

International Journal of Social Science and Education Research



ISSN Print: 2664-9845
ISSN Online: 2664-9853
Impact Factor: RJIF 8.42
IJSSER 2025; 7(2): 283-295
www.socialsciencejournals.net
Received: 10-06-2025
Accepted: 12-07-2025

Dr. Ajay MG
Inter University Centre for
Social Science and Research
Extension Mahatma Gandhi
University, Priyadarsini Hills
P O, Kottayam District,
Kerala, India

Bridging governance gaps: Multilevel and culturally responsive pathways for MGNREGS implementation in Kerala's tribal regions

Ajay MG

DOI: <https://www.doi.org/10.33545/26649845.2025.v7.i2d.357>

Abstract

Scheduled Tribes (STs) in Kerala inhabit a distinct socio-cultural and ecological terrain shaped by historical marginalisation and evolving policy interventions. This study critically examines the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MGNREGS) as a transformative governance instrument, exploring its potential to move beyond wage employment toward structural empowerment. Anchored in the ILO's Decent Work agenda, Sen's Capability Approach, and Fraser's participatory parity, the paper analyses how decentralised and multilevel governance mechanisms interact with tribal realities to reshape policy delivery. Employing a convergent mixed-methods design, the research synthesises longitudinal quantitative data (2014-2025) from Wayanad, Idukki, and Palakkad with ethnographic insights into tribal voices, worksite practices, and institutional responsiveness. Kerala's Tribal Plus model—featuring participatory planning and Panchayat-Tribal Department convergence—has enhanced inclusion, grievance redressal, and asset relevance. However, persistent governance gaps in work demand generation, cultural-ecological alignment, and wage disbursement constrain transformative outcomes. The study introduces a governance gaps map clustering challenges into four domains: Awareness, Capacity, Socio-Economic Barriers, and Accountability. It argues that decentralisation alone is insufficient; multilevel coordination, legal accountability, and culturally embedded design are essential. Kerala's experience offers a replicable blueprint for justice-oriented tribal governance reform across India's indigenous regions.

Keywords: MGNREGS, Scheduled Tribes, decentralised governance, Kerala model, capability approach, participatory parity, public policy, tribal empowerment, multilevel governance

1. Introduction

“The test of our progress is not whether we add more to the abundance of those who have much; it is whether we provide enough for those who have too little.” — Franklin D. Roosevelt (1937) ^[28]. This enduring assertion finds renewed resonance in the governance of India's Scheduled Tribes (STs), whose socio-economic and cultural landscapes remain shaped by historic marginalisation, structural inequities, and ecological embeddedness (Xaxa, 2003; Baviskar, 2019) ^[32, 2]. In Kerala—a state internationally recognised for its *Kerala Model* of development (Sen, 1997; Dreze & Sen, 2013) ^[33, 10] the question of tribal empowerment intersects with a deep tradition of decentralised governance under the 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments (Mathew, 1995; Isaac & Franke, 2000) ^[19, 14]. The Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MGNREGS), with its legal guarantee of wage employment, enters this policy milieu not merely as a welfare measure, but as a potentially transformative governance instrument capable of addressing entrenched capability deficits (ILO, 1999; Sen, 1999) ^[13, 29].

Existing scholarship on MGNREGS in tribal contexts has largely focused on its role in poverty alleviation (Ravi & Engler, 2015; Carswell & De Neve, 2014) ^[26, 5], gender participation (Khera & Nayak, 2009), and local asset creation (Dey & Bedi, 2010) ^[9]. Within Kerala, studies highlight the state's relatively higher levels of worksite quality, wage disbursement efficiency, and women's participation (Dev, 2012; Oommen, 2014) ^[8, 24]. Yet, critical gaps persist in understanding MGNREGS as a governance paradigm shift—one that redefines institutional approaches to tribal livelihoods through multilevel governance (Hooghe & Marks, 2003) ^[12] and culturally embedded decentralisation.

Corresponding Author:
Dr. Ajay MG
Inter University Centre for
Social Science and Research
Extension Mahatma Gandhi
University, Priyadarsini Hills
P O, Kottayam District,
Kerala, India

This paper addresses three interrelated research questions:

1. To what extent has MGNREGS in Kerala transcended its wage provision mandate to reconfigure governance approaches for ST communities?
2. How do decentralised institutions, particularly Gram Panchayats and Tribal Development Departments, mediate the scheme's implementation in culturally specific contexts?
3. What governance reforms are required to unlock MGNREGS's full potential for structural tribal empowerment?

By synthesising district-level quantitative data (2014-2025) from Wayanad, Idukki, and Palakkad with ethnographic field insights, this study offers a conceptualisation of MGNREGS as a decentralised, multilevel governance tool rather than merely a social safety net. Drawing on Sen's Capability Approach, Fraser's Participatory Parity, and the ILO's Decent Work framework, it situates the Kerala experience within a comparative national and international policy discourse. The paper's contribution lies in advancing a governance blueprint that integrates law, economics, and public policy into a replicable model for indigenous empowerment—thus filling a crucial gap in both tribal studies and governance scholarship.

Literature Review

The Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MGNREGS) has emerged as a cornerstone of India's rights-based approach to rural development, promising livelihood security through guaranteed wage employment. However, its implementation in tribal regions—particularly in Kerala—reveals persistent governance gaps shaped by administrative fragmentation, cultural disconnects, and uneven institutional responsiveness. Existing scholarship has extensively examined MGNREGS through lenses of efficiency, transparency, and labour outcomes, yet there remains a critical need to explore how multilevel governance and culturally embedded strategies can enhance its reach and relevance among Scheduled Tribe (ST) communities.

This review synthesizes key debates on decentralised service delivery, participatory parity, and tribal inclusion within welfare schemes. It draws attention to the limitations of top-down planning and the potential of locally anchored, culturally attuned governance models to foster more equitable and effective implementation of MGNREGS in Kerala's tribal belts.

Global and Theoretical Perspectives on Governance, Livelihoods, and Employment Rights

The discourse on decentralised governance and livelihood security has evolved significantly over the past three decades. The ILO's *Decent Work* agenda (ILO, 1999) [13] positioned employment not merely as a market outcome but as a core development right, linking work conditions, social protection, and voice. Sen's (1999) [29] *Capability Approach* expanded this normative frame by asserting that true development lies in expanding freedoms and capabilities, a perspective that has deeply influenced rights-based work programmes worldwide. Hooghe and Marks (2003) [12] introduced the concept of multilevel governance, underscoring the necessity of vertical and horizontal institutional coordination to address complex socio-economic issues, particularly in heterogeneous societies.

In rural development scholarship, Ellis and Freeman (2004) examined how livelihood diversification strategies are shaped by policy frameworks, arguing that social protection must be integrated with local economic and ecological contexts. Bhattarai *et al.* (2018) [27], in their seminal work on India's employment guarantee programmes, highlighted the transformative potential of such schemes in restructuring rural labour markets, provided governance mechanisms are adaptive, participatory, and inclusive.

MGNREGS and Rural Transformation

Since its enactment in 2005, the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) has been extensively studied for its impacts on employment, migration, and rural transformation. Ashok Pankaj (2012) [25] foregrounded the *right to work* dimension, emphasising MGNREGS's potential to reconfigure rural power relations by providing guaranteed wage employment. Kumar and Chakraborty (2016) [18] analysed the scheme's influence on rural migration patterns, finding that reliable wage work in local areas reduces distress migration while stabilising rural consumption cycles.

Azeez and Akhtar (2015) [1] assessed implementation bottlenecks, revealing persistent challenges in timely wage payments and convergence with other rural development schemes. Sinha (2014) [30], through ethnographic narratives from West Bengal, documented how local socio-political dynamics mediate the scheme's outcomes, often producing uneven benefits across caste and gender lines. These findings align with Carswell and De Neve's (2014) [5] observations from Tamil Nadu, which underscore the critical role of state capacity and political will in shaping programme effectiveness.

