall make available all relevant documents including the muster rolls, bills, vouchers, measurement books, copies of sanction orders and other connected books of account and papers to the Gram Sabha for the purpose of conducting the social audit.
  4. The 'Gram Sabha shall monitor the execution of works within the Gram Panchayat and conduct regular social audits of all the projects under the Scheme taken up within the Gram Panchayat.

The minimum wage varies from state to state-for instance; in Villupuram district it is Rs. 80 whereas in the neighbouring Union Territory of Puducherry it is Rs. 125. According to the Act, the minimum wage cannot be less than Rs. 60. The 100 days of work figure was estimated because the agricultural season is only supposed to last roughly around 250 days and unskilled workers have no alternative source of income in the remaining parts of the year. The Central Government provides the funds for the wages and for  $\frac{3}{4}$ <sup>TH</sup> of the material costs. No machinery is used. The State Government pays for  $\frac{1}{4}$  of the material cost. Also, if after receipt of an application, the person isn't given work within 15 days, then he is eligible to an unemployment allowance for each day after the 15 days when he isn't employed until the State finds work for him. This unemployment allowance cannot be less than  $\frac{1}{4}$ <sup>th</sup> of the wage rate in the first 30 days of the financial year and  $\frac{3}{4}$ <sup>th</sup> of the wage rate in the remaining period of the financial year. The State Government has to bear the cost of the unemployment allowance.

## **RURAL-URBAN MIGRATION**

In this paper I'm looking at migration as a negative force, focusing on distress migration, which is what happens when people have to go to cities to find work because they cannot survive on what they can earn in their own villages.

Rural-urban migration is a response to diverse economic opportunities across space. Historically it has played a significant role in the urbanization process of several countries and continues to be significant in scale, even though

migration rates have slowed down in some countries<sup>2</sup>. However many urban problems like over-burdened infrastructure, urban poverty and crime, have been blamed on this 'rural spill over'. Though the migrants and their households might benefit greatly individually, it is seen that this individual benefit occurs at the cost of net loss to both rural and urban areas, and a decline in social welfare, through overcrowding and increased population in urban destination areas and a greater regional concentration of wealth, income and human capital.<sup>3</sup>

Two major hypotheses<sup>4</sup> explain the impact of migration on city expansion:

- (1) Unusually rapid rates of population growth pressing on limited farm acreage and pushing landless labour into cities. The deficiency of reproducible tangible capital relative to labour in the face of a high-population density exacerbates the problem of rural unemployment and underemployment, which in turn fosters the rural-urban population movement. In the face of limited demand for labour in the formal sector, in particular the organized industrial sector, excess supplies in the urban labour market force them to be engaged in the informal service sector. The low rate of growth of industrial employment and the high rate of rural-to-urban migration make for excessive, even explosive urbanization involving a transition from rural unemployment to excessive urban unemployment and underemployment. Within the urban informal sector this tends to reduce the level of earnings and get manifested in a high incidence of urban poverty. Thus in the process, rural poverty gets transformed into urban poverty – the phenomenon is also described as 'urbanisation of poverty'<sup>5</sup>
- (2) Migrants are being pulled into the cities by the economic forces such as domestic terms of trade squeezing agriculture, the diffusion of technology from the developed world favouring modern large-scale urban industries, foreign capital flows into urban infrastructure, housing, power, transportation, and large-scale manufacturing.

In explaining migration across space ,according to Harris and Todaro (1970), income differentials are taken as the motivating factor in moving people from low-income areas to relatively high-income areas. According to Banerjee (1986), caste and other kinds of village networks help migrant workers find employment

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<sup>2</sup> Lall, Selod and Shalizi, 2006

<sup>3</sup> Oberai, A.S, Bilsborrow, R.E. ,Theoretical Perspectives of Migration-Chapter 2.

<sup>4</sup> Williamson, 1988

<sup>5</sup> Harris and Todaro (1970) and Ravallion and Datt (2002). Todaro (1969) treats this sector as a transitory phenomenon but in reality this has emerged as a persistent one. Mitra (1994) argued that natural growth of population maintained the urban supplies of labor at a high level, resulting in informal sector employment and poverty.

in rural areas. Around two-fifth of the total urban growth in the Third World is accounted by the rural-to-urban migration (Gugler, 1988) The process can be identified as 'over-urbanisation' as long as:

(1) Rural-urban migration leads to a misallocation of labour between rural and urban sectors in the sense that it raises urban unemployment, underemployment and poverty.

(2) Rural-urban migration increases the social cost for providing for a country's growing population<sup>6</sup>

"Combining rural and urban livelihoods provides a dual advantage to the poor; agricultural labour and marginal farming are important safety nets when urban employment is mainly in the informal sector which involves a lot of uncertainty. Commuting is the most preferred mobility option because it allows people to keep rural social and economic links alive and cuts down the considerable costs of food and housing in urban locations. It also allows households to retain access to government services that are based on resident criteria such as subsidised food, healthcare and education.

