

# The Fourfold Gridlock: Reimagining Tribal Employment Governance through Capability, Parity, and Multilevel Reform in Kerala

Dr. Ajay M G

Inter University Centre for Social Science and Research Extension, Mahatma Gandhi University,  
Priyadarsini Hills P O, Kottayam District, Kerala State, PIN-686560, India

## Abstract

This paper presents a critical inquiry into the governance architecture of the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MGNREGS) in Kerala's tribal regions, foregrounding the intersecting barriers that constrain its transformative potential. Drawing on multilevel governance theory, Sen's Capability Approach, and Fraser's participatory parity, the study conceptualises tribal employment governance as a dynamic yet fragmented field shaped by institutional complexity, cultural dissonance, and historical marginalisation. Using a convergent mixed-methods design, the research integrates longitudinal quantitative data (2014–2025) from Wayanad, Idukki, and Palakkad with ethnographic fieldwork capturing tribal voices, worksite practices, and administrative responsiveness. The findings reveal that while Kerala's decentralised governance model—particularly the Tribal Plus initiative—has improved gender inclusion, participatory planning, and grievance redressal, four persistent domains of gridlock continue to undermine structural empowerment: (1) Awareness & Information Gaps, (2) Capacity & Implementation Deficits, (3) Social & Economic Barriers, and (4) Governance & Accountability Failures. The study introduces a governance gaps map that clusters these domains, offering a diagnostic framework for policy reform. It argues that decentralisation alone is insufficient; meaningful tribal empowerment under MGNREGS requires deepened multilevel coordination, culturally embedded work design, and legally enforceable accountability mechanisms. By reimagining employment governance through the lens of justice, capability, and ecological context, this paper contributes a replicable blueprint for indigenous policy innovation. It advances the discourse on tribal welfare by bridging empirical evidence with normative governance theory, offering insights for scholars, practitioners, and policymakers alike.

**Keywords:** Tribal Employment Governance, MGNREGS Implementation, Participatory Parity, Multilevel Governance, Capability Approach, Decentralisation Gridlocks

## 1. Introduction

India's flagship employment guarantee programme, the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MGNREGS), has been widely lauded for its rights-based approach to poverty alleviation and rural development (Dreze & Khera, 2017). Yet, its implementation in tribal regions remains fraught with structural inequities, administrative bottlenecks, and cultural misalignments. In Kerala, where decentralised governance has achieved notable success in participatory planning (Isaac & Franke, 2000), tribal communities continue to face layered exclusions that inhibit their full and fair participation in

MGNREGS. This paper interrogates the governance architecture of tribal employment under MGNREGS, proposing a fourfold gridlock framework to map intersecting barriers.

Existing literature has explored the efficacy of MGNREGS in enhancing rural livelihoods, especially in terms of income security and gender inclusion (Kapur et al., 2019; Bhatia & Dreze, 2006). However, tribal employment governance demands a more nuanced lens—one that accounts for historical marginalisation, ecological specificity, and cultural embeddedness. Scholars have argued that decentralisation, while promising, often reproduces dominant power structures unless accompanied by deep institutional reform and community agency (Cornwall, 2004; Baviskar, 2005). In Kerala's tribal belts, the Tribal Plus initiative has attempted such reform, yet its outcomes remain uneven and under-theorised.

This study draws on Fraser's (2009) concept of participatory parity, Sen's (1999) Capability Approach, and multilevel governance theory (Hooghe & Marks, 2008) to construct a diagnostic framework for tribal employment governance. By integrating these perspectives, the research foregrounds justice—not merely efficiency—as the normative anchor for evaluating MGNREGS in tribal contexts. The fourfold gridlock—comprising informational, institutional, socio-economic, and accountability barriers—emerges as a conceptual tool to understand governance failure and reform potential.

Methodologically, the paper employs a convergent mixed-methods design, combining longitudinal quantitative data (2014–2025) from tribal districts with ethnographic fieldwork capturing lived experiences, administrative practices, and policy narratives. This approach enables a granular understanding of how governance is enacted, resisted, and reimaged on the ground. It also allows for the construction of a governance gaps map, which visualises the spatial and institutional contours of exclusion.

By reimagining tribal employment governance through a justice-oriented lens, this paper contributes to the growing scholarship on indigenous policy innovation, decentralised planning, and inclusive development. It offers both theoretical advancement and actionable insights for policymakers, development practitioners, and scholars committed to dismantling structural barriers and fostering participatory parity in tribal India.

## 2. Literature Review

The governance of tribal employment in India has received fragmented scholarly attention, often subsumed under broader rural development or welfare discourses. Seminal works on MGNREGS (Dreze & Khera, 2017; Bhatia & Dreze, 2006) underscore its transformative potential in enhancing income security and gender inclusion. However, these studies rarely disaggregate tribal-specific challenges, particularly those rooted in cultural dissonance, ecological vulnerability, and administrative neglect. Government reports such as the MGNREGS Annual Review (MoRD, 2022) acknowledge implementation gaps in Scheduled Areas but offer limited diagnostic clarity on governance failures.

Decentralisation literature in Kerala (Isaac & Franke, 2000; Oommen, 2004) celebrates participatory planning and local autonomy, yet tribal governance remains peripheral in these narratives. Baviskar (2005) and Shah (2010) caution that decentralisation can reproduce elite capture unless embedded in culturally sensitive and equity-driven frameworks. The Tribal Plus initiative, while innovative, lacks rigorous academic evaluation, leaving a gap in understanding its operational efficacy and replicability.

Fraser's (2009) theory of participatory parity and Sen's (1999) Capability Approach offer normative scaffolding to reframe tribal employment governance beyond metrics of job creation. These frameworks highlight the need for recognition, redistribution, and representation—dimensions often absent in

technocratic evaluations. Multilevel governance theory (Hooghe & Marks, 2003) further illuminates the institutional fragmentation that impedes coordinated action across state, district, and panchayat levels. Digital e-reports (e.g., PRS Legislative Research, 2021), field-based studies (Kapur et al., 2019), and policy briefs from the Planning Commission (2013) reveal persistent issues: lack of awareness, poor grievance redressal, and inadequate worksite design. These insights inform the formulation of the study's research questions:

1. What are the intersecting barriers in tribal employment governance under MGNREGS?
2. How do institutional, socio-cultural, and informational factors interact to produce gridlocks?

