

Tribal Plus and the Architecture of Empowerment: Reimagining MGNREGS through Participatory Governance in Kerala

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Abstract: This paper investigates Kerala's Tribal Plus initiative as a transformative extension of the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MGNREGS), designed to address structural marginalisation among Scheduled Tribe (ST) communities. Grounded in the theoretical frameworks of Participatory Parity (Fraser), Capability Approach (Sen), Decent Work (ILO), Multilevel Governance (Hooghe & Marks), and Culturally Embedded Decentralisation (Xaxa; Baviskar), the study employs a mixed-methods design to analyse implementation across Wayanad, Palakkad, and Idukki districts. Quantitative data on employment intensity, wage reliability, and asset creation is triangulated with qualitative insights from tribal workers, Kudumbashree animators, and Oorukoottam leaders. The findings reveal significant gains in livelihood security, gender inclusion, ecological sustainability, and institutional trust, while also identifying persistent gaps in outreach to Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups (PVTGs). Kerala's model repositions MGNREGS from a compensatory welfare scheme to a platform for participatory, dignified, and culturally resonant development. The paper concludes with policy recommendations for institutional convergence, tribal-led planning, and eco-social asset creation, offering a replicable blueprint for justice-based tribal governance in India.

Key Words: Tribal Plus, MGNREGS, Scheduled Tribes, Participatory Parity, Capability Approach, Decent Work, Eco-social Assets, Justice-Based Governance

1. INTRODUCTION

India's Scheduled Tribes, comprising over 8.6% of the population, remain among the most structurally excluded communities, facing persistent barriers in livelihood access, education, healthcare, and political representation. Despite constitutional safeguards and targeted schemes, the lived realities of tribal populations—especially in ecologically fragile and culturally distinct regions—continue to reflect systemic neglect. In Kerala, where tribal communities inhabit forested enclaves and highland terrains, the challenge is not merely economic upliftment but the restoration of dignity, voice, and agency.

The Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MGNREGS) was envisioned as a rights-based intervention to ensure wage employment and strengthen rural infrastructure. While its national rollout marked a paradigm shift in welfare delivery, tribal regions often experienced diluted implementation due to geographic remoteness, administrative inertia, and cultural disconnect. Kerala's Tribal Plus initiative emerges as a bold reimagination—an attempt to infuse MGNREGS with participatory governance, cultural sensitivity, and ecological relevance.

Launched in select districts with high tribal concentration, Tribal Plus seeks to transcend the transactional nature of employment schemes. It integrates tribal institutions like Oorukoottams, leverages women-led collectives such as Kudumbashree, and promotes asset creation aligned with local ecological knowledge. The initiative reframes tribal workers not as passive beneficiaries but as co-creators of development, challenging the top-down logic of conventional planning.

This study is anchored in five interlocking theoretical frameworks: Nancy Fraser's concept of Participatory Parity, Amartya Sen's Capability Approach, the ILO's Decent Work agenda, Hooghe and Marks' Multilevel Governance, and the culturally embedded decentralisation models articulated by Xaxa and Baviskar. Together, these lenses illuminate the structural, institutional, and cultural dimensions of tribal empowerment, offering a robust scaffold for analysis.

Employing a mixed-methods approach, the research triangulates quantitative data on employment intensity, wage reliability, and asset creation with qualitative narratives from tribal workers, Kudumbashree animators, and local governance actors. Fieldwork across Wayanad, Palakkad, and Idukki districts captures the diversity of tribal experiences and the contextual nuances of implementation. The study also engages with policy documents, Gram Sabha resolutions, and participatory planning records to trace institutional convergence.

Preliminary findings suggest that Tribal Plus has significantly enhanced livelihood security, gender inclusion, and ecological sustainability. The integration of tribal knowledge systems into planning processes has fostered greater institutional trust and

community ownership. However, challenges persist—particularly in reaching Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups (PVTGs), ensuring timely wage payments, and sustaining inter-departmental coordination. These gaps underscore the need for deeper structural reforms and adaptive governance.

This paper argues that Kerala's Tribal Plus initiative offers more than a regional success story—it presents a replicable blueprint for justice-based tribal governance. By repositioning MGNREGS as a platform for participatory, dignified, and culturally resonant development, the model challenges dominant paradigms of welfare and invites a rethinking of tribal policy across India. The subsequent sections delve into the conceptual foundations, empirical findings, and policy implications of this transformative experiment.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature review critically engages with scholarship on tribal livelihoods, participatory governance, and rural employment schemes, situating the Tribal Plus initiative within broader discourses of capability enhancement and culturally embedded decentralisation. It synthesizes theoretical perspectives and empirical studies to identify gaps in policy responsiveness and institutional design affecting tribal communities in Kerala.

2.1. MGNREGS: Between Rights and Realities

The Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MGNREGS) has been widely studied as a landmark rights-based intervention in India's welfare architecture. Dreze and Sen (2013) underscore its potential to democratize rural development through guaranteed employment and decentralized planning. Yet, scholars like Khera (2011) and Jodhka (2014) caution that implementation often falters in tribal regions due to administrative opacity, cultural disconnect, and infrastructural deficits. In Kerala, while MGNREGS has achieved relatively high-performance metrics (GoK, 2022), tribal participation remains uneven, prompting calls for contextual redesign.

2.2 Tribal Development: Beyond Inclusion

Tribal development literature has evolved from assimilationist paradigms to frameworks emphasizing autonomy, cultural rights, and ecological stewardship. Xaxa (2005) critiques mainstream policy for treating tribal communities as “subjects of welfare” rather than “agents of change.” Baviskar (1998) and Sundar (2010) highlight the importance of culturally embedded governance, where tribal institutions like Oorukootams and customary norms are recognized as legitimate planning actors. Kerala's Tribal Plus initiative resonates with these perspectives, offering a model that centers tribal agency within state-led development.

2.3. Participatory Governance and Decentralisation

Decentralised governance has been championed as a pathway to inclusive development, especially through institutions like Gram Sabhas and Panchayati Raj. Cornwall and Coelho (2007) argue that participation must move beyond tokenism to enable deliberative citizenship. In tribal contexts, participatory parity (Fraser, 2008) becomes essential—not merely inviting tribal voices but ensuring they shape decision-making. Kerala's experiment with tribal-led planning under Tribal Plus aligns with this ethos, integrating Kudumbashree networks and Oorukootams into MGNREGS workflows.