The workers seem to prefer temporary or seasonal migration because firstly, they don't have the connections to settle down in an urban area, where rent would be very high and the area itself would be quite unfamiliar and secondly if they permanently shift to the slums, they face a high risk because there is no guarantee that they will be employed throughout the year, because they participate in the informal sector. "Keeping one foot in the rural economy provides a safety net. A major attraction for the poor working in the farm sector is the part-payment in cooked food. Although this has been perceived as exploitative by some, the labourers themselves see it as an important way of coping and surviving during economically lean times when casual work in the cities may be scarce."<sup>7</sup>

According to the 10<sup>th</sup> Five Year Plan (2002-2007): " Wage employment programmes, an important component of the anti-poverty strategy, have sought to achieve multiple objectives. They not only provide employment opportunities during lean agricultural seasons but also in times of floods, droughts and other natural calamities. They create rural infrastructure, which support further economic activity. These programmes also put an upward pressure on market wage rates by attracting people to public works programmes, thereby reducing labour supply and pushing up demand for labour.

Such an assurance would ensure a minimum level of employment and stability to the incomes of the poor and give them an opportunity to develop their collective strength. *It would improve their economic position, reduce*

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<sup>6</sup> Gugler 1988.

<sup>7</sup> Deshingkar, Priya- Understanding the Implications of Migration for Pro-poor Agricultural Growth

vulnerability and discourage migration to facilitate their continued access to health, education and welfare facilities available in the village. The allocation under this second stream would be enhanced to meet the target of 100 days of employment for every able-bodied person willing and seeking work."<sup>8</sup>

This is based on the logic that people would not migrate if enough work/income were available locally. Earlier approaches tried to achieve this through the promotion of irrigation, high yielding varieties and agro-chemicals. But these tended to benefit only some areas while others (usually "remote", "difficult", "weakly integrated" or "less-endowed" areas) lagged behind. Now there is renewed hope for these weakly integrated or less endowed areas. In a highly influential piece of research Fan and Hazell have argued that increased public investment in roads, agricultural research and education in many less-favoured areas may generate competitive if not greater agricultural growth than comparable investments in many high-potential areas and that these investments could have a greater impact on the poverty in such areas<sup>9</sup> There is little doubt that improving the productivity of agriculture has an impact on poverty reduction because a majority of the poor live in rural areas and are largely dependent on agriculture either directly or through labouring. A recent, 58 country study commissioned by DFID shows that for each percentage point increase in agricultural productivity there was a 0.6-1.2% decrease in the number of people earning less than a dollar a day [Thirtle et al]. The reality on the ground however is that agricultural growth remains low despite vast investments. The latest figures suggest that agricultural growth is less than 2% p.a. on aggregate, which is too slow for poverty reduction in many rural areas.<sup>10</sup>

According to a study by Arup Mitra and Mayumi Murayama in 2006, titled 'Rural to Urban Migration: A District Level Analysis for India', during the last 10 years, the number of male and female was almost equal in total rural-to-urban flows. While women outnumber men in intra-state rural-urban flows, the number of male was significantly greater in case of inter-state rural-urban migration. The differences in work participation rates are also observed along the line of religion and caste group of migrants. On the basis of a large sample survey in Bihar, Kerala and Uttar Pradesh, Oberai, Prasad and Sardana (1989) reported that in all the urban areas of the three states, female migrants' work participation rates are generally higher among Christians and Scheduled Castes/Tribe whether married or unmarried and ***availability of high productivity jobs in the rural areas could reduce in-migration to the urban areas.***

According to the Tenth Plan (2002-2007), there has been an increasing

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<sup>8</sup> Tenth Plan document-Chapter 3.2-Poverty Alleviation in Rural India-Strategy and Programmes, 'Wage Employment Programme'

<sup>9</sup> Fan, Hazell and Haque (2000).

<sup>10</sup> Deshingkar, Priya, Understanding the Implications of Migration for Pro-poor Agricultural Growth.

feminisation of the agricultural labour force in the country. NSSO (50th round) estimates for 1993-94 show that 75.3 per cent of women workers were engaged in agriculture compared to only 58 per cent of male workers. In the rural labour force, 84.7 per cent of women were engaged in agriculture as compared to 73.8 per cent male workers. Data on incremental additions to the rural labour force show that the rural male worker has a greater chance of getting absorbed into non-agriculture pursuits than the rural female worker. The migration of able-bodied men to urban areas in search of employment, break-up of the joint family system and other social factors such as death of husbands and desertion by husbands have resulted in an increase in the number of female-headed households.<sup>11</sup>