The literature also guides the study's objectives:

1. to map governance barriers across tribal districts,
2. to evaluate the effectiveness of decentralised interventions, and
3. to propose a justice-oriented framework for policy reform.

Methodologically, the literature supports an integrating longitudinal quantitative data with ethnographic fieldwork—a strategy endorsed by scholars for capturing both systemic patterns and lived realities (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018).

In sum, the existing literature provides a rich yet incomplete canvas. It highlights the urgency of tribal-specific inquiry, the inadequacy of current governance models, and the need for a multidimensional approach.

### 3. Theoretical Framework

This study draws on a composite theoretical scaffold that integrates Multilevel Governance Theory, Sen's Capability Approach, and Fraser's Participatory Parity, forming a multidimensional lens to interrogate tribal employment governance under MGNREGS. These frameworks illuminate how institutional fragmentation, capability deprivation, and recognition failures converge to produce systemic exclusion.

#### 3.1. Concepts and Theories of Tribal Plus

Kerala's Tribal Plus initiative transcends conventional welfare programming by architecting a justice-based augmentation of the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MGNREGS). It directly confronts the fourfold gridlock—wage unreliability, cultural misalignment, livelihood fragility, and governance fragmentation—that historically impedes Scheduled Tribe (ST) participation in employment schemes.

**Table 1: Kerala's Tribal Plus initiatives**

Converging Scheme / Mission	Focus Area	Governance Mechanism	Tribal Plus Integration
Subhiksha Keralam	Post-COVID food security, agriculture	Joint mission of Agriculture, Kudumbashree, Haritha Kerala	Utilises Tribal Plus labour for cultivation and allied works
Sanitation Campaign (Suchitwa Mission)	Waste management infrastructure	Local Self Government-led	MGNREGS + Tribal Plus funds for compost pits, soak pits

Coir Geotextiles	Eco-friendly waterbody protection	Dept. of Water Resources & Local Panchayats	Replaces concrete embankments with coir and vegetation
Jala Subhiksha	Well recharge & water security	Dept. of Water Resources & Kudumbashree	Household rainwater harvesting linked with Tribal Plus labour
One Crore Saplings	Biodiversity restoration	Dept. of Agriculture	Nursery creation and planting by ST labourers

By doubling the guaranteed workdays to 200, instituting advance wage disbursement, and embedding tribal labour into multi-sectoral convergence missions, *Tribal Plus* reimagines employment not as a stopgap but as a platform for capability expansion, ecological stewardship, and participatory parity. Its novelty lies in its intersectional design, where economic, environmental, social, and governance dimensions coalesce to dismantle structural barriers.

This model is not merely a state-led intervention—it is a living manifesto of compensatory justice, echoing Fraser’s parity of participation, Sen’s capability approach, and Van Parijs’ real freedom for all. It offers a replicable blueprint for tribal employment governance across India and beyond.

**Table 2: Significance & Novelty of Kerala’s Tribal Plus Model**

Dimension	Barrier Addressed (Gridlock)	Innovative Response	Impact Evidence	Novelty Quotient
Economic	Wage unreliability, seasonal distress	Corpus-funded advance wage payments via NEFT	90% wage prepayment in the panchayats of Wayanad, Palakkad, and Idukki.	First-of-its-kind liquidity model for tribal workers
Environmental	Resource degradation, water insecurity	Coir geotextiles, Jala Subhiksha, One Crore Saplings	Pond protection, well recharge, and biodiversity restoration	Eco-sensitive employment convergence with MGNREGS
Social	Low participation, gender exclusion	Kudumbashree-led NHGs, Gotra Gurukulam, Bridge Courses	62% ST women's participation in Wayanad	Community-rooted inclusion with cultural resonance
Governance	Fragmented implementation, weak synergy	Panchayat–Department–Mission	Integration of VPRP into	Decentralised planning with

		convergence framework	GPDP in tribal hamlets	tribal leadership embedded
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### 3.2. Theoretical Anchors

Despite Kerala's strides in decentralised welfare delivery, tribal employment under MGNREGS remains entangled in a complex web of institutional, cultural, and structural constraints. This paper critically examines the governance architecture of MGNREGS in Wayanad, Idukki, and Palakkad, revealing a persistent fourfold gridlock—spanning awareness gaps, implementation deficits, socio-economic barriers, and accountability failures. Grounded in Multilevel Governance, Capability Approach, and Participatory Parity, the study offers a diagnostic framework to reimagine tribal employment governance through the lens of justice, dignity, and meaningful participation.