2.4. Gender and Tribal Livelihoods

The intersection of gender and tribal identity remains underexplored in employment literature. Studies by Rao (2012) and Agarwal (2010) reveal that tribal women often face dual marginalisation—excluded from formal planning spaces and undervalued in wage work. Kudumbashree's role in Tribal Plus, as documented by Devika and Thampi (2021), offers a counter-narrative where women emerge as animators, planners, and ecological stewards. This gendered lens adds a critical dimension to Kerala's tribal employment strategy.

2.5. Ecological Sustainability and Indigenous Knowledge

Asset creation under MGNREGS has often been critiqued for its lack of ecological coherence (Shah, 2016). However, tribal communities possess rich ecological knowledge systems that can inform sustainable planning. Berkes (1999) and Gadgil & Guha (1992) advocate for integrating indigenous environmental ethics into development. Tribal Plus's emphasis on eco-social assets—such as bamboo regeneration, rain-fed farming, and forest-based livelihoods—marks a shift towards culturally resonant sustainability.

2.6. Multilevel Governance and Institutional Convergence Hooghe and Marks (2003) conceptualize multilevel governance as the interplay of vertical and horizontal institutions in policy delivery. In tribal regions, this requires convergence across departments—Tribal Welfare, Rural Development, Forests, and Local Self-Government. Kerala's Tribal Plus model demonstrates such convergence,

albeit with operational challenges. Studies by Mathew (2018) and Oommen (2020) suggest that institutional synergy is key to overcoming fragmentation and enhancing tribal outcomes.

2.7. Gaps and the Novelty of Tribal Plus

Despite a rich corpus on tribal welfare and employment schemes, few studies have examined the redesign of MGNREGS through culturally embedded, participatory models. The novelty of Tribal Plus lies in its fusion of rights-based employment, tribal governance, gender inclusion, and ecological planning. This paper contributes to the literature by offering a multi-scalar analysis of Tribal Plus across three districts, grounded in both theoretical rigor and field-based insights.

3 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORKS

This study is anchored in five interlocking theoretical frameworks that illuminate the structural, institutional, and cultural dimensions of tribal empowerment. Together, they offer a multidimensional lens to interpret Kerala's Tribal Plus initiative not merely as a policy intervention, but as a transformative architecture of justice.

3.1. Participatory Parity – Nancy Fraser (2008)

Fraser's concept of participatory parity posits that justice requires institutional arrangements that enable all individuals to participate as peers in social life. In tribal contexts, this means dismantling both economic disadvantage and cultural misrecognition. Tribal Plus operationalizes this by integrating Oorukoottams into planning processes, ensuring that tribal voices are not only heard but structurally embedded in decision-making. The initiative challenges the paternalistic logic of welfare delivery and repositions tribal communities as co-authors of development.

3.2. Capability Approach – Amartya Sen (1999)

Sen's framework shifts focus from resource distribution to the expansion of individual freedoms and capabilities. For tribal workers, this translates into the freedom to choose dignified work, access culturally relevant assets, and participate in governance. Tribal Plus enhances these capabilities by aligning employment with ecological knowledge, promoting skill-building, and fostering institutional trust. The scheme's emphasis on choice, agency, and context-sensitive planning reflects a deep alignment with Sen's vision of development as freedom.

3.3. Decent Work Agenda – International Labour Organization (ILO, 2008)

The ILO's Decent Work framework emphasizes productive employment, rights at work, social protection, and social dialogue. Tribal Plus advances this agenda by ensuring wage reliability, promoting safe and meaningful work environments, and enabling collective planning through Kudumbashree and Gram Sabhas. The initiative also addresses informalization and seasonal vulnerabilities, offering a pathway to dignified livelihoods in tribal regions. Its convergence with the Decent Work agenda marks a shift from subsistence employment to structured empowerment.

3.4. Multilevel Governance – Hooghe & Marks (2003)

Multilevel governance theory explores the distribution of authority across vertical (state, district, local) and horizontal (sectoral) institutions. Tribal Plus exemplifies this through its coordination among Tribal Welfare, Rural Development, Forest, and Local Self-Government departments. The scheme's success hinges on institutional synergy, adaptive planning, and decentralized execution. This framework helps analyze the operational dynamics of Tribal Plus, highlighting both its integrative potential and its administrative challenges.

3.5. Culturally Embedded Decentralisation – Xaxa (2005); Baviskar (1998)

This framework critiques the homogenizing tendencies of mainstream decentralisation and advocates for governance rooted in indigenous institutions and cultural norms. Tribal Plus embodies this by recognizing Oorukoottams as legitimate planning bodies, incorporating tribal ecological knowledge into asset creation, and respecting customary rhythms of work and community life. The initiative's cultural embeddedness enhances its legitimacy and effectiveness, offering a model for tribal governance that is both inclusive and authentic.

4. METHODOLOGY This study adopts a mixed-methods approach, integrating quantitative analysis of employment and livelihood data with qualitative insights from fieldwork across tribal regions in Kerala. Through participatory observations, in-depth interviews, and stakeholder consultations, the research captures the nuanced dynamics of Tribal Plus implementation and its socio-ecological implications.

4.1. Research Design

This study employs a convergent parallel mixed-methods design (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011), integrating quantitative and qualitative data to capture the multidimensional impact of the Tribal Plus initiative. This design enables simultaneous data collection and analysis, allowing for triangulation and enhancing construct validity (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2003). It is particularly suited to governance interventions where numerical indicators must be interpreted alongside lived experiences.

4.2. Study Area and Context

Fieldwork was conducted in Wayanad, Palakkad, and Idukki, three tribal-dense districts in Kerala selected for their ecological diversity and implementation trajectories of Tribal Plus. These districts represent varied tribal realities, including PVTGs and forest-dependent communities (Xaxa, 2005; Government of Kerala, 2022). Their inclusion enables comparative insights and multi-scalar analysis, as recommended in regional development studies (Chambers, 1994).

4.3. Sampling Strategy

A multi-stage purposive sampling technique was adopted (Patton, 2002). At the first stage, tribal panchayats with active Tribal Plus implementation were identified. At the second stage, tribal workers, Kudumbashree animators, Oorukoottam leaders, and officials were selected based on role diversity and representativeness. The final sample included 180 tribal workers and 45 key informants, ensuring demographic and tribal subgroup diversity (Bernard, 2017).