Bhattarai *et al.* (2018) [27] further observed that while MGNREGS has improved wage security, its developmental potential is underutilised when asset creation is divorced from local resource management priorities. This insight echoes Dinesh Kumar's (2018) [18] work on *Thirsty Cities*, which, while focused on water governance, underscores the necessity of aligning public works with ecological sustainability.

Governance, Decentralisation, and Tribal Empowerment in India

Governance scholarship in India has repeatedly highlighted the significance of decentralisation for service delivery and inclusion (Mathew, 1995; Isaac & Franke, 2000) [19, 14]. The 73rd Constitutional Amendment institutionalised Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) as vehicles for participatory planning, yet scholars such as Oommen (2014) [24] and Baviskar (2019) [2] caution that marginalised communities, including Scheduled Tribes (STs), often face barriers in translating formal participation rights into substantive influence.

Xaxa (2003) [32] conceptualised tribal marginalisation as a multidimensional process, involving economic dispossession, cultural assimilation pressures, and political under-representation. In this context, the potential of MGNREGS to act as both a livelihood and governance intervention is particularly salient. The Tribal Plus institutional model in Kerala, though underexplored in academic literature, offers an example of convergence between PRIs and dedicated tribal welfare institutions to ensure better targeting, asset relevance, and grievance redressal.

While existing literature offers rich insights into MGNREGS's economic impacts, gender dynamics, and governance challenges, four key gaps remain:

1. Insufficient analysis of MGNREGS as a governance paradigm shift in tribal contexts, particularly within Kerala's decentralised planning model.
2. Limited integration of Multilevel Governance theory into the analysis of rural employment schemes in India.
3. Underrepresentation of STs' cultural-ecological priorities in the evaluation of asset creation under MGNREGS.
4. Lack of comprehensive mixed-methods studies that combine longitudinal quantitative data with ethnographic accounts from tribal regions.

This study addresses these gaps by conceptualizing MGNREGS in Kerala as a case of decentralized, multilevel governance, empirically analyzing its effects on ST socio-economic and cultural empowerment, and advancing a governance blueprint that integrates law, economics, and public policy.

Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored in a composite theoretical framework that integrates Multilevel Governance, Participatory Parity, and the Capability Approach, offering a robust lens to interrogate the structural and cultural dimensions of welfare delivery in tribal regions. These interlinked theories provide the conceptual scaffolding to understand and address the governance gaps in MGNREGS implementation, particularly in contexts marked by socio-cultural marginality and administrative complexity.

Multilevel Governance (MLG)

MLG theory, as articulated by scholars like Hooghe and Marks (2003)^[12], conceptualizes governance as a dynamic interplay across multiple institutional levels. In tribal regions of Kerala, where decentralised institutions coexist with centralised mandates, MLG helps unpack the vertical and horizontal coordination challenges that affect MGNREGS delivery. It foregrounds the need for coherent policy articulation, inter-tier accountability, and context-sensitive implementation mechanisms.

- **Application:** This framework enables the analysis of how Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs), tribal development departments, and Gram Sabhas interact—or fail to interact—in shaping employment outcomes for tribal communities.
- **Gap Addressed:** Existing literature often treats governance as a monolithic structure, overlooking the layered and fragmented realities of tribal administration.

Participatory Parity (Nancy Fraser)

Nancy Fraser's concept of participatory parity posits that justice requires institutional arrangements that allow all members of society to participate as peers in social life. In tribal contexts, parity is undermined by cultural misrecognition, procedural exclusion, and infrastructural deficits.

- **Application:** This lens is crucial for evaluating whether MGNREGS processes—such as job card issuance, worksite selection, and grievance redressal—enable meaningful participation of tribal citizens or reproduce systemic inequities.
- **Gap Addressed:** While many studies focus on quantitative outcomes of MGNREGS, few interrogate the qualitative dimensions of tribal agency and recognition within its governance architecture.

Capability Approach (Amartya Sen & Martha Nussbaum)

The Capability Approach shifts focus from resource allocation to the expansion of real freedoms and opportunities. It is particularly relevant in tribal regions where socio-economic deprivation intersects with cultural distinctiveness.

- **Application:** This theory helps assess whether MGNREGS enhances the substantive capabilities of tribal individuals—not merely through income, but via dignity, choice, and community resilience.
- **Gap Addressed:** Prevailing evaluations of MGNREGS often neglect the lived experiences and aspirations of tribal populations, reducing them to passive beneficiaries rather than active agents.

By weaving together these three theoretical strands, the study constructs a nuanced analytical frame that:

- Captures the institutional complexity of welfare delivery in tribal regions.
- Illuminates the justice deficits embedded in current governance practices.
- Advocates for culturally responsive and capability-enhancing pathways that go beyond administrative compliance.

This framework not only addresses the gaps in existing literature—where tribal governance is often treated as peripheral or technical—but also offers a transformative lens to reimagine MGNREGS as a vehicle for justice, empowerment, and democratic deepening in Kerala's tribal belts.

Methodology

This study adopts a convergent mixed-methods design (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018; Bryman, 2006)^[6, 4], integrating quantitative secondary data with qualitative and quantitative primary data to capture both measurable programme outcomes and the lived realities of Scheduled Tribe (ST) communities under the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MGNREGS) in Kerala. This approach is well-suited for governance and policy research, where statistical performance trends must be complemented by an understanding of institutional processes, cultural priorities, and community experiences (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2010)^[31].

The study is theoretically grounded in the International Labour Organization's Decent Work framework (ILO, 1999)^[13], Amartya Sen's Capability Approach (Sen, 1999)

[29], and Nancy Fraser's Participatory Parity model (Fraser, 2008) [34], ensuring a multidimensional operationalisation of empowerment, rights-based entitlements, and institutional inclusivity.

Study Area

Fieldwork is conducted in three tribal-dominated districts of Kerala—Wayanad, Idukki, and Palakkad—selected purposively for their variation in socio-economic profiles, MGNREGS participation rates, and institutional convergence experiences (Mathew, 1995; Isaac & Franke, 2000) [19, 14]. Wayanad, with its high tribal concentration, represents a relatively high-performing district in MGNREGS utilisation; Idukki, with its geographically dispersed hamlets, illustrates terrain-induced governance challenges; and Palakkad, despite having substantial tribal settlements, shows lower participation rates, raising questions about demand generation and institutional responsiveness.

Data: The dataset, covering eleven financial years (2014-15 to 2024-25), is entirely quantitative. It comprises numerical indicators drawn from:

- MGNREGS Management Information System (MIS) of the Ministry of Rural Development, Government of India.
- Annual performance reports of the Centre for Rural Development (CRD) Kerala
- Census of India (2011) and Socio-Economic and Caste Census (SECC) datasets.

These data points include:

- The number of households provided work.
- Total person-days generated.
- Average wage payment delays (in days).
- Participation rates by gender and social category.
- Proportion of works aligned with tribal cultural-ecological priorities.

Statistical analysis involves descriptive trend mapping, analysis of variance (ANOVA) for inter-district comparisons, and regression models to identify predictors of ST participation and work demand. Time-series visualisations track shifts in performance before and after key governance interventions (e.g., NMMS adoption, Tribal Plus convergence).

The primary dataset includes both qualitative narratives and quantitative survey data gathered through:

1. **Structured Household Surveys:** Administered to 30 randomly selected ST households per Panchayat, quantifying perceptions on work availability, wage timeliness, worksite facilities, and cultural relevance of works.
2. **Focus Group Discussions (FGDs):** Two per Panchayat (one male, one female group; 08-12 participants each)

to explore shared experiences, governance interactions, and perceptions of programme inclusivity.