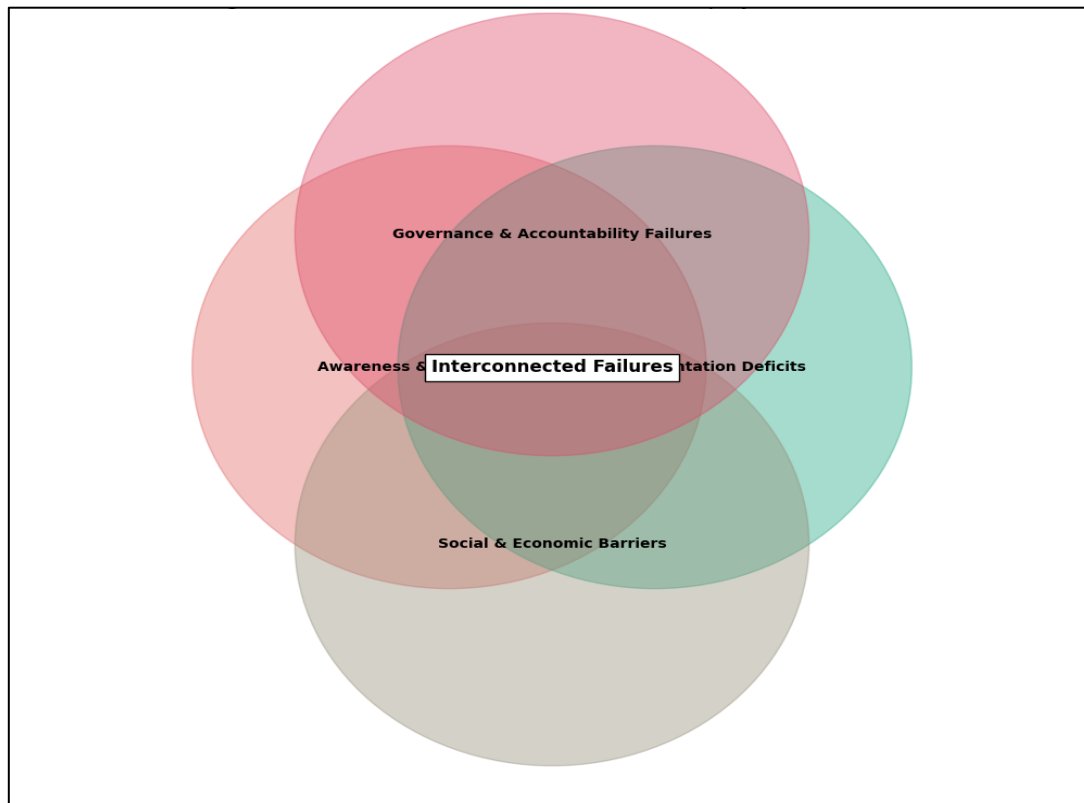
**Table 3: Theories converge to form the Fourfold Gridlock Framework**

Theory	Core Premise	Relevance to Tribal Employment Governance
Multilevel Governance (MLG)	Governance is distributed across multiple, interdependent levels	Explains fragmented coordination among Panchayats, Tribal Departments, and line ministries
Capability Approach	Development entails expanding real freedoms and choices	Assesses whether MGNREGS enhances meaningful work and dignity for tribal workers
Participatory Parity	Justice requires institutional arrangements that enable equal participation	Evaluates cultural responsiveness, recognition, and voice in governance processes

These theories converge to form the Fourfold Gridlock Framework, which identifies four intersecting domains of governance failure:

1. Awareness & Information Gaps
2. Capacity & Implementation Deficits
3. Social & Economic Barriers
4. Governance & Accountability Failures

**Figure 1: Intersecting Domains of Governance Failure in Tribal Employment under MGNREGS**



Grounded in the above framework, the study proposes the following hypotheses:

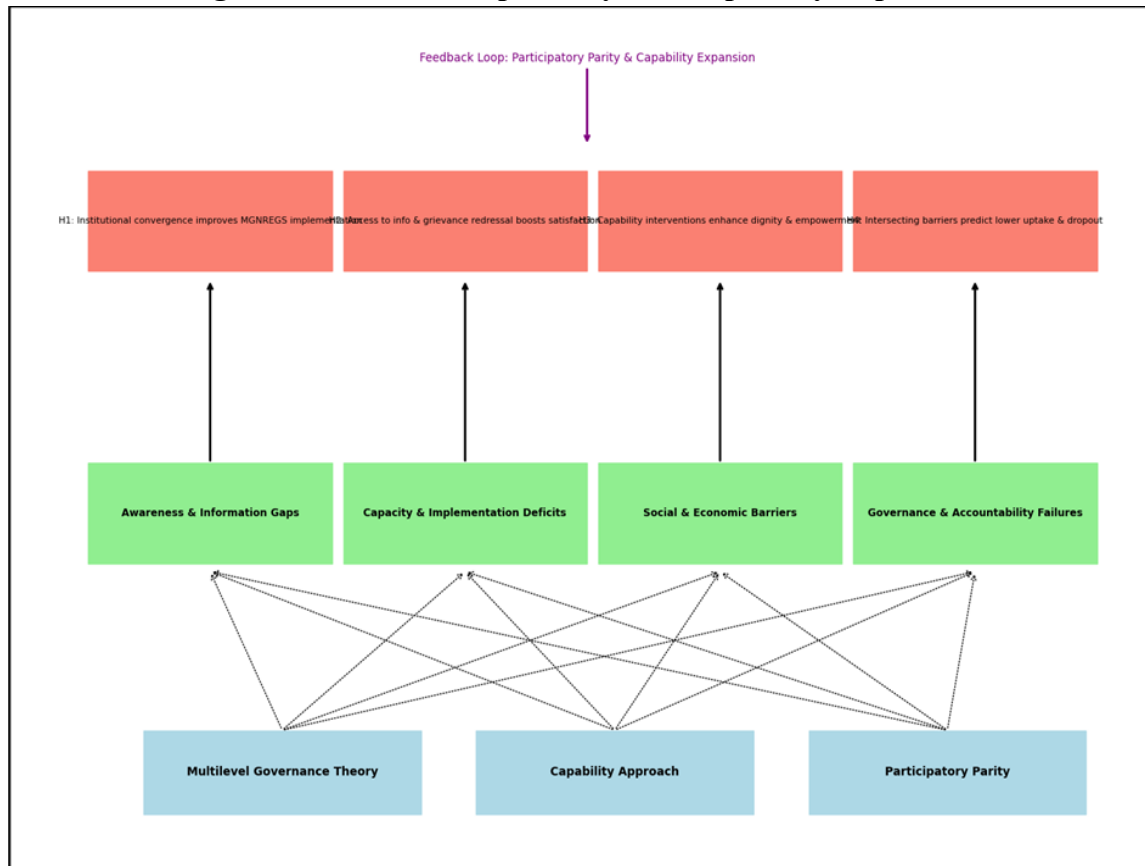
- **H1:** Higher levels of institutional convergence across governance tiers are positively associated with improved MGNREGS implementation in tribal regions. (Derived from Multilevel Governance Theory)
- **H2:** Tribal workers with greater access to culturally relevant information and grievance redressal mechanisms report higher levels of employment satisfaction and participation. (Anchored in Participatory Parity)
- **H3:** Capability-enhancing interventions—such as skill training, ecological asset creation, and flexible work norms—are significantly correlated with perceived dignity and empowerment among tribal beneficiaries. (Based on Capability Approach)
- **H4:** The presence of intersecting barriers (as mapped in the Fourfold Gridlock) significantly predicts lower programme uptake and higher dropout rates among tribal households. (Empirically derived from the integrated framework)