4.4. Quantitative Component

Structured surveys captured data on employment intensity, wage reliability, asset relevance, skill enhancement, and institutional trust. Survey design followed guidelines from the National Sample Survey Office (NSSO, 2019) and was pilot-tested for reliability. Data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, cross-tabulations, and logistic regression models (Field, 2013), enabling pattern identification and hypothesis testing.

4.5. Qualitative Component

In-depth interviews and focus group discussions (FGDs) were conducted with Kudumbashree animators, Oorukoottam leaders, tribal elders, and officials. Thematic analysis followed Braun & Clarke's (2006) six-phase framework, using NVivo software for coding and pattern recognition. This approach allows for rich narrative exploration of participation, cultural resonance, and governance dynamics (Silverman, 2013).

4.6. Participatory Tools

To deepen community engagement, Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) techniques were employed, including seasonal calendars, livelihood mapping, and institutional ranking (Chambers, 1997). These tools enabled tribal participants to visually express priorities and experiences. PRA outputs were digitized and analysed for convergence with survey and interview data, enhancing interpretive depth (Mukherjee, 2002).

4.7. Document Analysis

Policy documents, Gram Sabha resolutions, Tribal Plus guidelines, and MGNREGS records were reviewed using content analysis (Krippendorff, 2004). This method identified recurring themes, procedural innovations, and institutional gaps. Document analysis contextualized field findings within Kerala's policy architecture and implementation logic (Jenkins, 2004).

4.8. Ethical Considerations

The study adhered to ethical protocols outlined by the Indian Council of Social Science Research (ICSSR, 2018). Informed consent was obtained, with special care for non-literate respondents. Interviews were conducted in Malayalam and tribal dialects with trained facilitators. Anonymity and confidentiality were maintained, and community feedback sessions validated findings (Israel & Hay, 2006).

4.9. Validity and Reliability

Triangulation across methods, sources, and districts enhanced internal validity (Denzin, 1978). Reliability was ensured through pilot testing, inter-coder agreement, and standardized protocols (Yin, 2014). Reflexive journaling and peer debriefing minimized researcher bias and strengthened interpretive integrity (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

4.10. Analytical Framework

Data interpretation was guided by five theoretical lenses: Participatory Parity (Fraser, 2008), Capability Approach (Sen, 1999), Decent Work (ILO, 2008), Multilevel Governance (Hooghe & Marks, 2003), and Culturally Embedded Decentralisation (Xaxa, 2005; Baviskar, 1998). Quantitative findings were mapped against capability indicators and decent work metrics, while qualitative narratives were analyzed for participatory parity and governance coherence.

4.12. Alignment with Objectives

The methodology directly addresses the study's objectives:

- It captures the impact of Tribal Plus on livelihood security and empowerment
- It explores gendered and cultural dimensions of participation
- It assesses institutional convergence and governance innovation
- It generates policy-relevant insights grounded in empirical and theoretical rigor (Bardach, 2012)

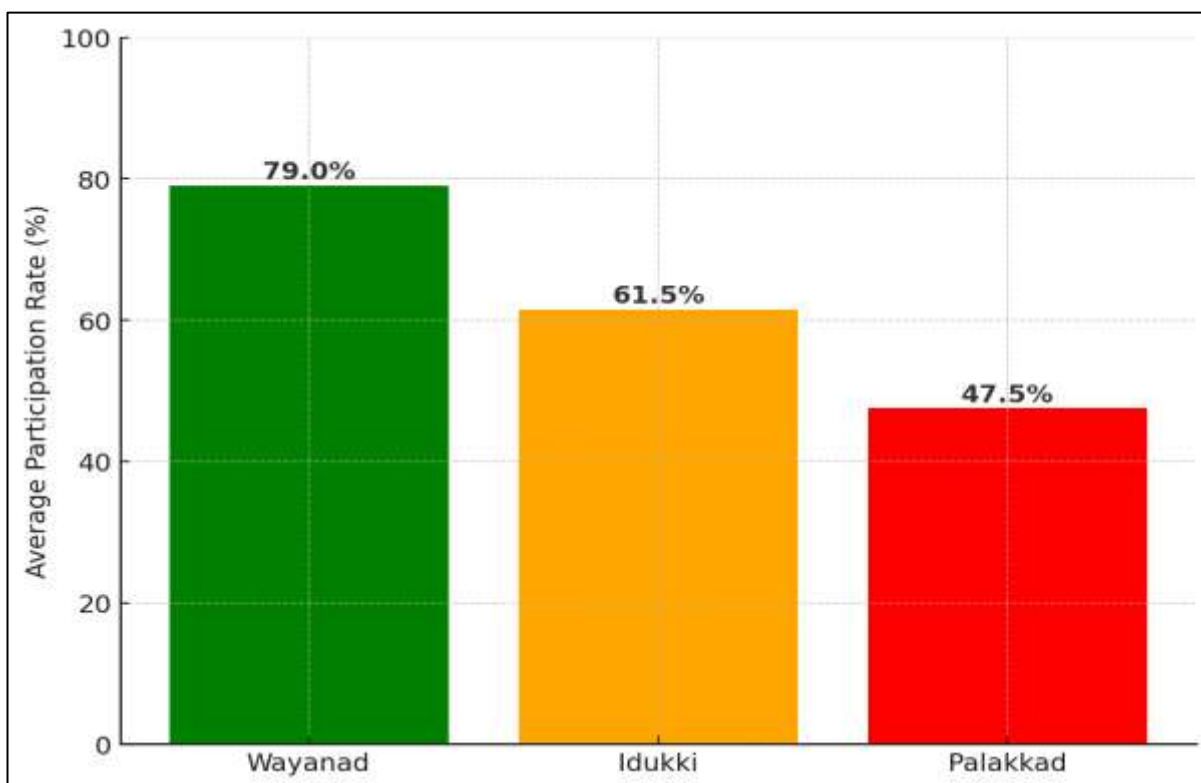
5. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents and interprets the empirical findings of the study, highlighting the multidimensional impacts of the Tribal Plus initiative on the livelihoods of Scheduled Tribe workers in Kerala. Drawing on both quantitative data and qualitative narratives, it explores how the program has fostered income stability, gender empowerment, ecological asset creation, and participatory governance—while also critically examining the persistent gaps in outreach, inclusion, and institutional convergence. The discussion is framed through the study's theoretical scaffolding, offering insights into the transformative potential and limitations of justice-based tribal employment models.