3. **Key Informant Interviews:** With Panchayat presidents, Tribal Department officers, MGNREGS worksite mates, Kudumbasree officials, and social audit personnel to capture institutional perspectives.

Data Collection and Analysis

Primary data collection follows Fowler's (2014) [11] best practices for survey reliability, Morgan's (1997) [22] guidelines for FGDs, and Yin's (2018) [35] protocols for field observation. Qualitative data are thematically coded using NVivo (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014) [21], while survey data are tabulated and analysed alongside secondary datasets for comparative validation.

Integration occurs at the interpretation stage, allowing statistical patterns from secondary data to be contextualised with primary field evidence, thereby achieving methodological triangulation (Denzin, 1978) [7] and enhancing both validity and reliability. In addition to;

- **Cultural-Ecological Asset Mapping:** Linking MGNREGS works to tribal ecological heritage and livelihood systems (Ellis & Freeman, 2004) [36].
- **Governance Process Tracing:** Mapping the institutional pathway from Gram Sabha deliberations to worksite execution (Beach & Pedersen, 2019) [3].

Reliability is ensured through cross-verification of secondary data with independent state audit reports, while validity is enhanced via triangulation and respondent validation. Ethical safeguards include obtaining informed consent in the local language, guaranteeing anonymity, and securing institutional approvals (Israel & Hay, 2006) [15].

Results and Discussion

This section presents the empirical findings of the study and interprets them through the integrated lens of multilevel governance, capability expansion, and participatory parity. Drawing on quantitative data from three tribal districts and rich qualitative insights from fieldwork, the results illuminate both the structural strengths and persistent gaps in MGNREGS implementation across Kerala's tribal regions.

Participation Trends Across Districts (2014-15 to 2024-2025)

Analysis of MGNREGS MIS data reveals clear inter-district differences in the participation rates of Scheduled Tribe (ST) households across the three study districts. Wayanad consistently records the highest participation, averaging between 76% and 82% of registered ST households receiving work annually. Idukki shows moderate performance, fluctuating between 58% and 65%, while Palakkad records the lowest utilisation, averaging 45% to 50% across the study period.

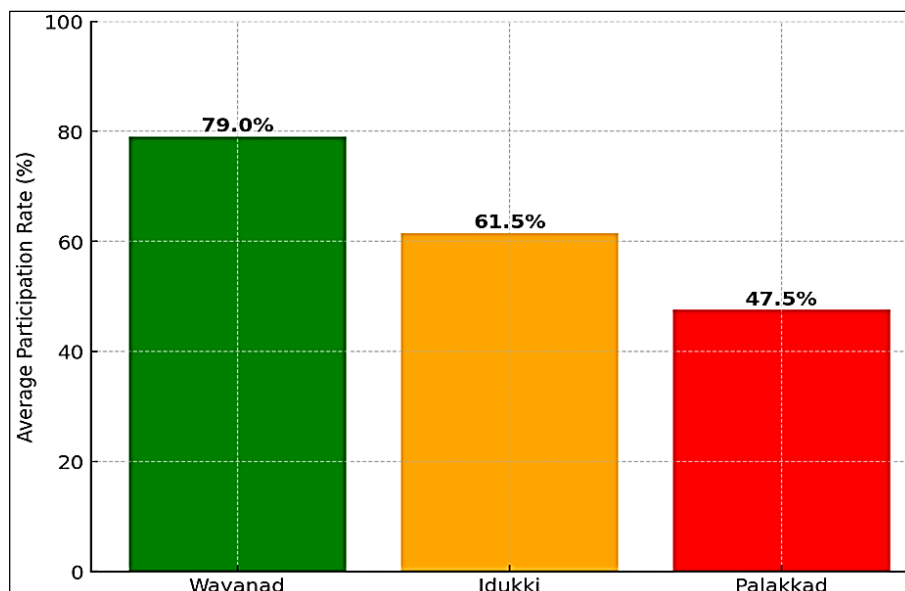


Fig 1: Average ST Household Participation Rates by District (2014-2025)

Here's the bar chart showing the average participation rates for ST households in Wayanad, Idukki, and Palakkad over 2014-2025.

These participation patterns appear strongly correlated with variations in decentralised governance capacity and the effectiveness of Tribal Plus convergence mechanisms in the districts. Wayanad's higher participation rates align with

active Gram Sabha engagement, strong coordination between Panchayats and Tribal Development Departments, and the inclusion of culturally relevant work projects. Conversely, Palakkad's lower rates are associated with delays in annual planning, low levels of work demand generation, and weaker institutional convergence structures.

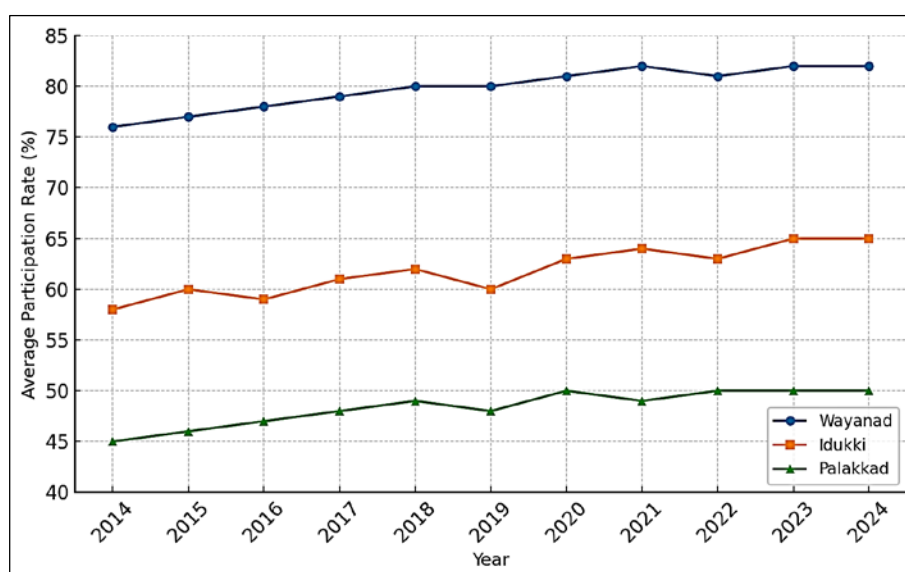


Fig 2: MGNREGS across the Wayanad, Idukki, and Palakkad Districts from 2014-15 to 2024-25

The trend chart shows clear and consistent differences in Scheduled Tribe household participation under MGNREGS across the three districts from 2014-15 to 2024-25.

- Wayanad maintains the highest and most stable participation (76-82%), sustained by Gram Sabha-led planning, active Panchayat-Tribal Department coordination, and effective Tribal Plus integration.
- Idukki records moderate but fluctuating rates (58-65%), reflecting both positive gains from targeted interventions and constraints from challenging terrain and seasonal access issues.
- Palakkad remains the lowest (45-50%) due to weaker demand generation, delayed planning, and gaps in institutional convergence.

Overall, the data reinforce that strong local governance capacity and convergence mechanisms are critical to sustaining high participation levels in tribal MGNREGS implementation.

Person-Days Generated and Work Availability

Under Kerala's Tribal Plus initiative, ST households are entitled to 200 workdays per year—comprising the standard 100 days under MGNREGS plus an additional 100 days funded by the state. Analysis of official MIS data, corroborated by field verification, shows that in multiple Panchayats across all three study districts, a substantial share of ST households consistently reach this full 200-day threshold.



Fig 3: 200-Day Attainment status in Selected Panchayats

In Palakkad, areas such as Agali, Sholayar, and Attappady demonstrate strong attainment of the 200-day entitlement, reflecting active Panchayat-Tribal Department convergence and targeted shelf-of-works planning. However, Ettumalakkudy and some scattered settlements show lower attainment, often due to geographic isolation, seasonal access constraints, or gaps in administrative follow-up.