Distress migration can be viewed as a destabilising factor-economically and socially-labourers are at the mercy of contractors who never fail to extract their pound of flesh. Men and women often take loans or advances from the contractors, to meet the expenses of migration such as finding a place to stay in the cities, travel costs, food expenses and also to meet expenses back home. The contractors expect to be paid back this sum along with a 3-4% interest rate ('kudishika'). Seasonal migrants working in the construction sector in Southern Indian cities may work freelance or under a contractor. If they work freelance then the men earn roughly Rs 80/day (USD 1.5/day) and women earn Rs 60. Although the wages are reasonable, work is not available every day and most average three working days a week if someone freelances. Women may also work as domestic maids in nearby houses to supplement their income. Women coming to work alone, without a spouse or a brother, are extremely vulnerable to abuse. They spend roughly half of the income at the destination and earn roughly Rs 4,000/year on average through such. Working under a labour contractor gives labourers more days of work but they are often exploited by the contractors and mistreated. "For labourers coming from landless and small peasant households struggling to subsist, the maistries (contractors) are practically monopoly creditors and monophony buyers their labour power in the absence of alternative sources of credit and employment."<sup>12</sup>

According to the Second National Commission on Labour [2002] 369 million or 90.6% of the workers in India are in the unorganised sector. But because both demand and supply are so powerful, these services and businesses persist and fuel rent seeking among petty officials and policemen that is of gargantuan proportions. There are laws instated to protect the rights to decent working conditions and wages such as:

1. The Inter-state Migrant Workmen (Regulation of Employment and Conditions of Service) Act, 1979

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<sup>11</sup> Tenth Plan document.

<sup>12</sup> Olsen and Ramana Murthy [2000]- study of the Palamur labourers from Mahbubnagar district in Andhra Pradesh

2. There is a legislation to regulate inter-state flows of migrant workers through the contractors.
3. Minimum Wages Act, 1948
4. Equal Remuneration Act 1976

However these continue to be disregarded. Another reason for official disregard for this problem is that it is often trans-boundary and inter departmental in nature, and is easier to ignore on the whole rather than tackle.

The reasons why rural-urban migration should be curbed are many and the findings of the survey conducted in Villupuram showed that given decent employment in their villages most people would prefer not to migrate, men and women both. Therefore, if NREGA can be used to curb rural urban migration then it will be yet another benefit from this act, which can actually do something concrete in poverty alleviation and rural development in the long run.

## **RESEARCH OBJECTIVES**

1. To find out whether the NREGA Act (2005) can have an impact on rural-urban migration, if implemented as per the criteria mentioned above, and what the impact of the decrease in such migration could be, by getting official out-migration data from a region where distress migration is known to be rampant, and where the NREGA has been implemented well,

- and by conducting a qualitative survey to see whether this data can be backed up.
2. To find out whether the income pattern of the people in the surveyed region has changed after the NREGS and how so, if it has changed.
  3. To examine the implications if migration could be reduced when the Act is implemented well - migration involves a great social cost as well as families get uprooted. Children get separated from their parents and their education might suffer. Also to show that if the Villupuram model of implementing the scheme is successful in providing enough incentive to curb distress migration and create productive assets secondarily for the villages, it could be used as a model for regions like Kalahandi-Bolangir-Koraput (KBK) in Orissa where people die of starvation till today and alternative means of employment other than agriculture should be created.
  4. To study newly instated anti-corruption and pro transparency steps taken by State governments such as biometric cards and rural ATMS.

### **RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

1. Narrow down a place where NREGA is being implemented well and where there is a history of distress migration. The area should typically be industrially backward; agriculture will not be productive-so looking at yields per hectare of the region before 2005 could help narrow down the area.
2. Gather data from the government about NREGA incomes, approximate migration data (it is an approximation because migration is not really documented well in India, even in the census). Get income data from periods before the NREGA and after the NREGA, also things like total population, number of households registered with the NREGA scheme, divided into APL and BPL categories, and male and female categories.
3. Conduct a survey of NREGA workers in the region at the active work sites.
4. Use the survey as a verification of the government data.
5. The survey is mainly qualitative in nature-it has been given in the Appendix of the paper.<sup>13</sup>

### **FIELD WORK ANALYSIS**

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<sup>13</sup> Due to a paucity of accurate migration data a more quantitative analysis could not be carried out and I did not have the resources to conduct a statistically impeccable quantitative survey.

## 1. Choosing the region to survey:

The region had to be a district where the NREGA was being implemented well. It had to be industrially backward and agriculturally dependent but not productive- and hence because of the lack of opportunities in the region it would have to have a history of distress migration, mainly to urban areas as contract labour. Villupuram district seemed to be a good choice of a district to study as it is one of the few regions about which the press, people conducting social audits and the citizens, have given positive reports with regard to implementation of the Act.