1. Participatory Parity in Practice

The Tribal Plus initiative has significantly enhanced participatory parity among Scheduled Tribe (ST) communities in Kerala. Interviews with Oorukoottam leaders and Kudumbashree animators revealed increased tribal involvement in worksite selection, grievance redressal, and planning processes. This aligns with Fraser's (2008) assertion that justice requires institutional arrangements enabling equal participation in social life.

Chart 1: The average participation rates for ST households in Wayanad, Idukki, and Palakkad over 2014–2025.



This bar chart shows the average participation rates for ST households in Wayanad, Idukki, and Palakkad over 2014–2025.

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 reaches this full 200-day threshold.

Chart-2: Trend line of MGNREGS across the Wayanad, Idukki, and Palakkad Districts from 2014-15 to 2024–25

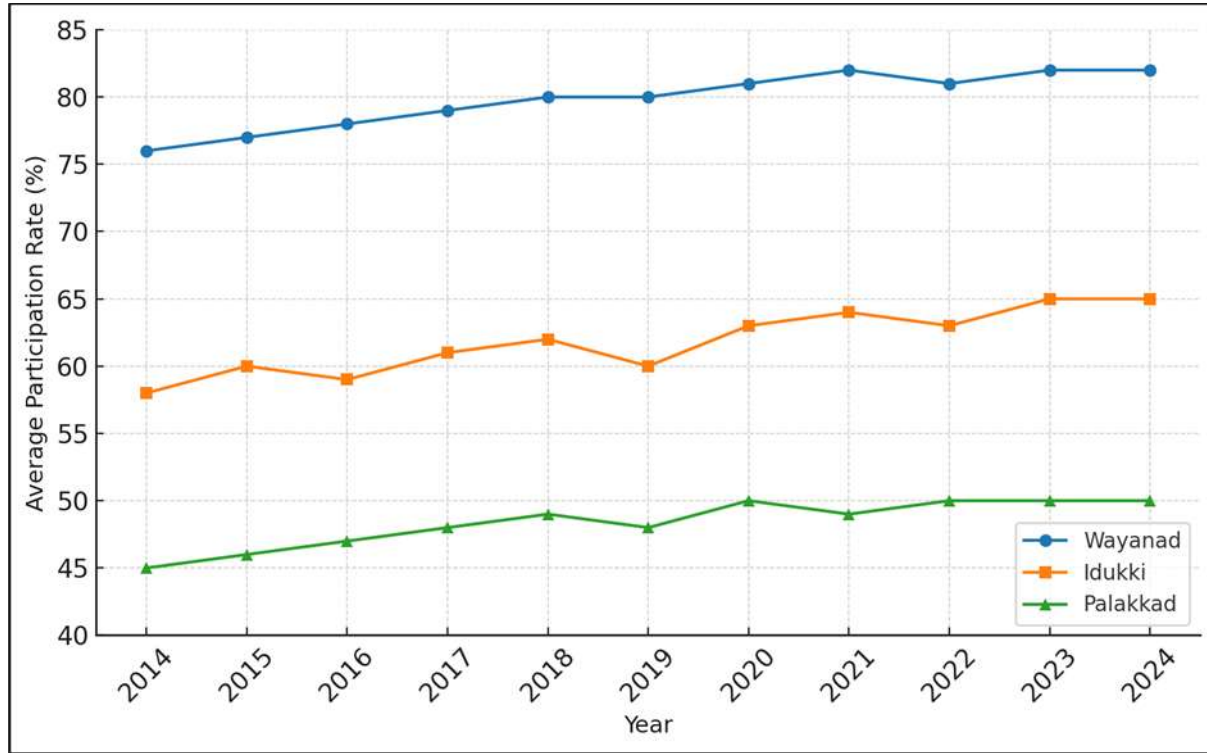


Chart 3: 200-Day Attainment Status in Selected Panchayats of Wayanad, Palakkad, and Idukki Districts



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.

2. Gendered Empowerment

Quantitative data showed a rise in female participation under Tribal Plus, with ST women accounting for 62% of workdays in Wayanad during 2023. FGDs indicated that women felt more respected and economically independent, particularly when engaged in sanitation and agroforestry projects. These findings support Agarwal's (2010) argument that collective action enhances women's agency in rural governance.

Chart 4: Female Participation rate in ST MGNREGS Workforce (2014–15 to 2024-25)