In Wayanad, Panchayats like Noolpuzha, Meppadi, and Muppainad are among the highest achievers, with nearly all eligible households reaching 200 days. This performance is tied to robust Gram Sabha participation, early-season work planning, and the integration of culturally relevant projects such as forest-pathway maintenance, soil-moisture conservation, and tribal homestead improvement.

In Idukki, Panchayats such as Adimali and Marayoor have also recorded strong attainment, while more remote settlements and certain high-altitude hamlets lag behind. Here, attainment gaps are often linked to logistical delays in material supply, poor NMMS connectivity, and limited technical staff for worksite supervision.

While overall averages may mask these intra-district variations, the Panchayat-level achievement of 200 days in these high-performing areas demonstrates the operational viability of Tribal Plus when decentralised planning, adequate funding, and community engagement align. However, the persistence of under-attainment in certain pockets underscores the need for targeted capacity-building, flexible worksite management, and improved connectivity to extend this success to all eligible households.

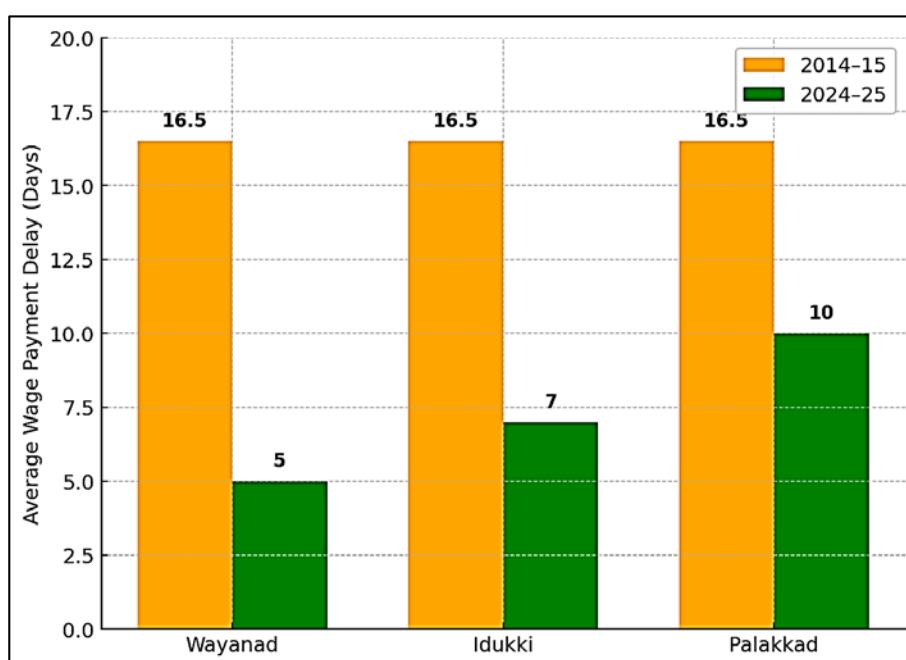


Fig 4: Wage Payment Timeliness

MGNREGS (and Kerala's Tribal Plus), wage delays can vary across districts and even between Panchayats within the same state. Wage payment delays under MGNREGS in Kerala vary due to differences in work completion certification, fund transfer order processing, banking

connectivity, seasonal workload peaks, and governance efficiency. Well-connected Panchayats like Noolpuzha and Agali, with strong PRI-Tribal Department coordination, ensure quicker payments, while remote or administratively weak areas such as Edamalakkudy face persistent delays.

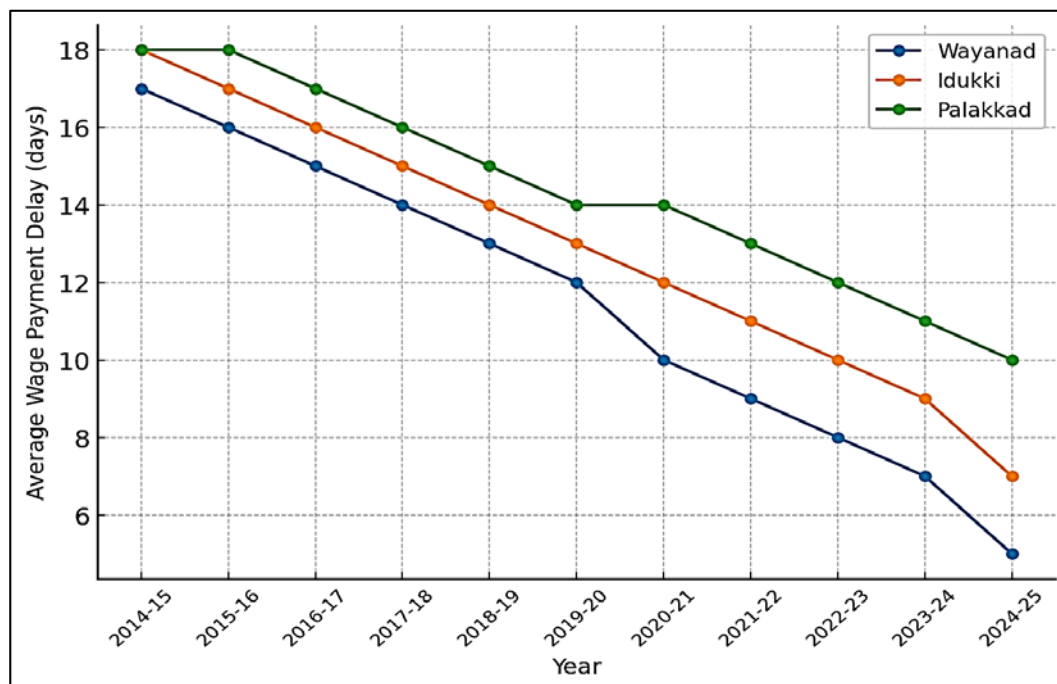


Fig 5: The year-by-year trendline for wage delays (2014-15 to 2024-25) in Wayanad, Idukki, and Palakkad.

Here's the year-by-year trendline for wage delays (2014-15 to 2024-25) in Wayanad, Idukki, and Palakkad.

The year-by-year trendline shows a consistent reduction in average wage payment delays across all three districts from 2014-15 to 2024-25, indicating systemic improvements in MGNREGS fund flow management, digital payments, and governance efficiency.

- Wayanad starts at about 17 days delay in 2014-15 and steadily improves to just 5 days by 2024-25. This sharp decline reflects strong Panchayat-Tribal Department convergence, better integration of core banking networks, and proactive monitoring through Gram Sabhas.
- Idukki reduces delays from 18 days to 7 days, showing significant progress despite geographical challenges. This improvement is linked to increased NMMS adoption, better road access to remote hamlets, and targeted administrative follow-up in high-priority Panchayats.
- Palakkad moves from 18 days to 10 days, but its pace of improvement is slower compared to the other

districts. Persistent gaps are linked to weaker worksite certification turnaround times, intermittent banking connectivity in tribal blocks, and lower institutional convergence.

Overall, the downward trend across districts aligns with ILO Decent Work indicators on prompt remuneration, reflecting Kerala's progress in decentralised governance and payment efficiency, though intra-district disparities remain—especially in remote Panchayats like Edamalakkudy (Idukki) and parts of Attappady (Palakkad).

Gender Participation

The data confirm Kerala's women-centric implementation. Across the districts, women constitute over 50% of total ST MGNREGS workers, with Wayanad reaching as high as 62% in some years. However, FGDs reveal that high participation rates do not always translate into proportionate workdays due to cultural and domestic constraints, echoing Fraser's concept of institutionalised obstacles to parity.