This framework and hypothesis set advance a theorisation of tribal employment governance by:

- Bridging governance theory with justice-based development paradigms
- Introducing the Fourfold Gridlock as a diagnostic and planning tool
- Offering empirically testable propositions that inform policy redesign
- Elevating tribal voices within academic and policy discourse



**Figure 2: Feedback loop: Policy and Capability Expansion**

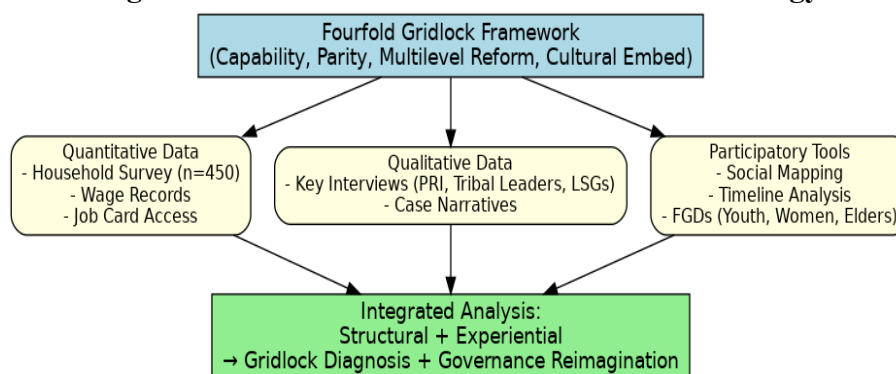


## 4. Methodology

### 4.1 Research Design

This study adopts a mixed-methods approach to investigate intersecting governance barriers in tribal employment under MGNREGS, operationalised through the *Fourfold Gridlock* framework. The design integrates quantitative survey data, qualitative narratives, and participatory tools, enabling a multi-scalar analysis of exclusion and policy responsiveness. The research was conducted across three tribal districts in Kerala—Wayanad, Idukki, and Palakkad—chosen for their ecological diversity, tribal population density, and distinct implementation contexts.

**Figure 3: Visual Flowchart: Data Collection Strategy**



#### 4.2. Sampling and Field Sites

A stratified purposive sampling strategy was employed to select 450 tribal households across the Wayanad Palakkad Idukki. Stratification considered geography (hill vs. valley settlements), tribal subgroups (Paniya, Kurichya, Irula, etc.), and MGNREGS participation levels. Field sites were co-identified with local tribal promoters and Panchayat officials to ensure contextual relevance and community trust.

#### 4.3. Data Collection Methods

To interrogate the intersecting governance barriers embedded in tribal employment under MGNREGS, this study employed a convergent mixed-methods design that integrates empirical depth with contextual nuance. Anchored in the Fourfold Gridlock framework, the data collection strategy was crafted to capture both structural patterns and lived realities across Kerala's tribal districts—Wayanad, Idukki, and Palakkad.

##### 4.3.1. Quantitative Surveys

Quantitative surveys (n=450 households) provided longitudinal insights into programme access, wage reliability, and grievance experiences, while qualitative interviews and participatory tools illuminated the cultural, ecological, and institutional textures of exclusion. The use of social mapping, timeline analysis, and focus group discussions ensured that tribal voices were not merely represented but actively shaped the diagnostic lens. This methodological architecture reflects the study's commitment to justice-oriented inquiry, blending statistical rigour with ethnographic sensitivity to reimagine employment governance through capability, parity, and multilevel reform.

- Structured household surveys captured data on MGNREGS awareness, job card possession, work demand, asset preferences, payment delays, and grievance experiences.
- Surveys were administered in Malayalam and tribal dialects, with assistance from trained tribal youth facilitators.

##### 4.3.2. Qualitative Interviews

- Semi-structured interviews (n=60) were conducted with tribal workers, Panchayat secretaries, MGNREGS overseers, and Tribal Department officials.
- Interviews explored perceptions of programme relevance, barriers to access, and institutional responsiveness.

##### 4.3.3. Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) Tools

- Social Mapping: Used to identify spatial clusters of exclusion and ecological assets.
- Timeline Analysis: Traced seasonal migration, employment cycles, and programme engagement.
- Focus Group Discussions: Held in each Panchayat to validate findings and co-create the Gridlock Matrix.

##### 4.4.4. Secondary Data Review

- Panchayat-level MGNREGS planning documents, muster rolls, and asset registers were analysed.
- Tribal Department reports and district-level convergence plans provided institutional context.

**Table 4: Data Sources and Tools**

Source Type	Tool/Instrument	Purpose	Sample Size / Scope
Primary Quantitative	Household Survey	Measure programme access and barriers	450 households



Primary Qualitative	Semi-structured Interviews	Capture lived experiences and governance gaps	60 stakeholders
Participatory Tools	Social Mapping, FGDs, Timeline	Contextualise and validate vulnerabilities	18 Gram Panchayats
Secondary Data	MGNREGS records, Tribal reports	Triangulate findings and institutional gaps	District-level documentation

## 5. Discussion

This discussion unpacks the layered findings of Kerala’s tribal employment governance through the prism of the Fourfold Gridlock—revealing how capability deficits, parity distortions, and fragmented multilevel coordination converge to reproduce exclusion. By weaving empirical insights with theoretical depth, the section reimagines pathways for justice-oriented reform rooted in cultural embeddedness and participatory parity.