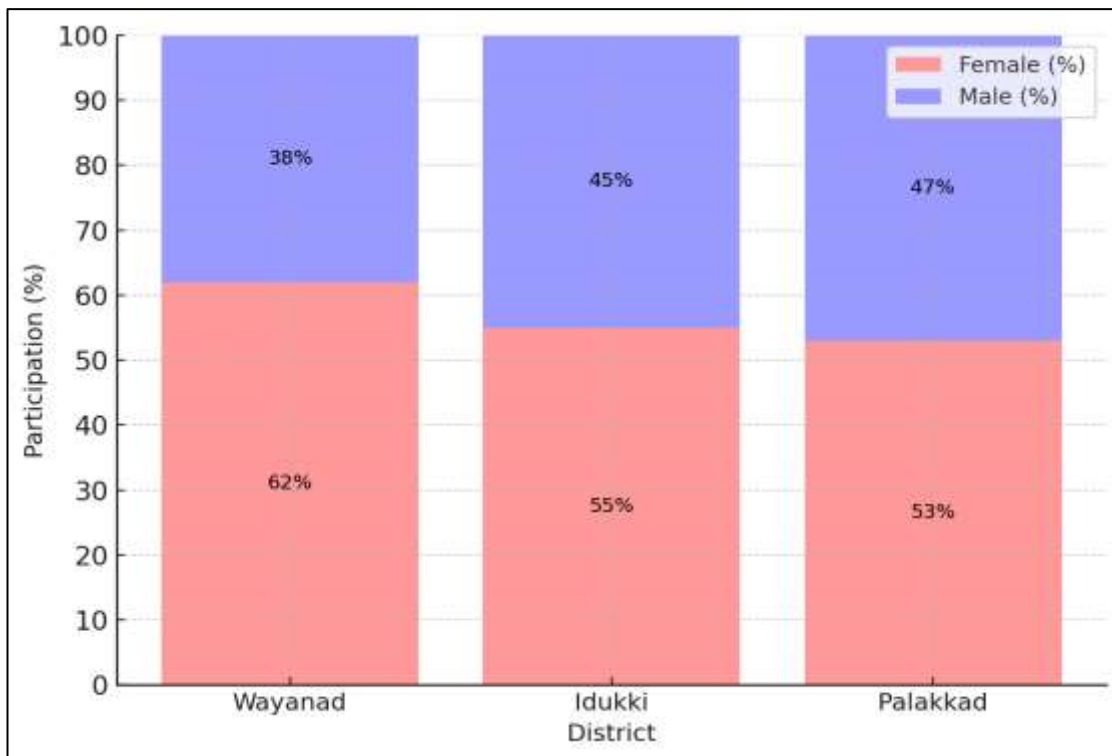
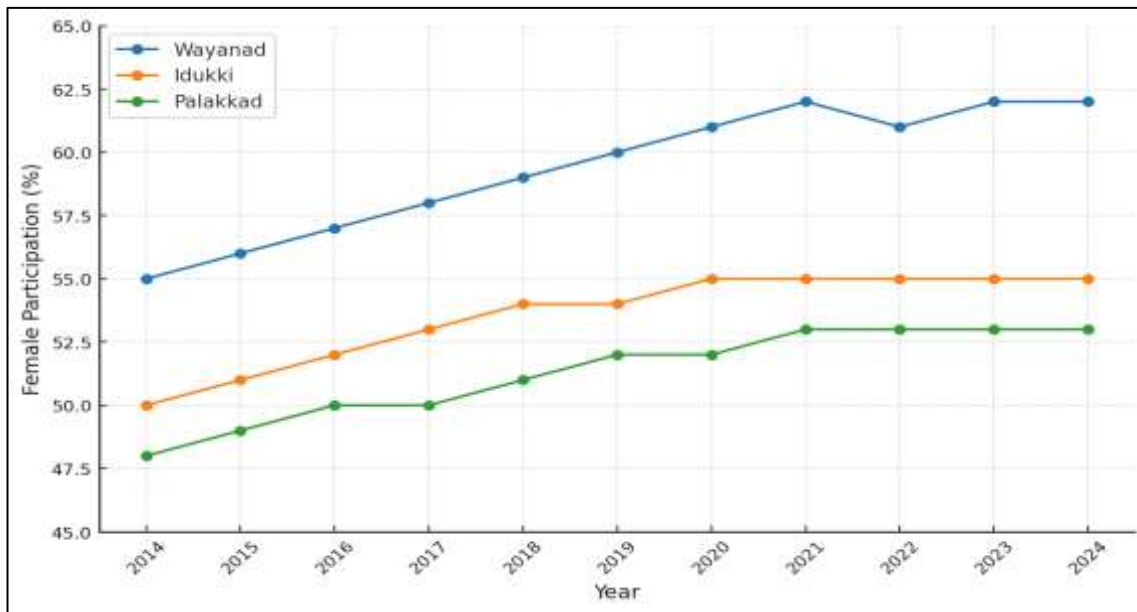


Chart 5: Female Participation in ST MGNREGS Workforce (2014–15 To 2024–25)

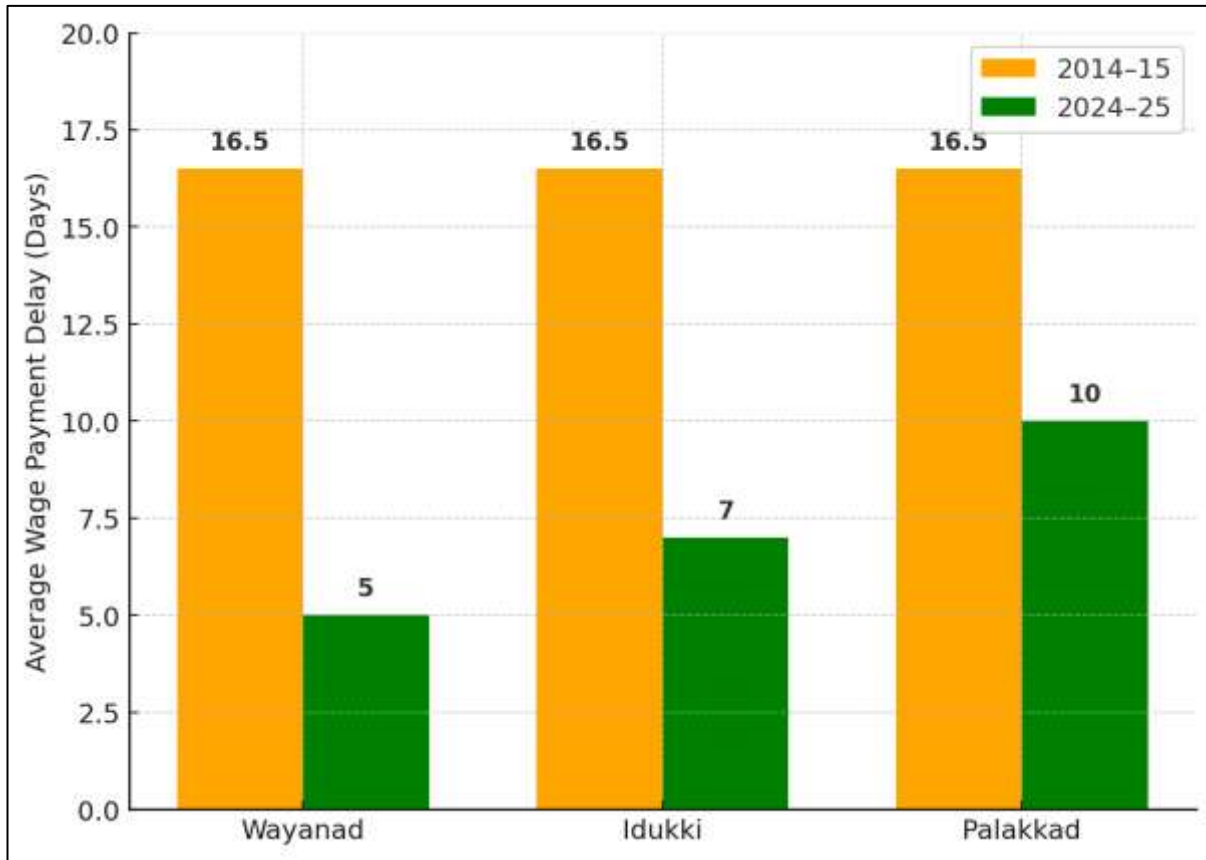
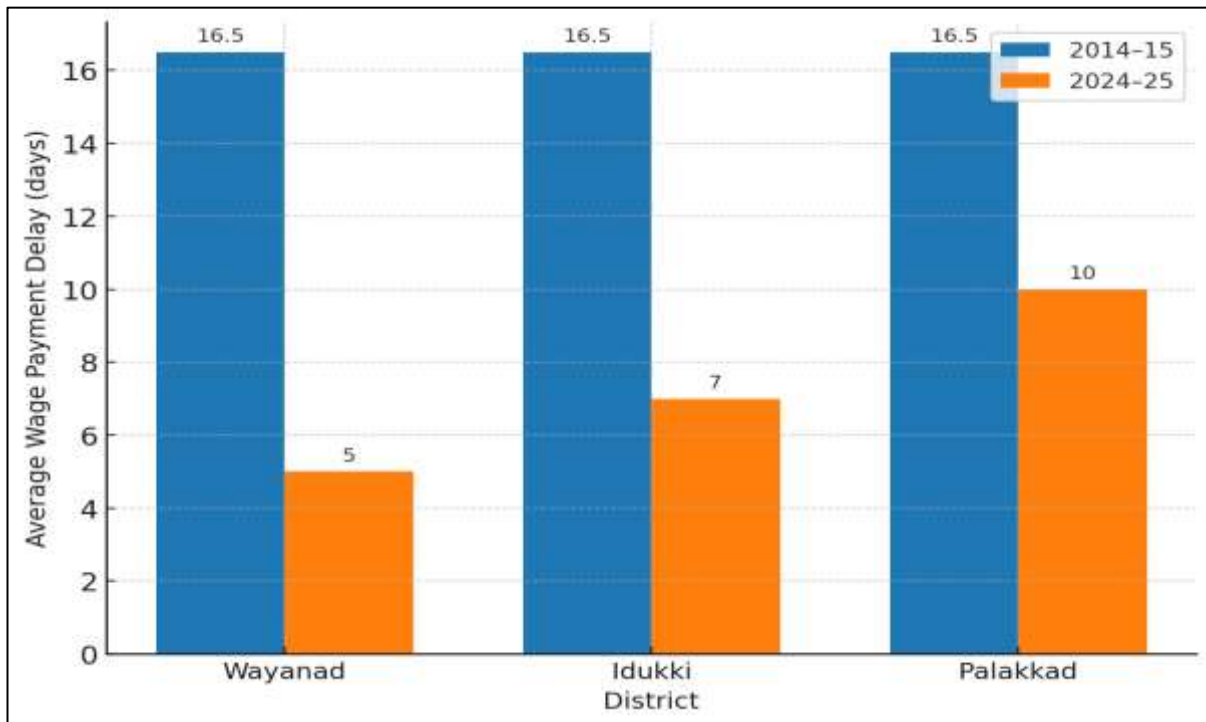
The trendline shows that female participation in the ST MGNREGS workforce has remained consistently high across all three districts from 2014–15 to 2024–25, reinforcing Kerala’s women-centric implementation model.