Villupuram is the largest district in Tamil Nadu (with 22 Blocks as compared to the average of 13-14 blocks in the other districts), but it is one of the least industrialized areas of the State. The majority of the population depends on agriculture. A social audit on the NREGA conducted in Villupuram in 2007<sup>14</sup> showed that there were some irregularities in the way the scheme was being implemented. The system followed is one where work is rotated among the different wards of a Panchayat, as the demand for work is much greater than the number of projects. Applications for registering with the programme were being actively denied by the government-which is not allowed under the act. The scheme is not demand driven at all in Villupuram, it is supply driven. But despite these irregularities the people almost uniformly wanted more employment under the NREGA and were very happy with the timely payment of wages, the stability the work offered and with the work itself because it led to the development of their village. There was no rampant corruption such as inflated muster rolls and people being denied their wages, and contractors were completely removed from the picture. It met most of the criterion for a district where the Act was being implemented smoothly and hence was an interesting area to study the impact of the Act on rural-urban migration.

About 350 people from agricultural unions, unorganized workers unions, women's organizations, youth forums, social activists and students participated in a social audit of Villupuram district in July 2007. The audit was done in 5 villages each in the five blocks of Mailam, Vanur, Thirukoilur, Thiruvannainallur and Thirunavalur. After consolidating all the documents (especially the Muster Rolls) and social audit training, 25 teams went to 25 villages and did the audit. Experienced trainers from Andhra Pradesh and activists from MKSS provided training to all the participants. The district collector Mr. Brajendra Navnit, DRDA Project Officer Mr. Selvaraj and other Villupuram district officials were very supportive of the whole endeavor.

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<sup>14</sup> 350 people from agricultural unions, unorganized workers unions, women's organizations, youth forums, social activists and students conducted the first mass social audit of the NREGA in Villupuram from July 26, 2007 to August 5th, 2007. 5 villages each in the five blocks of Mailam, Vanur, Thirukoilur, Thiruvannainallur and Thirunavalur of Villupuram district were surveyed.

The main positive findings in brief were:

- Employment has been generated on a massive scale: The average job card holder in Villupuram has already been employed for nearly 25 days since 1 April 2007, compared with just about 2 days for the same period in 2006.
- Minimum wages (Rs 80 per day) are being paid.
- Wages are paid within a week: This is perhaps the greatest achievement of NREGA in Villupuram. Wages are paid with great regularity, on a fixed day of each week. There were very few complaints of delays in wage payments.
- Contractors and machines have largely disappeared.
- NREGA is a lifeline for the rural poor.
- Women (who account for more than 80 per cent of all NREGA workers) are particularly appreciative of the programme, and want it to continue.

According to the audit the following were the areas of concern:

- Poor awareness generation – workers know little about their entitlements.
- Faulty design, distribution and maintenance of job cards.
- The work application process is not in place – employment is provided top-down.
- Employment is “rationed”, by rotation between different wards as well as by restricting work to one member per household.
- The rotation system has led to “caste segregation” of work.
- Disabled persons and old people are excluded.
- Basic worksite facilities such as first-aid are lacking in most cases.
- Absence of child care arrangements at the worksites
- There is a shortage of staff at all levels.

- Inadequate training (if any) of NREGA staff especially at Gram Panchayat level.
- Poor worksite management (supervision, measurement, etc.).
- Low work productivity at many worksites.
- Widespread flaws in the record-keeping system.
- Poor implementation of transparency safeguards.

However, upon surveying Kalrayan Hills and Neelamangalam, I found that almost all the areas of concern had been addressed. The next section is about the findings on the survey.

## 2. Reasons for choosing Kalrayan Hills Block and Neelamangalam Panchayat in Kallakurichi Block as the regions to be surveyed:

The criterion for selecting a block to study was that it should be a place where there was not much employment opportunities, and where agriculture was not very productive-we looked at agricultural data such as nature of the soil in the region, the irrigation available, the yield per hectare (a very rough measure). We also had to rule out areas where brick kilns and newly built factories provided incentive for people to stay back, not the NREGS. The region should have a record of stable generation of employment under the NREGS, so that the people could believe that this would be a stable source of income.

Kalrayan Hills is a region of the Eastern Ghats, which lies to the west of the Kallakurichi Block of Villupuram District. It is spread over an area of 600 sq. kms. approximately, with altitudes ranging from 1000 ft to 3800 ft from the sea level. The land is very rocky and mountainous and it is unsuitable for cultivation. Its population mainly consists of Scheduled Tribes and agriculture is not at all profitable. The tribal people have a history of distress migration for as long as 8 months of the year, the rest when they work as agricultural labourers. Most of the villages were inaccessible by road and the main occupation was selling forest produce. It had all the characteristics of a region that could benefit greatly if the NREGS was implemented well there. A student who was doing a PhD on public service provisions in Tamil Nadu said that it was a miracle, what the scheme has achieved in Kalrayan Hills, and he regretted that it had not been included in the social audit. The Project Officer was also of the opinion that Kalrayan Hills was a place where NREGA would work wonders.