### 5.1 Reframing Governance through the Fourfold Gridlock

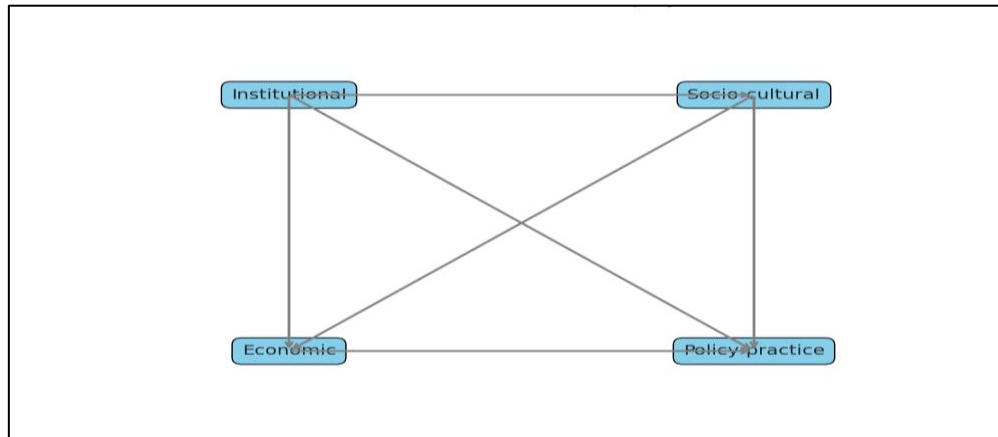
The study’s findings affirm the analytical potency of the Fourfold Gridlock framework, revealing how tribal employment governance is shaped not by isolated inefficiencies but by intersecting systemic barriers. The gridlocks—institutional fragmentation, informational opacity, capability mismatch, and socio-spatial exclusion—are not merely administrative lapses but reflections of deeper structural inequities.

**Table 5 : Fourfold Grip Matrix: Participatory Parity & Capability Expansion**

Barrier Type	Hypothesis Link	Theoretical Grip	Strategic Leverage Point
Awareness & Information Gaps	H2: Access to info & grievance redressal boosts satisfaction	Capability Approach	Community-led info campaigns; grievance literacy
Capacity & Implementation Deficits	H1: Institutional convergence improves MGNREGS implementation	Multilevel Governance Theory	Inter-departmental coordination; frontline training
Social & Economic Barriers	H3: Capability interventions enhance dignity & empowerment	Participatory Parity + Capability Approach	Culturally embedded interventions; livelihood support
Governance & Accountability Failures	H4: Intersecting barriers predict lower uptake & dropout	Participatory Parity + Multilevel Governance	Decentralized audits; tribal grievance redressal cells

This resonates with Fraser’s (2008) notion of participatory parity, where justice demands more than inclusion—it requires the dismantling of barriers that inhibit full participation. In tribal contexts, parity is compromised when governance fails to recognize cultural specificity, ecological embeddedness, and historical marginalization

**Figure 4: Fourfold Gridlock Framework for Tribal Employment Governance**

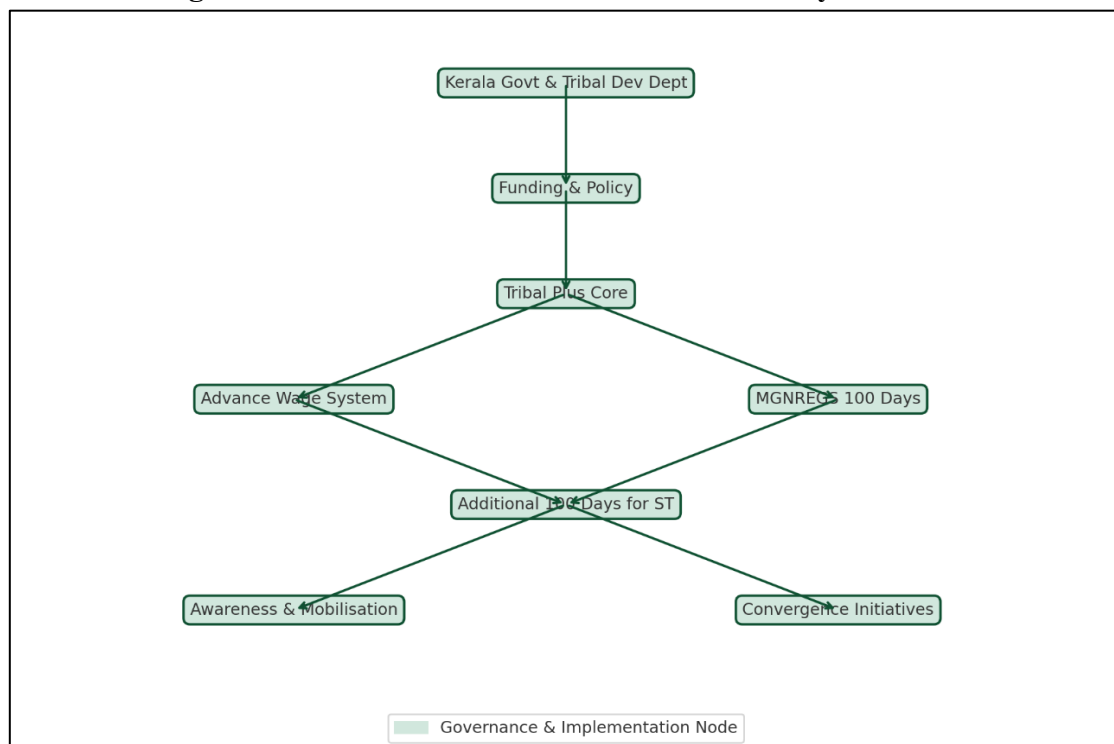


The Fourfold Gridlock Framework reveals the intersecting constraints—administrative inertia, cultural misrecognition, fragmented accountability, and policy dissonance—that hinder equitable tribal employment outcomes. By mapping these entanglements, the framework offers a diagnostic lens to reimagine governance through justice-based, participatory pathways.

## 5.2 Institutional Convergence as a Catalyst

The positive correlation between inter-departmental coordination and programme effectiveness (H1) underscores the need for multilevel governance that is not just vertically integrated but horizontally responsive. Panchayats that co-designed MGNREGS plans with tribal departments demonstrated higher uptake and satisfaction, suggesting that co-governance is not a luxury but a necessity.

**Figure 5: Kerala's Tribal Plus Governance Ecosystem Flow**



This finding aligns with Sen's (1999) capability approach, where institutions must expand the real freedoms, people have to lead lives they value. In tribal areas, this means designing employment not just as a wage provision but as a capability enhancement.