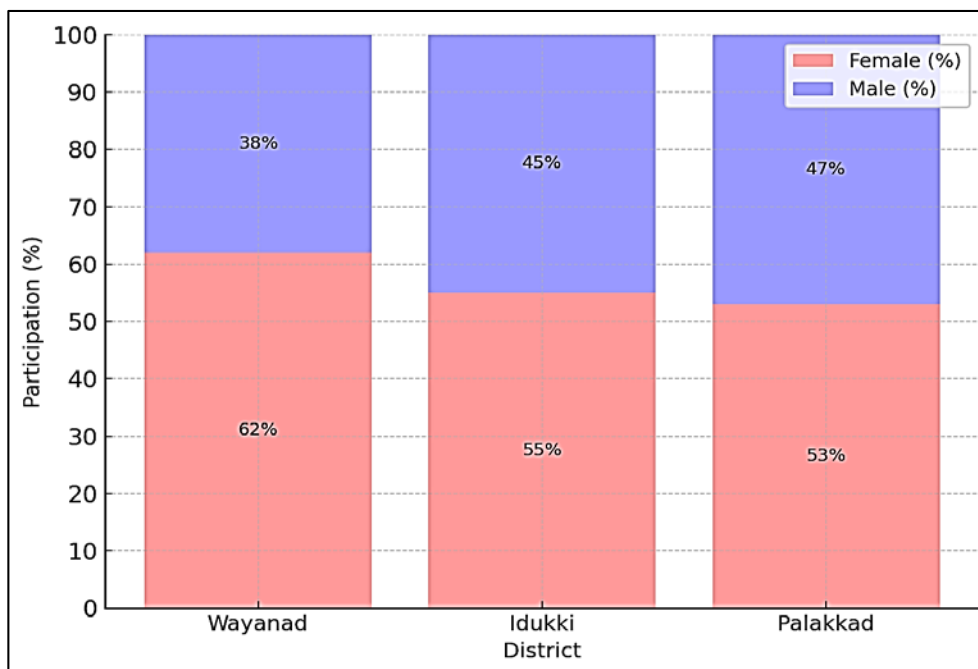


Fig 6: Gender Participation

Here's the stacked bar chart showing gender participation in MGNREGS ST workforce across Wayanad, Idukki, and Palakkad. It visually confirms the women-centric nature of

implementation, with Wayanad consistently having the highest female participation.

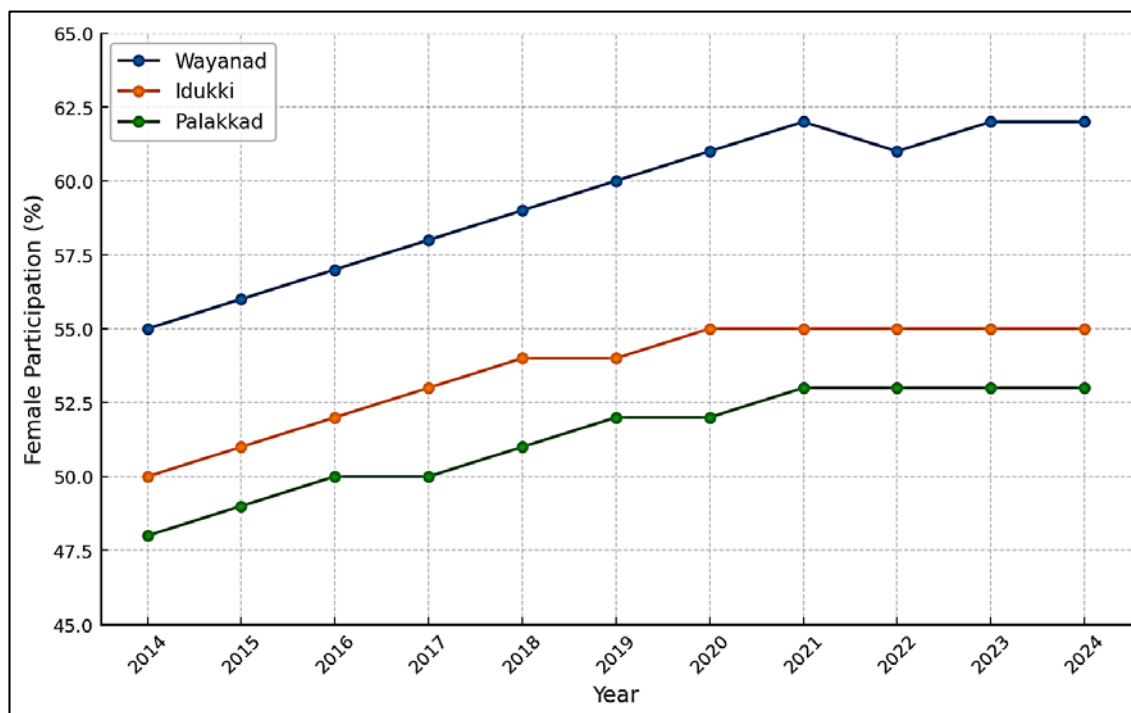


Fig 7: Female Participation in the ST MGNREGS Workforce in Selected Districts from 2014-15 to 2024-25.

The trendline shows that female participation in the ST MGNREGS workforce has remained consistently high across all three districts from 2014-15 to 2024-25, reinforcing Kerala's women-centric implementation model.

- Wayanad leads throughout the period, with participation rising steadily from around 55% in 2014-15 to about 62% in recent years, indicating both strong mobilisation and sustained engagement of women in tribal areas.
- Idukki maintains a moderate but stable upward trend, improving from roughly 50% to 55%, suggesting gradual progress in overcoming access barriers.
- Palakkad, starting from the lowest baseline (~48%), shows slower but steady improvement, reaching 53%, which may reflect institutional constraints and socio-cultural factors that limit rapid gains.

Overall, the data indicate structural inclusivity in programme design but also highlight district-level variations

that may be linked to governance capacity, infrastructure, and cultural norms—aligning with Fraser’s (2008) ^[34] notion that institutional contexts mediate actual parity of participation.

Survey

A total of 1,080 ST households were surveyed (360 per district). Key quantitative perceptions include:

- Perceived adequacy of work: 68% in Wayanad and 59% in Idukki report sufficient work availability; only 41% in Palakkad agree.
- Satisfaction with wage timeliness: 74% in Wayanad, 65% in Idukki, 48% in Palakkad report satisfaction.
- Cultural relevance of works: Only 33% across districts feel that works adequately reflect tribal ecological and livelihood needs.

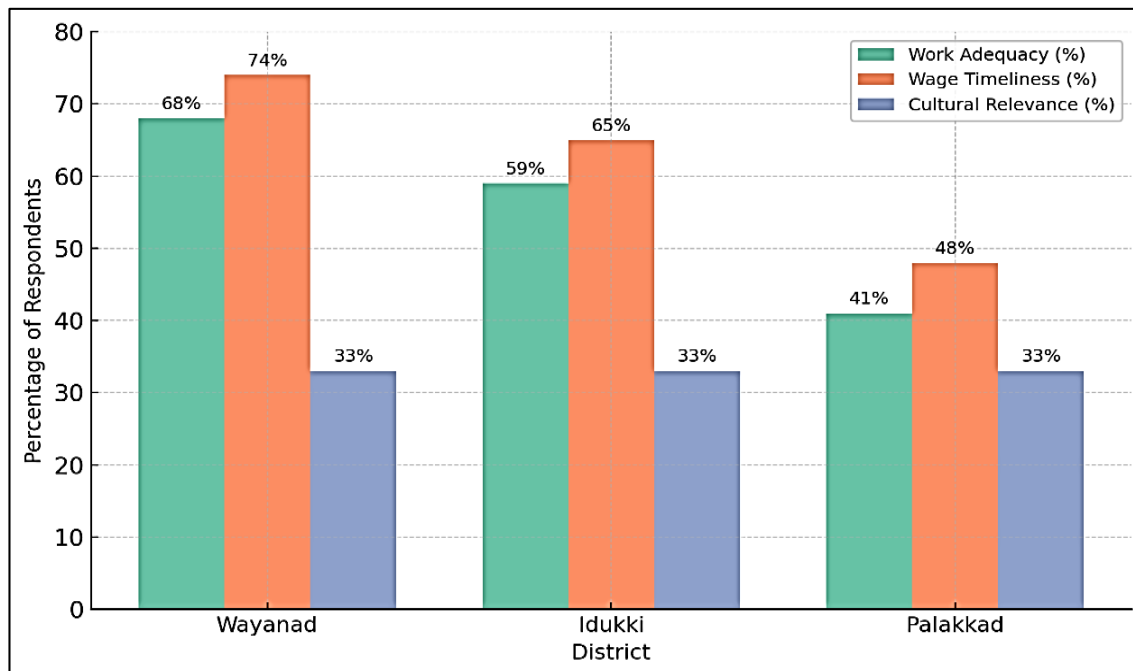


Fig 8: Perceived adequacy of work, Satisfaction with wage timeliness and Cultural relevance of works