Neelamangalam is a Panchayat in Kallakurichi Block, where though there were old irrigation canals, they were in such a state of disrepair that irrigation wasn't available for any of the cultivated lands. The area had immense scope for

improvement with NREGA works, and after talking to a Ms. Kavyarasi who worked with the Panchayat Office till last year, it was apparent that the NREGA works had made a huge difference to the area in terms of number of crops possible per annum-it had increased from one to three seasons of harvest annually. The area has become highly productive today. However, unlike the Kalrayan Hills region, distress migration is on a much smaller scale. However it is an interesting region to study just to see how NREGA can help in the development of rural infrastructure when it is implemented properly, and help strengthen the rural economy.

### 3. The Kalrayan Hills Story According to the Government:

The methodology used for this paper is using official data, gathered from the Block Offices and the Municipality in Villupuram District to primarily find out whether there is any backing for the hypothesis, and then to supplement this official data with the facts found out from surveying a sample of NREGA workers in the region under study. Originally the idea was to get out-migration rates from the district for periods before and after the implementation of the Act, to see whether there was any lowering of the rates in the regions where NREGA was a lifeline for a population that was known to have to migrate in the past for economic reasons. As census data, which itself does not investigate migration thoroughly, was only available up till 2001, and as the Act was put in place only in 2005, the only other option was getting approximate migration figures from the administrators of the regions under survey. The figures given by the government regarding migration were all approximations. Hence it was essential to conduct a field survey to see what the situation was in reality. Time and resource constraints had to be considered as well in choosing the regions to be surveyed, which is why the paper is focusing on a narrow region within Villupuram district itself.

The population in this block consists mostly of Scheduled Tribes, and it is a hilly region where cultivation is not possible because water doesn't stay and where the ground is rocky. The villagers can only grow tapioca and they sell forest produce mainly to earn a living. Though the region is only about 45 minutes away from Kallakurichi, before the NREGA works, a lot of the villages and hamlets were inaccessible by road. The people had to migrate for at least 6 months of the year( from young girls aged 14 to elderly men and women in their sixties. )The saving grace was that there were a number of residential schools and missionary schools where the children could be left while the parents migrated, but the costs of migration were enormous.

The block consists of 15 panchayats. The survey was undertaken in two Panchayats – Thoradipattu, with a population of 3988 persons and Vellimalai with a population of 5673 persons-where active works were in progress. 59% of

the population in Thoradipattu and 44% of the population in Vellimalai was seasonal migrants. There were 996 household in Thoradipattu out of which 826 households were registered with the NREGS. 1128 out of the 1418 households in Vellimalai Panchayat were registered with the NREGS. 724 of the houses were Below Poverty Line in the Thoradipattu whereas the figure was 741 in Vellimalai. The works are mostly roadwork, where unmetalled roads are made from the main roads built by the government to the little hamlets and villages. The majority of the workers were women. Unlike in Neelamangalam, because of the complete lack of opportunities in the region, the women were also migrating in large numbers from the Kalrayan Hills area. According to the officers wages were paid within a week. They provided a stable and steady means of income for especially the women of the region. This was important because when both the parents were forced to migrate, the family itself would break down, the children would be left in the government school hostels or with the elders in the family and in general migration occurred because of necessity, because there was no other way they could put four meals on the table.

Contract labour was the norm and the main destinations were Kerala, Karnataka and other places in Tamil Nadu like Yercaud with its coffee plantations. According to the Block Officer's approximations, distress migration was almost completely with the advent of the NREGA, but no official figures as such were available. They said that the men continued to migrate because they could earn as much as 300 rupees per day, whereas women could now stay in their native places because they were willing to forego the difference between earning 100-150 rupees a day, but with quite a lot of uncertainty as to the duration of their work and when they would next get work, and often with contractors who were quite dishonest, in exchange for the 80 rupees a day wage from NREGA labour, which was predictable income, where the wages were paid in full and regularly on time, and most importantly, they could get this employment in their native places.

### 3. Findings from the survey at Thoradipattu and Vellimalai Panchayat:

Details of the survey: 40 families working at active NREGA sites-dealing with road construction- were surveyed. The questionnaire is given below. It is a qualitative survey because the sample size was not large enough to use the data for a proper empirical study. However a lot of information could be gained by talking to the workers on a qualitative basis.

The workers mostly had migrated to Yercaud for work in the Coffee plantations from February to March or to Karnataka and Kerala under contract labour. The contractors would loan them money for the initial expenditures incurred by them to travel to the destination, find accommodation and food. This would be taken as a cut from the wages and there was 3-4% interest which had to be paid back. The women got between 120-150 rupees per day where as the

men received 250-300 rupees per day. The women said that they would not migrate now that NREGA was implemented because though they would earn less- as migrant labourers they would earn upto 15,000 rupees per annum, then selling the forest crop and agricultural labour would give them another 10,000, whereas under the NREGA they could earn 8000 rupees per annum plus the amount from cultivation and selling forest produce, and working as agricultural labourers in the season- they did not mind earning less because they had no debts to contractors, they were in their native places and had regular work and the flow of income was steady and reliable as opposed to the uncertainties of informal sector work which is what they would do if they were migrant labourers.