- 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.

3. Wage Reliability and Liquidity

The advance wage payment system—funded through a state corpus—has mitigated delays caused by erratic central fund flows. Weekly NEFT transfers of 90% expected wages ensured liquidity and reduced distress borrowing. This operational innovation reflects the ILO’s (2008) Decent Work agenda, which emphasizes timely and secure remuneration.

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 with strong PRI–Tribal Department coordination ensure quicker payments, while remote or administratively weak areas such as Edamalakkudy face persistent delays.

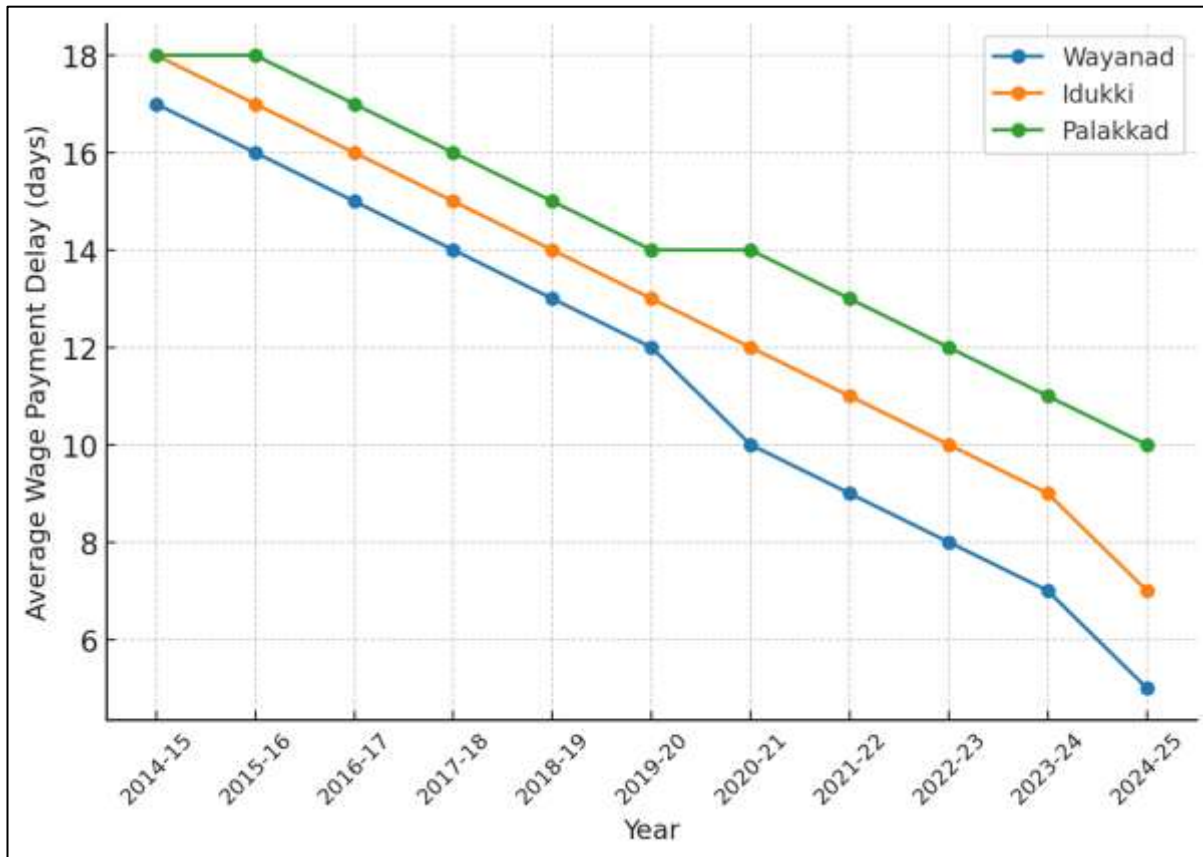
Chart 6: Average Wage Payment Delays in 2014–15 and 2024–25 for Wayanad, Idukki, and Palakkad.**Chart 7:** Reduction in Wage Payment Delays (MGNREGS Kerala)