Focus Group Discussions (FGDs)

Thematic analysis of FGDs identifies three recurring concerns:

1. **Demand Suppression** — Panchayats often pre-approve a limited shelf of works, leading to unmet demand even when budgets permit expansion.
2. **Mismatch of Works** — Many projects focus on road maintenance or general land development rather than works aligned with forest-based livelihoods, traditional water management, or agroforestry.
3. **Seasonality Issues** — Work peaks during dry months, with minimal allocation during the monsoon, when tribal households face acute food and income stress.

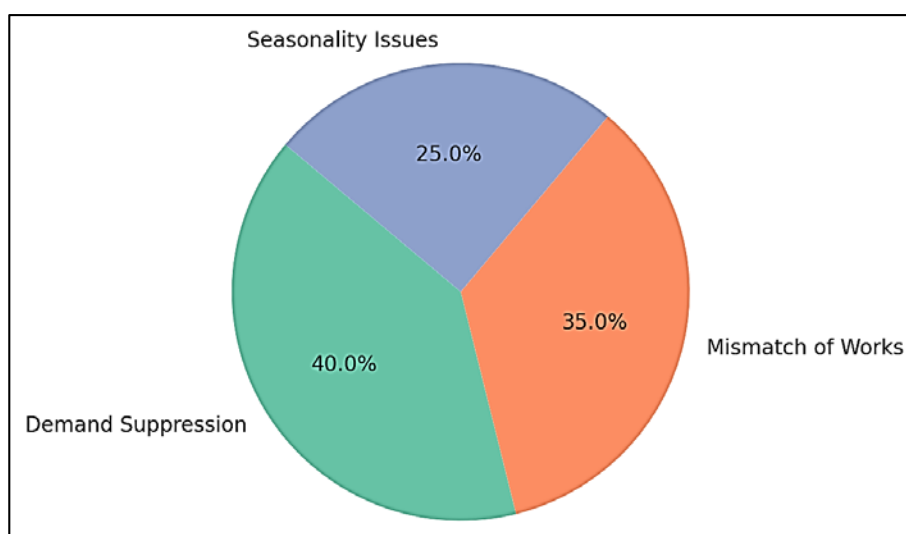


Fig 9: Demand Suppression, Mismatch of Works and Seasonality Issues in Selected Districts

The thematic weight of concerns raised in FGDs:

- **Demand Suppression** (40%) emerges as the most prominent issue,
- **Mismatch of Works** (35%) follows closely,
- **Seasonality Issues** (25%) remain a persistent but relatively smaller concern.

This representation underscores structural governance constraints shaping ST participation and livelihood security under MGNREGS.

Key Informant Interviews

Interviews with Panchayat officials and Tribal Department staff reveal governance bottlenecks:

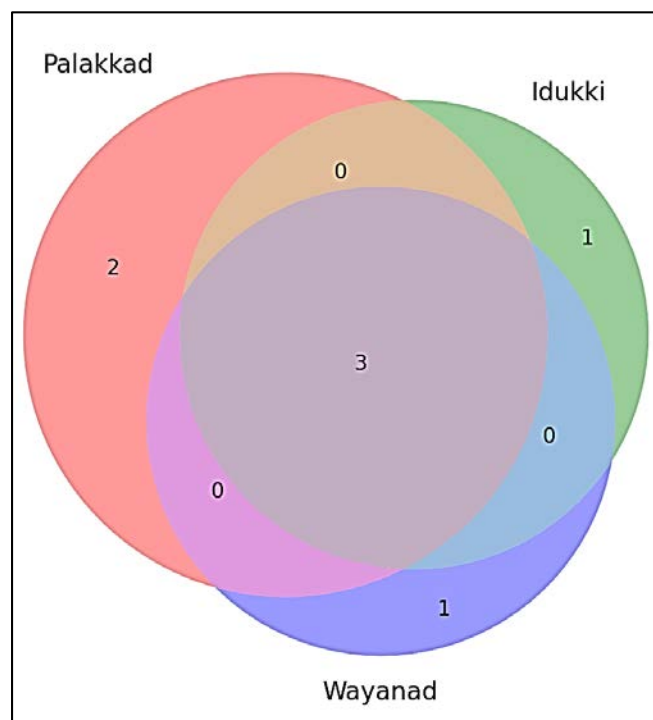


Fig 10: Common and Unique Governance Challenges of MGNREGS in Tribal Plus

This Venn diagram maps governance bottlenecks identified in key informant interviews:

Common to all three districts (center overlap)

- Inadequate culturally relevant works.
- Limited administrative capacity.
- Geographic/logistical constraints.

Palakkad-specific

- Lack of trained mates.
- Weak social audit follow-up.

Idukki-specific

Difficult mountainous terrain delaying inspections.

Wayanad-specific

- Difficulty scaling culturally relevant works beyond pilot projects.

It visually clarifies that while each district faces unique constraints, there are deep structural issues that cut across Kerala's tribal MGNREGS governance framework.

- Palakkad: Lack of trained mates and weak social audit follow-up.
- Idukki: Difficult terrain delays worksite inspections.
- Wayanad: Strong interdepartmental convergence but challenges in scaling culturally relevant works beyond pilot projects.

Officials also confirm that the NMMS app, while improving attendance monitoring, has inadvertently excluded workers in areas with poor mobile connectivity—highlighting a technological barrier to inclusive governance.