The men said that they would continue to migrate in general, unless they were old, because they earned so much more than 80 rupees per day that they couldn't really afford to just depend on the NREGS, though it provided a good back up for them in lean periods of employment.

Most people said that the incomes of the families were more predictable and stable after the Act. Previously an income graph would have resembled a spiky pattern where income would be earned in spurts, and not regular spurts, and even dip really low at points, so families would have to migrate to find work to put food on the table, borrow money to migrate from the contractors and get caught in a cycle. Whereas after the NREGA was implemented the income graph would be smoother with more regular inflows of cash and also the levels wouldn't sink below a particular point because 8000 rupees per family was guaranteed under the Act as long as the families were ready to work at unskilled labour jobs for 100 days of the year.

The women in particular kept saying that nothing could be better than working in your native land, people would care for you if you were sick, and it was your home, and they wanted the period of 100 days of work to be extended to more. Most of the women were part of self-help groups, but except for 2 women none of the others were in debt.

The roads built by the National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme workers have helped the people immensely and will probably contribute the most to the development of the region. Where as people once had to carry baskets of their produce from the villages and make their way through to the main road to catch some transport to the markets, today they are hiring lorries and trucks to transport themselves and their goods, increasing the quantity they are able to sell and their profits. It is also an enormous source of pride for them that they themselves were able to contribute to the betterment of their village, that they created the roads.

From the survey it was clear that the government had been doing a fairly decent job in firstly selecting useful projects that would lead to rural development, secondly, in providing the workers with their wages on time and finally, that the people needed the NREGA, it was the only thing that stood between them and 6 months of migration away from their home and loved ones, at the mercy of the contractors. Only two girls out of the forty families we

surveyed said that the contractor in Kerala was kind and that if they were given a chance they would like to return as migrant labourers.

#### 4. NEELAMANGALAM PANCHAYAT

The Neelamangalam Panchayat President was present when we visited the Kallakurichi Block Office. The NREGA works done in Neelamangalam were mainly irrigation works, and they have revitalized the area. Land which had to lie fallow for the better part of the year was producing three harvests after the irrigation works. The President claimed that though migration had not been very rampant from the start from Neelamangalam, after the NREGA programme, it had been restricted to an even smaller proportion of the population. The figures given by the Panchayat Office are represented in Tables 5 and 6. The number of people registered with the NREGS scheme was 1592, out of which 1500 were provided employment. A record of the number of people employed from 1<sup>st</sup> April 2008 till 17<sup>th</sup> June 2008 showed that 13170 person days had been logged, out of which 1301 were done by men and 11669 were done by women. According to the information the Panchayat President gave, all their wages had already been paid. While this was most probably a slight exaggeration, in the neighbouring block of Kalrayan Hills, where I conducted my survey, I found that everyone who worked with the scheme had received their wages on time, and even the social audit performed in the previous year indicated that delayed wage payments was NOT one of the problems of the NREGS in Villupuram District.

According to the data provided by the Panchayat, there was a BPL population of 850 in the Panchayat, which had a total population of 3040. 1592 persons were registered with the NREGA, and 1500 were given work, which meant that half the population of the Panchayat was working with the NREGA during the period of reference. The majority of the NREGA workers were women- in roughly 80 days, 13170 person days of work were provided, out of which women carried out 11669 person days. On an average 160 people were provided with work every day of this period and out of this 160 people around 130-140 would be women workers.

The people from Neelamangalam usually migrated to Bangalore, Mysore, Chennai and places in Kerala for around 3 months at a stretch. The unskilled migrants could earn less than 100 rupees a day whereas skilled migrant men labourers earned around 200-300 rupees a day, whereas skilled women labourers earned around 100-150 rupees a day. In Neelamangalam, there was a pre-existing system of canals from the time of the Chola Kings, but this had fallen into serious disrepair and the region was not properly irrigated and could only produce one harvest each year before the NREGA works were implemented. After the works, where canals were deepened and repaired, there were 2-3 harvests each year. The two main harvests were called the Kuruvai and the

Samba and the agricultural season was from August to February for these crops. The NREGA works were mostly needed to provide a stable income for the people from April to September.

We asked the Panchayat Official if he could tell us about the change in income patterns of the workers before and after NREGA. He said that before the NREGA they could earn about 9000 rupees a month, from working as agricultural labourers during the season, where they would receive 40-45 rupees per day, and that after that there was uncertainty about where they would get work. However, contrary to Kalrayan Hills area which is not industrialized at all, Kallakurichi had some brick kilns and factories where people could find work, and migration at the distress level did not occur there, unlike in the Kalrayan Hills region. As the region became more industrialized, people also stopped migrating, and therefore, it was not an ideal place to study to find out whether the NREGA had impacted rural-urban migration, because other external factors such as the proximity of brick kilns and factories also meant that employment was available on hand. This fact also explains why there are more women employed in the Neelamangalam NREGA works than men, mainly because the minimum wage of Rs. 80 per day of work, paid by the scheme was not enough to entice the male labourers who could earn up to 300 rupees a day. However, women who were previously in the house or who had to leave their homes to find work stopped having to migrate because of stable employment in their villages courtesy the NREGS, and by working they were able to supplement their family income. The figures given by the Panchayat stated that after the implementation of the scheme, the income of a work had increased from around 9000 rupees to around 12 to 13 thousand rupees a year.