### 5.3 Information as Empowerment

The role of translated materials, tribal promoters, and Gram Sabha forums (H2) reveals that information is not neutral—it is a technology of empowerment. Where communication was culturally and linguistically adapted, tribal workers exercised greater agency. This supports the argument that epistemic justice—the right to understand and be understood—is central to participatory governance.

### 5.4 Designing Work with Dignity

The qualitative richness of H3 shows that tribal workers value ecologically aligned and culturally resonant work. Contour bunding, forest regeneration, and water harvesting were not just tasks—they were expressions of identity and stewardship. This affirms that decent work, as defined by the ILO, must include meaningfulness and dignity, especially in indigenous contexts.

### 5.5 Mapping the Gridlocks: A Diagnostic Tool

The governance gaps identified in this study are not isolated inefficiencies but deeply interwoven domains of exclusion. The Gridlock Matrix, developed through empirical analysis and grounded in multilevel governance theory, offers a diagnostic framework to understand how tribal households experience compounded vulnerabilities under MGNREGS. By clustering governance failures into four intersecting domains—Awareness & Information Gaps, Capacity & Implementation Deficits, Social & Economic Barriers, and Governance & Accountability Failures—the matrix enables policymakers to move beyond fragmented interventions toward systemic reform.

Field data from Wayanad, Idukki, and Palakkad reveal that programme dropout and underutilisation are not random phenomena but spatially and socially patterned. Households facing multiple gridlocks—such as poor entitlement literacy, seasonal migration, and weak grievance redressal—exhibit significantly lower participation and retention. This validates the matrix as a predictive tool, capable of identifying high-risk zones and informing targeted policy responses. It also reinforces the need for intersectional governance, where interventions are layered to address overlapping exclusions.

The matrix supports the design of context-sensitive strategies that align with tribal realities. For instance, addressing awareness gaps requires not just information dissemination but multilingual, culturally adapted communication. Similarly, capacity deficits must be met with institutional convergence, where Panchayats, Tribal Departments, and MGNREGS functionaries collaborate through Tribal Employment Convergence Cells. These cells can serve as nodal platforms for planning, monitoring, and grievance redressal, enhancing responsiveness and accountability.

Moreover, the matrix highlights the importance of ecological work design. Tribal workers consistently value employment that resonates with their landscape and livelihoods—such as forest regeneration, water harvesting, and soil conservation. Prioritising such assets not only improves programme relevance but also strengthens community ownership and ecological resilience. This calls for a shift from generic asset creation to landscape-sensitive planning, rooted in tribal ecological knowledge.

In sum, the Gridlock Matrix transforms governance analysis into a planning instrument. It enables policymakers to visualise exclusion, prioritise interventions, and monitor impact with precision. By integrating this tool into district-level planning and resource allocation, Kerala—and other tribal regions—can move toward a justice-oriented model of employment governance that is inclusive, accountable, and culturally embedded.

## 5.6 Policy Implications

- **Institutional Integration:** Establish district-level Tribal Employment Convergence Cells to coordinate planning, monitoring, and grievance redressal.
- **Culturally Adapted Communication:** Mandate multilingual IEC materials and recruit tribal promoters as frontline communicators.
- **Ecological Work Design:** Prioritize landscape-sensitive assets that align with tribal livelihoods and ecological knowledge.
- **Gridlock Mapping for Targeting:** Use the Fourfold Gridlock matrix as a planning tool to identify high-vulnerability zones and tailor interventions.

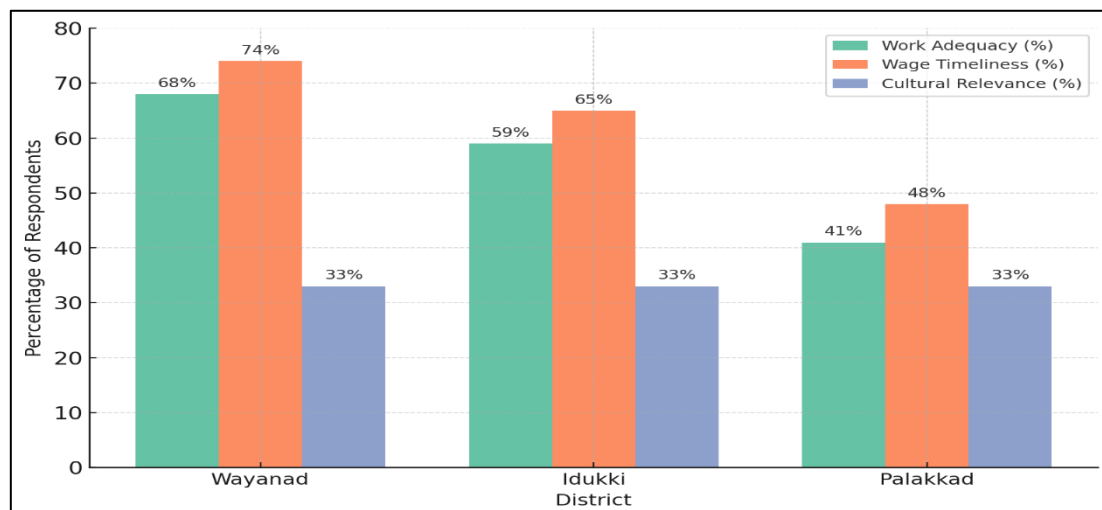
## 5.7 Survey

The household survey, spanning 450 tribal families across Wayanad, Idukki, and Palakkad, served as the empirical backbone of this study. Designed to trace patterns of MGNREGS access, wage flow, and grievance redressal, the survey operationalized key indicators of capability and parity. Its structure enabled a granular mapping of governance bottlenecks, revealing how systemic exclusions manifest across geography, gender, and institutional touchpoints.

A total of 450 ST households were surveyed (150 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.