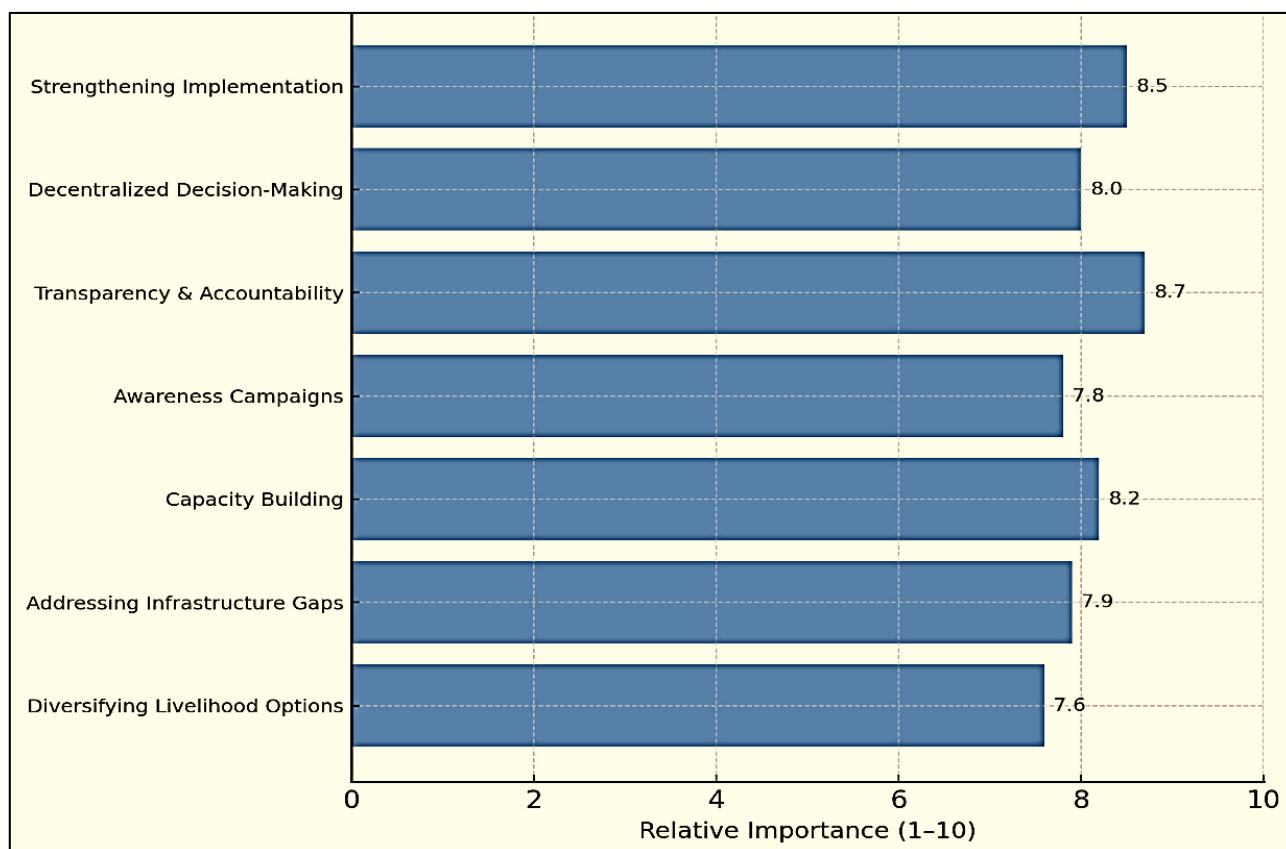


Fig 11: Governance perspectives of tribal plus MGNREGS Integration

The chart illustrates the relative importance of seven governance perspectives for strengthening Tribal Plus-MGNREGS implementation, based on qualitative assessments from officials and agencies.

- Transparency & Accountability (8.7) and Strengthening Implementation (8.5) emerge as the highest priorities, reflecting the need for trust-building and efficient coordination between agencies.

- Capacity Building (8.2) and Decentralized Decision-Making (8.0) also rank high, underscoring the importance of empowering local institutions and enhancing tribal participation.
- Awareness Campaigns (7.8), Addressing Infrastructure Gaps (7.9), and Diversifying Livelihood Options (7.6), though slightly lower, remain critical to ensuring sustainable and inclusive outcomes.

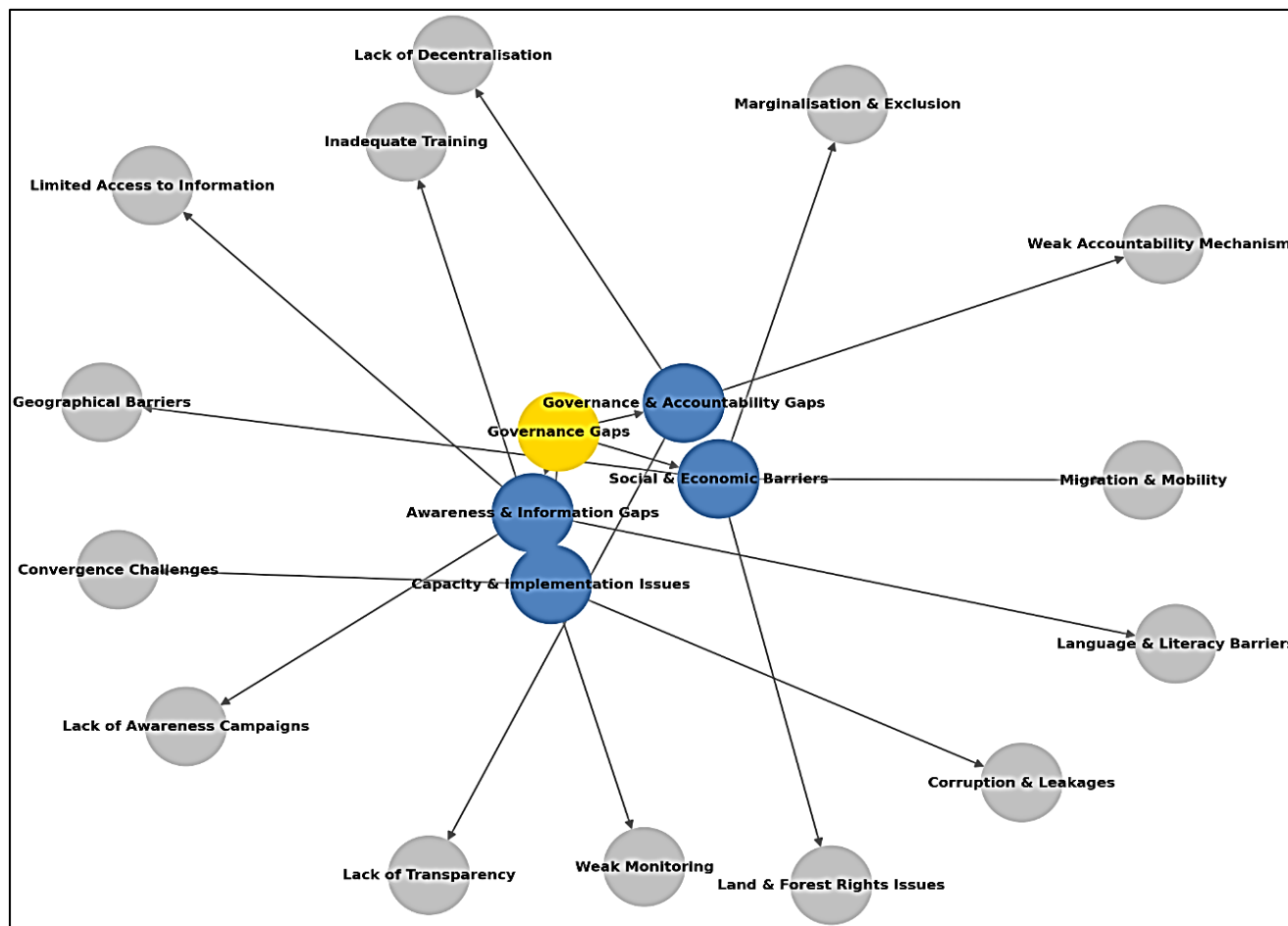


Fig 12: Governance Gaps map of the main problem areas in Tribal MGNREGS implementation into four interconnected domains

This governance gaps map visually clusters the main problem areas in Tribal MGNREGS implementation into four interconnected domains:

- **Awareness & Information Gaps:** Limited outreach, language barriers, and inadequate targeted campaigns prevent many tribal households from fully understanding their rights and entitlements.
- **Capacity & Implementation Issues:** Weak local institutional capacity, insufficient training, poor monitoring, and ineffective convergence with other schemes undermine programme delivery.
- **Social & Economic Barriers:** Marginalisation, geographic remoteness, land rights disputes, and seasonal migration limit participation and continuity of work.
- **Governance & Accountability Gaps:** Weak decentralisation, low transparency, and poor accountability mechanisms create systemic inefficiencies and mistrust.

By mapping these categories together, the diagram shows that no single reform is sufficient—meaningful

improvement requires simultaneous action across all four domains through multilevel governance reforms, stronger institutional coordination, and culturally aligned work design.

Here's a governance gaps map that visually organizes the four main domains—Awareness, Capacity, Socio-Economic Barriers, and Accountability—along with their specific sub-issues, showing how each gap connects to the broader implementation challenges in Tribal MGNREGS.