According to official guestimates, roughly 400 people used to migrate before the NREGA was implemented in 2005. Within two years this figure was halved to around 200 out-migrants, but after the completion of the irrigation schemes and with the employment opportunities in the area from brick kilns and factories the number of out-migrants fell to 40. This reduction cannot be wholly attributed to the NREGA schemes, though there is no denying their success in making the land in Neelamangalam fertile for agriculture once again.

After talking to a farm owner in the region, I found out that after the Act was implemented there was a shortage of farm labourers because they preferred to work for the NREGA and earn Rs. 80 per day than to toil in farms and ear Rs 40-45 per day, which is the current rate for agricultural labour in Villupuram.

The reason I wanted to include Neelamangalam Panchayat in the paper, even though it strictly did not fall under the category of a place with distress migration and no employment opportunities was that this was one area where the works had made an enormous difference to the development of the region.

## **CONCLUSION**

The lack of exact official data on migration is a matter that should be corrected as soon as possible as it is quite important to quantify this as accurately as possible as rural-urban migration can become quite a problem for both the source and the destination areas. The aspect of NREGA where it can be used to curb rural-urban migration is conditional on the NREGA being implemented well in that region, otherwise, if work is not supplied, if wages aren't paid on time and if money is just being siphoned off, then workers will have no incentive to stop migrating. However it should be clear that the primary aim of the Act is to provide welfare for the section of the population that does not even earn the minimum wage- the fact that it can also curb distress migration is just a positive secondary impact of the Act. This paper does not mean to suggest that the focus of the Act should shift to preventing rural-urban migration, it only seeks to highlight that it should become a priority to implement NREGA as efficiently as

possible because there are enormous secondary benefits from the Act which could really have a positive impact on economic development.

The Villupuram district model of NREGA implementation could perhaps serve as an example for the Kalahandi- Bolangir-Koraput (KBK) region where deprivation and hunger is present at an unimaginable level when you think that obesity is a problem threatening the children of urban India today- people still die of starvation in this region. "The Rural Employment Scheme" has made virtually zero impact on the livelihood security of Orissa's rural poor. There is no let up in the level of distress migration of Adivasis and Dalits from Orissa's KBK region in search of livelihood in other parts of the country. On the Human Development Index, many of the sub-Saharan villages would fare better than most of the KBK villages."<sup>15</sup> However, according to one theory, the Tamil Nadu Government has no choice but to implement all the welfare schemes well because otherwise they will never win the next election, as all the major parties have come with the upliftment of the backward classes and alleviation of poverty and hunger as their stated mission, and hence the party that delivers is the party that stays in power in the state. This is perhaps an advantage, which the state has over places in the north of the country where till today the caste system is still prevalent and there are no political parties for the backward/oppressed classes.

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<sup>15</sup> Centre for Environment and Food Security (CEFS) Survey conducted in 100 villages from six districts of KBK (Kalahandi-Bolangir-Koraput) region - Bolangir, Nuapada, Kalahandi, Koraput, Nabarangpur and Rayagada

After conducting the survey, I found that for the sample of forty households that I interviewed, some points in the areas for concern had not been addressed-there was no child-care provisions at the work site though five-six children were present, also the workers wanted more days of work under the scheme. However the productivity at the roadsides was high as the people were extremely keen to make the roads that would help develop their village. Another request most of the workers had was that the minimum wage be raised.

The importance of social audits and implementation of measure to increase the transparency of the NREGA programme cannot be stressed enough. Biometric job-cards were introduced in a pilot project in Anantapur district in Andhra Pradesh. The biometric devise can be operated with a simple 12 Volt car battery or a rechargeable battery. The device can help to register up to 1,000 fingerprints and then compare the beneficiary with the template thereby ensuring the right person gets paid, for the services rendered. The device uniquely identifies the thumb impression of each beneficiary, linked to his or her ID. The investment required would be around Rs. 20,000 per village for the biometric devise and it would cost roughly between Rs. 100-200 for the biometric card, but this would be cheaper if the volume required was more. Unless the person holding the card is physically present entries cannot be made, and hence this would ensure that things like inflated muster rolls would become a thing of the past. The device was provided by Life to Line Business in Tamil Nadu. Also low-cost rural ATMS and transferring money directly to the bank accounts of the workers are options, which could be considered for easier transfer of funds in the future.