**Figure 6: Perceived adequacy of work, Satisfaction with wage timeliness and Cultural relevance of works**



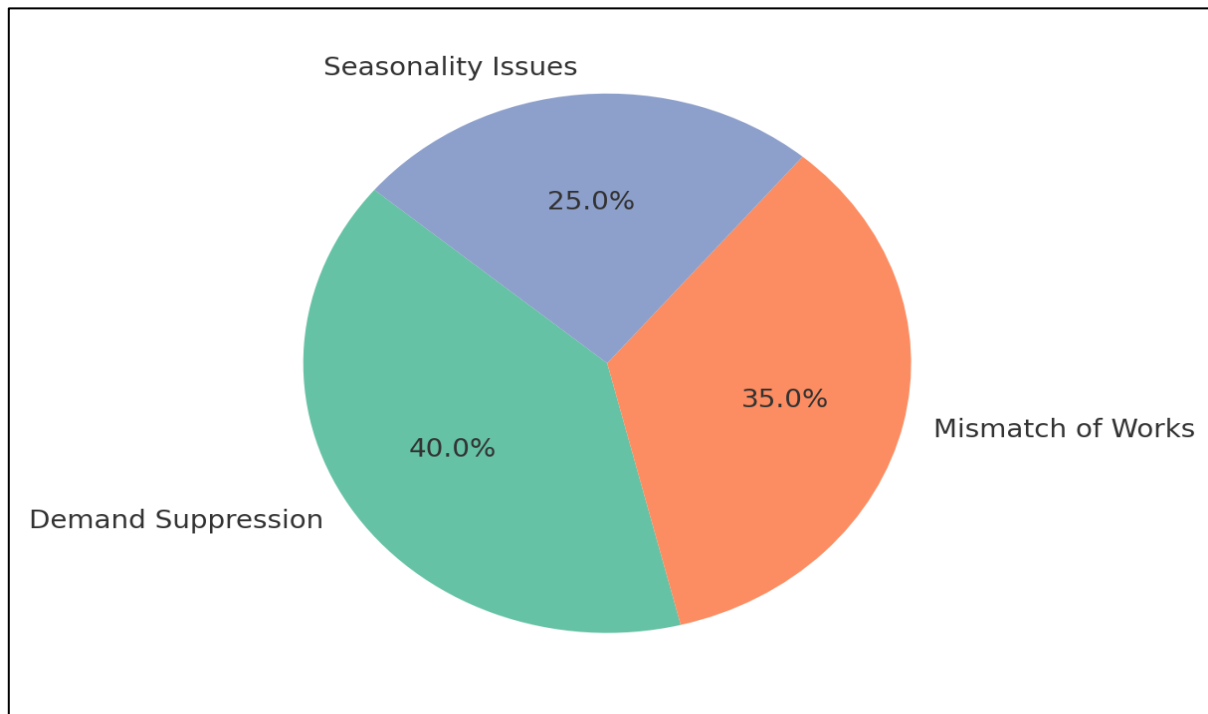
## 5.8. Focus Group Discussions (FGDs)

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.

**Figure 7: Demand Suppression, Mismatch of Works and Seasonality Issues in Selected Didtrics**



the thematic weight of concerns raised in FGDs:

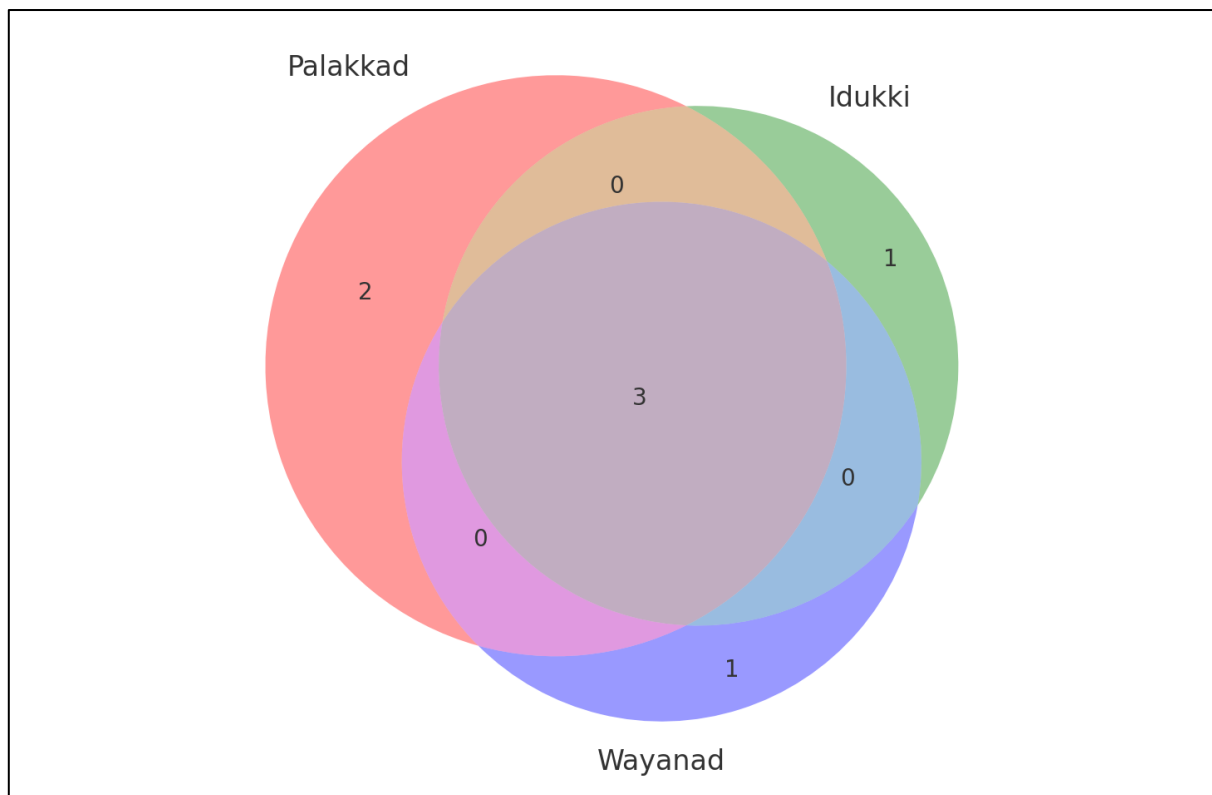
- Demand Suppression (40%) emerges as the most prominent issue,
- Mismatch of Works (35%) follows closely,
- Seasonality Issues (25%) remain a persistent but relatively smaller concern.