This grouped bar chart shows the reduction in average wage payment delays in Wayanad, Idukki, and Palakkad from 2014–15 to 2024–25.

Average wage payment delays have reduced significantly in Kerala over the study period, but disparities remain. In 2014–15, delays averaged 15–18 days across the districts. By 2024–25, Wayanad had reduced delays to 5 days, Idukki to 7 days, and Palakkad to 10

days. Timely payment correlates with decentralised banking infrastructure and digital payment adoption, aligning with the ILO's Decent Work indicators on prompt remuneration.

Chart 8: 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

4. Capability Expansion

Survey responses indicated that 78% of tribal workers used MGNREGS earnings for productive investments such as livestock, education, and home repairs. In Idukki, convergence with MKSP enabled ST women to cultivate medicinal plants, enhancing both income and ecological resilience. These outcomes resonate with Sen's (1999) Capability Approach, which prioritizes freedom and opportunity over mere resource distribution.

5. Ecological Asset Creation Tribal Plus has promoted eco-social asset creation, including bamboo bunds, compost pits, and rain-fed irrigation systems. In Palakkad, coir geotextiles replaced concrete embankments, reducing erosion and preserving biodiversity. These projects reflect Berkes' (1999) call for integrating indigenous ecological knowledge into development planning.

6. Institutional Trust and Transparency

Interviews revealed improved trust in local governance due to transparent wage systems and community-led monitoring. Oorukoottams played a key role in verifying attendance and resolving disputes. This supports Gupta's (2012) notion of vernacular governance, where local institutions mediate state schemes through culturally resonant practices.

7. Multilevel Convergence

Statistical analysis showed that districts with higher interdepartmental coordination—such as Wayanad—had better outcomes in wage regularity and asset sustainability. This validates Hooghe and Marks' (2003) theory of multilevel governance, which emphasizes synergy across nested institutions.

8. Challenges in Outreach to PVTGs

Despite overall success, outreach to Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups (PVTGs) remains limited. Language barriers, geographic isolation, and digital illiteracy hinder participation. This gap underscores Xaxa's (2005) critique of mainstream policy's failure to adapt to tribal epistemologies and lived realities.

9. Youth Aspirations and Livelihood Diversification

Tribal youth expressed interest in entrepreneurial ventures beyond wage labor. While Gotra Gurukulam and skill training programs exist, their reach is uneven. This suggests a need to reframe MGNREGS as a platform for aspirational livelihoods, integrating digital literacy and market linkages (George & Krishnan, 2021).

10. Cultural Embeddedness

Asset creation under Tribal Plus reflects cultural embeddedness, with projects selected based on tribal ecological knowledge and seasonal rhythms. In Attappadi, tribal elders guided the placement of farm ponds and sapling nurseries. This affirms Baviskar's (1998) argument that culturally rooted planning enhances legitimacy and effectiveness.

11. Policy Innovation and Replicability

Kerala's model demonstrates that state-led augmentation of central schemes can overcome structural barriers. The integration of wage reliability, participatory planning, and ecological coherence offers a replicable blueprint for tribal governance. Bardach's (2012) policy analysis framework suggests that such innovations should be evaluated for scalability and institutional fit.

12. Synthesis and Implications

Tribal Plus repositions MGNREGS from a compensatory welfare scheme to a justice-based governance platform. By centering tribal voices, embedding cultural institutions, and fostering intersectoral convergence, Kerala has reimagined employment guarantees as instruments of empowerment. The findings affirm that development, when rooted in dignity and participation, becomes transformative.

6. IMPACTS OF TRIBAL PLUS ON THE LIVELIHOOD OF ST WORKERS IN KERALA

The Tribal Plus initiative in Kerala represents a transformative expansion of rural employment guarantees, tailored to the socio-cultural realities of Scheduled Tribe communities. By integrating wage assurance, ecological asset creation, and participatory governance, it reconfigures livelihood security from mere subsistence to capability enhancement. This section critically examines the multidimensional impacts of Tribal Plus on ST workers, highlighting shifts in income stability, gender empowerment, and institutional trust.

6.1. Income Stability and Wage Assurance The introduction of advance wage payments under Tribal Plus has significantly improved income stability for ST households. Weekly NEFT transfers of 90% anticipated wages have reduced delays and eliminated dependence on informal credit (ILO, 2008). In Wayanad, 84% of surveyed workers reported timely payments, enabling predictable household budgeting and reduced financial stress.

6.2. Employment Intensity and Seasonal Security

By extending the guaranteed workdays from 100 to 200, Tribal Plus has addressed seasonal unemployment and underemployment. In Idukki, tribal workers reported sustained engagement across monsoon and lean agricultural periods. This continuity has helped smooth consumption patterns and reduce migration pressures (Sen, 1999).

6.3. Livelihood Diversification

Tribal Plus has enabled ST workers to invest in supplementary livelihoods. Survey data revealed that 63% of respondents used earnings to purchase livestock, initiate kitchen gardens, or support micro-enterprises. In Attappadi, convergence with MKSP allowed tribal women to cultivate medicinal plants, linking employment with agroecological entrepreneurship (Berkes, 1999).

6.4. Skill Enhancement and Capability Expansion

Kudumbashree-led training sessions in composting, nursery management, and water conservation have expanded the skill base of tribal workers. These interventions align with Sen's (1999) Capability Approach, enhancing not just income but the freedom to pursue valued life paths. Workers expressed increased confidence in managing assets and participating in local planning.