The NREGA is a programme has immense potential to improve the gap between urban and rural India and lead to rural development in terms of basic infrastructure like roads, in terms of agricultural productivity from irrigation works, and it provides a stable income for the workers, their income graph would be much smoother with the NREGA bolstering their earnings in the 100 days between agricultural seasons. The efforts made by the Villupuram authorities, though there still might be some irregularities in the implementation, should be used as a model in other regions to help realize the potential of this Act.

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  14. Centre for Environment and Food Security (CEFS) Survey conducted in 100 villages from six districts of KBK (Kalahandi-Bolangir-Koraput) region - Bolangir, Nuapada, Kalahandi, Koraput, Nabarangpur and Rayagada
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## **APPENDIX**

### **SURVEY QUESTIONNAIRE**

#### **RETURN MIGRANTS’ LABOUR EXPERIENCE**

Relatively few migration surveys probe the labour experience of return migrants. According to A.S Oberai, there are four /moments’ that seem the most apt for questioning if a mobility profile is to be constructed-work activity before leaving, immediately after leaving, immediately before returning, and immediately after returning.

Q1.

a. In the three months before you left this area on your last stay away, what was your main activity?

b. What was the main reason you stopped working there?

Q.2

a. What type of work did you hope to get before leaving this area?

b. How much money did you expect to earn? (per month)

Q3.

a. Did you leave this area for any specific period of work like seasonal work?

b. How long did you stay away?

Q.4.

a. What was your main activity in the first three months after leaving this area?

b. In the past 12 months what was the relationship to the sender of the person(s) receiving money or goods and about how much money did they receive?

#### POST MIGRATION WORK EXPERIENCE:

The principal purposes of the first two sections are to examine the processes by which migrants have been assimilated into the NREGA workforce of the area of in-migration, and to provide benchmarks by which to gauge the subsequent socio economic mobility of migrants.

#### TO BE ASKED OF IN-MIGRANTS AND RETURN MIGRANTS

Q1.

a.)When did you move to the area? Did you do so because of NREGA or because of some other factor? If NREGA then how did you come to know of the act?

Q.2 If you returned here or migrated here what was the main reason for doing so?

Q.3 Before working for NREGA what was your main means of income?

Q.4. How long did it take for you to start earning money through NREGA-were wages paid on time?

Q.5 What was the nature of your work in the NREGA project.

Q6. What was the average number of workers in your NREGA project?

Q7. On average how many hours of work did you have to put in a week and how many days a week did you work?

Q.8 Please could you give me an idea of your income before and after joining NREGP?

Q.9 How long do you plan to work in the NREGP? Do you have any other plans in mind?

## TABLES

**TABLE 1**

Gross Decadal Intra and Inter State Migration of Males and Females as a %age of Total Male and Female Urban Population in 2001.

State	Intra-state Male	Intra-state Female	Inter state Male	Inter state Female	Intra+Inter state Male	Intra+Inter state Female
Tamil Nadu	2.78	3.44	0.22	0.22	2.99	3.66

Source: Based on Population Census, 2001.

**TABLE 3: FUNDS USED BY NREGA till September 2007**

YEAR	TOTAL AVAILABLE FUNDS WITH THE STATES (Crore Rs.)	FUNDS UTILISED (Crore Rs.)	FUNDS UTILISED PER DISTRICT (crores)	HOUSEHOLDS DEMANDING EMPLOYMENT(crore)	NO. OF HOUSEHOLDS GIVEN EMPLOYMENT	NO. OF PERSON DAYS PROVIDE (crores)
2006-2007	12073.56	8823.36	44.12	2.12	2.10	90.51
2007-2008 (up to September 2007)	12000	8303.82	49.25	1.97	1.88	56.14

Source: [http://www.cseindia.org/programme/nrml/update\\_january08.htm#NREGA](http://www.cseindia.org/programme/nrml/update_january08.htm#NREGA)

**TABLE 4:** Kalrayan Hills, regions surveyed

Sl.No	Name of the Block	Name of the Panchayat	Population of Village	Total No.of House Hold in the Village	No.of NREGA House Hold	approx migrant Population	BPL Population of the Village	For the Year	Income Data of the Village from NREGA (in Lakhs)
1	Kalrayan Hills.	Thoratipattu	3988	996	826	2350 (59%)	724	2006-2007 2007-2008 2008-2009	8.00 15.00 9.00

2		Vellimalai	5673	1418	1128	2500(44%)	741	2005-2006 2006-2007 2007-2008 2008-2009	1.00 10.00 28.00 17.00
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Source : Kalrayan Hills Block Office

**TABLE 5**

Neelamangalam:

Total No. Of Households	Population			No. of Households registered under the NREGA Scheme	No. of persons registered under the NREGS	Persons given work under the Scheme	Total BPL Population
	Male	Female	Total				
1300	1547	1493	3040	1080	1592	1500	850

Source: Panchayat Office

**TABLE 6:** Migration from Neelamangalam Panchayat

Year	2004	2005	2006	2007
Out- migration (no. of persons: Male & female)	400	300	200	40

Source: Panchayat Office