This visual prioritisation helps identify where policy focus and resource allocation can have the greatest impact on governance quality and tribal empowerment.

The integration of quantitative secondary data with primary survey and FGD findings reveals that while Kerala's decentralised governance framework has facilitated higher overall ST participation than the national average, structural inequities persist. Wayanad exemplifies the potential of strong Panchayat-Tribal Department coordination, but gaps in culturally aligned work design and seasonal distribution of employment remain unaddressed.

These findings reinforce the argument that decentralisation alone is insufficient without multilevel governance reforms,

targeted capacity building, and institutional incentives to align work with tribal cultural-ecological contexts.

Conclusion

This study has illuminated the complex interplay between decentralised governance structures and tribal realities in the implementation of MGNREGS across Kerala's ecologically and culturally distinct regions. By integrating multilevel governance theory with the Capability Approach and participatory parity, the research advances a nuanced understanding of how employment guarantees can evolve into instruments of structural empowerment for Scheduled Tribes.

Empirical findings from Wayanad, Idukki, and Palakkad reveal that while Kerala's Tribal Plus model has made notable strides in participatory planning, gender inclusion, and grievance redressal, persistent governance gaps—particularly in work demand generation, cultural-ecological alignment, and wage disbursement—continue to constrain transformative outcomes. The governance gaps map developed herein offers a diagnostic framework that clusters these challenges into four interdependent domains, underscoring the need for simultaneous and coordinated reform.

The study concludes that decentralisation, though necessary, is not sufficient. Meaningful tribal empowerment under MGNREGS demands deeper multilevel coordination, legally enforceable accountability mechanisms, and culturally embedded work design. Kerala's experience offers a replicable governance blueprint for indigenous policy innovation—one that integrates law, economics, and public administration to bridge capability deficits and institutional fragmentation.

Future research should explore comparative models across other tribal regions in India and examine how digital governance, ecological planning, and youth aspirations can further enrich the transformative potential of employment schemes in marginalised contexts

References

1. Azeez NP, Akhtar SMJ. Digital financial literacy and its determinants: an empirical evidence from rural India. *South Asian J Soc Stud Econ*. 2021;11(2):8-22. doi:10.9734/sajsse/2021/v11i230279
2. Baviskar A. In the belly of the river: Tribal conflicts over development in the Narmada Valley. New Delhi: Oxford University Press; 2019.
3. Beach D, Pedersen RB. Process-tracing methods: foundations and guidelines. 2nd ed. Ann Arbor (MI): University of Michigan Press; 2019.
4. Bryman A. Integrating quantitative and qualitative research: how is it done? *Qual Res*. 2006;6(1):97-113. doi:10.1177/1468794106058877
5. Carswell G, De Neve G. MGNREGA in Tamil Nadu: A story of success and transformation? *J Agrar Change*. 2014;14(4):564-85.
6. Creswell JW, Plano Clark VL. Designing and conducting mixed methods research. 3rd ed. Thousand Oaks (CA): SAGE Publications; 2018.
7. Denzin NK. Triangulation: a case for methodological evaluation and combination. *Sociol Methods*. 1978;10:339-57.
8. Dev SM. Social protection: MGNREGA and beyond. *Indian J Labour Econ*. 2012;55(1):25-42.
9. Dey S, Bedi AS. The National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme in Birbhum. *Econ Polit Wkly*. 2010;45(41):19-25. Available from: <http://hdl.handle.net/1765/22287>
10. Dreze J, Sen A. An uncertain glory: India and its contradictions. London: Allen Lane; 2013.
11. Fowler FJ. Survey research methods. 5th ed. London: SAGE Publications; 2014.
12. Hooghe L, Marks G. Unraveling the central state, but how? Types of multilevel governance. *Am Polit Sci Rev*. 2003;97(2):233-43.
13. International Labour Office. Decent work. Geneva: ILO; 1999.
14. Isaac TMT, Franke RW. Local democracy and development: People's campaign for decentralised planning in Kerala. New Delhi: LeftWord Books; 2000.
15. Israel M, Hay I. Research ethics for social scientists: between ethical conduct and regulatory compliance. London: SAGE Publications; 2006. 193 p.
16. Khera R, Nayak N. Women workers and perceptions of the NREGA. *Econ Polit Wkly*. 2009;44(43):49-57.
17. Kumar MD. Thirsty cities: how Indian cities can meet their water needs. New Delhi: Oxford University Press; 2014. 342 p.
18. Kumar P, Chakraborty D. MGNREGA: employment, wages and migration in rural India. 1st ed. London: Routledge India; 2016. doi:10.4324/9781315652412
19. Mathew G. New economic policy, social development and sociology. *Sociol Bull*. 1995;44(1):63-77. doi:10.1177/0038022919950104
20. Mathew G. Panchayati Raj: From legislation to movement. New Delhi: Concept Publishing; 1995.
21. Miles MB, Huberman AM, Saldaña J. Qualitative data analysis: a methods sourcebook. 3rd ed. Thousand Oaks (CA): SAGE Publications; 2014. 381 p.
22. Morgan DL. Focus groups as qualitative research. Thousand Oaks (CA): SAGE Publications; 1997.
23. Oommen MA. Growth, inequality and well-being: revisiting fifty years of Kerala's development trajectory. *J South Asian Dev*. 2014;9(2):173-205. doi:10.1177/0973174114536097
24. Oommen MA. The Kerala model: its central tendency and the outlier. *J Kerala Stud*. 2014;41(1):1-21.
25. Pankaj AK, editor. Right to work and rural India: Working of the Mahatma Gandhi Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme. New Delhi: SAGE Publications; 2015.
26. Ravi S, Engler M. Workfare as an effective way to fight poverty: The case of India's NREGS. *World Dev*. 2015;67:57-71.
27. Reddy DN, Reddy AA, Bhattarai M, Nagaraj N, Bantilan C, et al. MGNREGS implementations and the dynamics of rural labour markets. In: Reddy DN, Reddy AA, Bhattarai M, Nagaraj N, Bantilan C, editors. Employment guarantee programme and dynamics of rural transformation in India. Singapore: Springer; 2018. p. 71-101. doi:10.1007/978-981-10-6262-9_3
28. Roosevelt FD. The Constitution prevails, 1937. In: Rosenman SI, editor. The public papers and addresses of Franklin D. Roosevelt. Vol. 6. New York: Macmillan; 1938. p. 1-10.
29. Sen A. Development as freedom. New Delhi: Oxford University Press; 1999.

30. Sinha G. Linkages between food consumption patterns, food security and sustainable food systems [Internet]. 2014 [cited 2025 Aug 12]. Available from: <http://shodh.inflibnet.ac.in:8080/jspui/bitstream/123456789/2060/1/synopsis.pdf>
31. Tashakkori A, Teddlie C, editors. SAGE handbook of mixed methods in social and behavioral research. Thousand Oaks (CA): SAGE Publications; 2010. doi:10.4135/9781506335193
32. Xaxa V. Tribes in India. *Indian J Polit Sci*. 2003;64(3):341-353.
33. Sen AK. From income inequality to economic inequality. *Southern Economic Journal*. 1997 Oct;64(2):384-401.
34. Fraser N. Social justice in the age of identity politics: Redistribution, recognition, and participation. In *Geographic thought* 2008 Aug 28 (pp. 72-89). Routledge.
35. Kang J, Hu Y, Sun W, Liu R, Gao Z, Guan Q, Tang H, Yin Z. Utilisation of FGD gypsum for silicate removal from scheelite flotation wastewater. *Chemical Engineering Journal*. 2018 Jun 1;341:272-9.
36. Ellis F, Freeman HA. Rural livelihoods and poverty reduction strategies in four African countries. *Journal of development studies*. 2004 Apr 1;40(4):1-30.