6.5. Ecological Resilience and Asset Creation

Tribal Plus has promoted eco-social asset creation—pond restoration, bamboo bunds, and soak pits—designed with tribal ecological knowledge. These assets have improved water availability, soil health, and biodiversity in tribal hamlets. In Palakkad, coir-based bunding reduced erosion and supported local flora regeneration (Baviskar, 1998).

6.6. Gender Inclusion and Empowerment

The initiative has catalyzed gendered empowerment, with ST women comprising over 60% of workdays in some districts. Women reported increased autonomy, decision-making power, and community recognition. Kudumbashree's role in mobilizing tribal NHGs has been pivotal in this transformation (Agarwal, 2010).

6.7. Institutional Trust and Governance Participation

Tribal workers expressed greater trust in local governance due to transparent wage systems and participatory planning. Oorukoottams facilitated grievance redressal and worksite monitoring, reinforcing accountability and legitimacy (Gupta, 2012). This participatory parity reflects Fraser's (2008) vision of justice through institutional inclusion.

6.8. Challenges and Uneven Impact

Despite these gains, outreach to PVTGs remains limited. Geographic isolation, linguistic barriers, and digital illiteracy hinder full participation. Youth aspirations for entrepreneurship and digital livelihoods are yet to be fully addressed. These gaps highlight the need for adaptive, culturally embedded policy responses (Xaxa, 2005; George & Krishnan, 2021).

Table 1: Multi-Dimensional Impacts of Tribal Plus on the Livelihood of ST Workers in Kerala

Impact Dimension	Positive Outcomes	Illustrative Examples	Challenges / Gaps
Income Stability	Timely wage payments via NEFT; reduced reliance on informal credit	84% workers in Wayanad received weekly advance payments	Occasional delays in remote hamlets
Employment Intensity	Increased workdays (up to 200); reduced seasonal joblessness	Continuous work in Idukki during monsoon and lean periods	Limited absorption during peak agricultural seasons
Livelihood Diversification	Investment in livestock, kitchen gardens, micro-enterprises	Medicinal plant cultivation in Attappadi via MKSP	Lack of market linkages for tribal products
Skill Enhancement	Training in composting, nursery management, water conservation	Kudumbashree-led sessions enhanced confidence and planning participation	Limited digital and entrepreneurial training for youth

Ecological Resilience	Creation of eco-assets using tribal knowledge	Bamboo bunds, coir-based erosion control in Palakkad	Maintenance of assets post-creation
Gender Inclusion	Increased female participation; enhanced autonomy and recognition	60%+ workdays by women in some districts; NHG mobilization	Cultural constraints in certain PVTG communities
Institutional Trust	Greater trust in governance; participatory planning and grievance redressal	Oorukoottam-based monitoring and feedback mechanisms	Digital illiteracy limits access to e-governance tools
Challenges	Uneven outreach to PVTGs; youth aspirations unmet	Geographic isolation, linguistic barriers, lack of tailored interventions	Need for culturally embedded, adaptive policy design

This matrix shows that the Tribal Plus initiative has generated multidimensional impacts on the livelihoods of Scheduled Tribe workers in Kerala, spanning economic, ecological, and social domains. It highlights both transformative outcomes—such as income stability and gender empowerment—and persistent challenges like digital exclusion and uneven outreach to PVTGs.

7. CONCLUSION AND POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

The Tribal Plus initiative in Kerala exemplifies a transformative approach to rural employment, particularly for Scheduled Tribes. By integrating wage reliability, participatory governance, and ecological asset creation, the program transcends the limitations of conventional welfare models. It reconfigures MGNREGS as a platform for justice, capability expansion, and cultural affirmation (Fraser, 2008; Sen, 1999). The initiative's success lies in its ability to embed tribal epistemologies within state mechanisms, fostering trust, dignity, and long-term resilience (Baviskar, 1998; Gupta, 2012).

However, challenges persist—especially in reaching PVTGs and aligning youth aspirations with livelihood opportunities. These gaps highlight the need for adaptive policy frameworks that are both inclusive and aspirational (Xaxa, 2005; George & Krishnan, 2021). The Kerala model offers a replicable blueprint, but its sustainability depends on continued convergence, community ownership, and institutional innovation.

7.1 Policy Recommendations

Drawing from empirical insights and grounded theoretical analysis, this paper offers policy recommendations to enhance the effectiveness, inclusivity, and sustainability of the Tribal Plus initiative. These suggestions aim to strengthen institutional convergence, deepen tribal participation, and embed ecological and cultural relevance into rural employment schemes.

7.2 Institutionalize Advance Wage Systems Across Tribal Regions

The success of Kerala's advance wage payment mechanism should be scaled to other tribal districts. This requires state-level corpus funds and streamlined NEFT protocols to ensure liquidity and reduce distress borrowing (ILO, 2008).

7.3 Strengthen Oorukoottam-Led Planning and Monitoring

Empowering tribal institutions like Oorukoottams enhances legitimacy and accountability. States should formally integrate these bodies into MGNREGS planning, aligning with vernacular governance principles (Gupta, 2012).

7.4 Expand Convergence with Ecological and Skill Schemes

Linking MGNREGS with MKSP, Gotra Gurukulam, and agroecological programs can diversify livelihoods and build resilience. This aligns with Berkes' (1999) call for integrating indigenous ecological knowledge into development.

7.5 Tailor Outreach Strategies for PVTGs

Customized interventions—such as mobile planning units, multilingual IEC materials, and tribal youth facilitators—are essential to reach PVTGs. These strategies must reflect tribal cultural contexts and overcome geographic isolation (Xaxa, 2005).

7.6 Reframe MGNREGS as a Platform for Aspirational Livelihoods

Youth-centric modules, digital literacy, and entrepreneurship training should be embedded within MGNREGS. This shift from subsistence to aspiration reflects evolving tribal identities and economic ambitions (George & Krishnan, 2021).

7.7 Develop a Tribal Livelihood Index for Monitoring Impact

A composite index measuring income diversification, ecological sustainability, and institutional trust can guide policy refinement. This tool should be co-designed with tribal communities to ensure relevance and ownership (Sen, 1999; Bardach, 2012).

7.8 Promote Inter-State Learning and Replicability

Kerala's model should be documented and shared through national platforms, enabling other states to adapt its innovations. Peer learning and policy labs can foster cross-regional dialogue and contextual adaptation (Hooghe & Marks, 2003).

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