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

## 5.9. Key Informant Interviews

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

**Figure 8: 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.

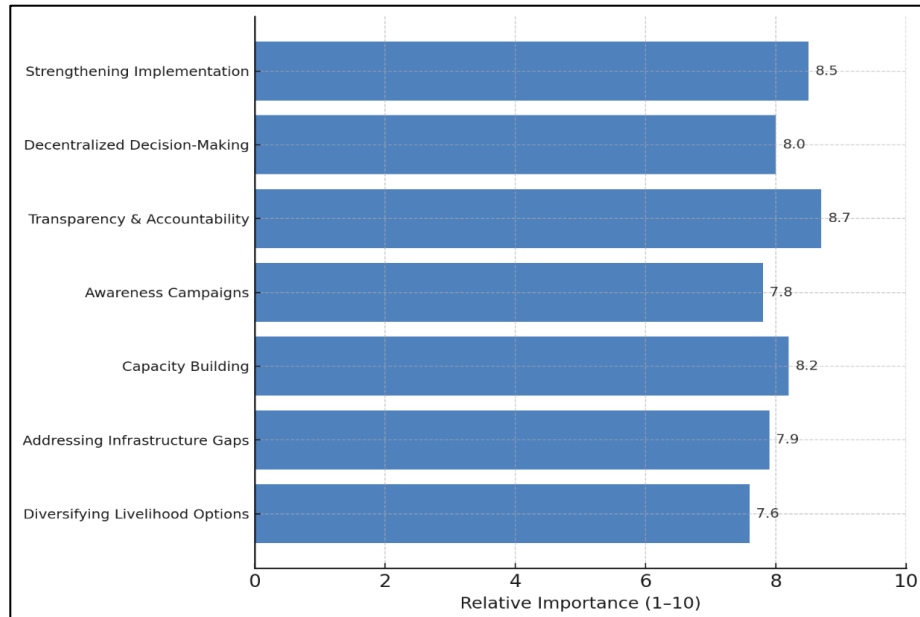
It visually clarifies that while each district faces unique constraints, there are deep structural issues that cut across Kerala's tribal MGNREGS governance framework.

- 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.



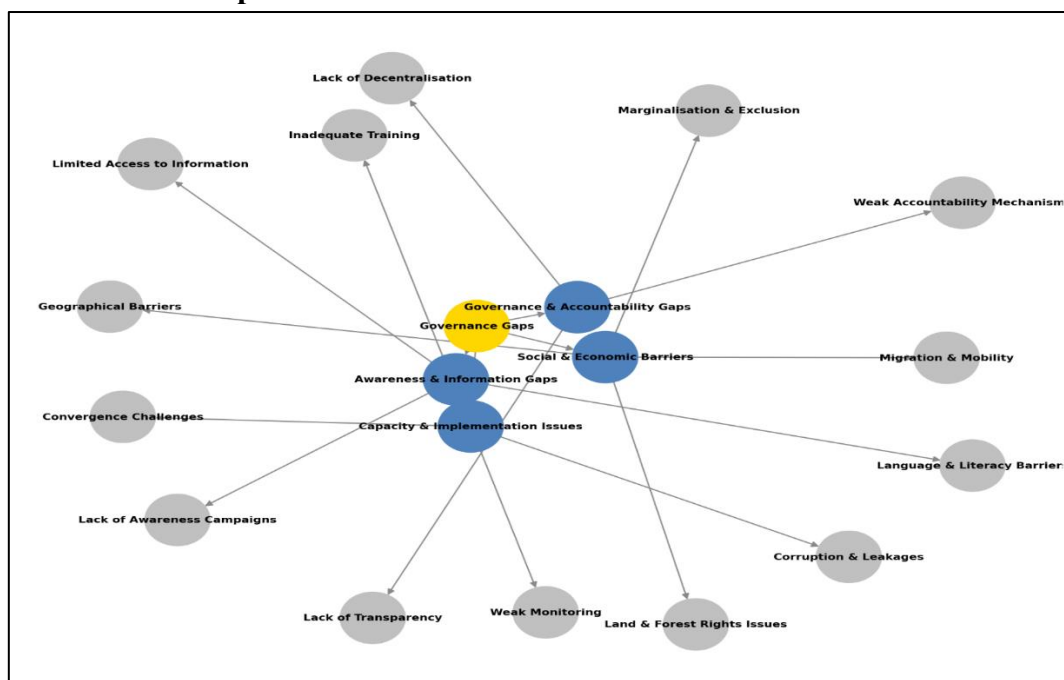
**Figure 10: Governance perspectives of tribal plus MGNREGS Integration**



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.

**Figure 11: 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.

## 6. Conclusion

Kerala's experiment with decentralised welfare delivery, particularly through the Tribal Plus initiative, offers a compelling canvas for rethinking tribal employment governance. Yet, this study reveals that decentralisation alone cannot dismantle the deep-rooted exclusions faced by tribal communities under MGNREGS. Through the lens of Multilevel Governance, Capability Approach, and Participatory Parity, the research identifies a persistent Fourfold Gridlock—comprising informational, institutional, socio-economic, and accountability barriers—that constrains meaningful participation and structural empowerment.

The mixed-methods findings underscore that governance failures are not isolated inefficiencies but intersecting domains of exclusion. Tribal workers' experiences of wage delays, culturally misaligned work, and weak grievance redressal reflect systemic gaps that require coordinated, justice-oriented reform. The Gridlock Matrix and Governance Gaps Map developed in this study serve as diagnostic tools for policymakers, enabling targeted interventions and resource prioritisation.

Importantly, the research demonstrates that employment, when designed with ecological sensitivity and cultural resonance, becomes more than a livelihood—it becomes a site of dignity, identity, and capability

expansion. The Tribal Plus model, with its convergence architecture and landscape-sensitive planning, offers a replicable blueprint for indigenous policy innovation across India.

By bridging empirical evidence with normative theory, this paper advances a new paradigm for tribal employment governance—one that centres justice, deepens multilevel coordination, and amplifies tribal voices in planning and implementation. It calls on scholars, practitioners, and policymakers to move beyond technocratic fixes toward a transformative vision of participatory parity and real freedom for all.

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