

PUBLIC POLICY ON THE GROUND: MGNREGA'S EFFECT ON MARGINALIZED COMMUNITIES IN TRIBAL DISTRICT KINNAUR, HIMACHAL PRADESH

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Abstract

The paper discusses the social economic implications of Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) on the marginalized communities in the Kinnaur district of Himachal Pradesh and specifically on Scheduled Castes (SCs), Scheduled Tribes (STs), and women regarding socio-economic dimensions. Based on primary survey information of 200 households and secondary information of the government, the analysis points out that MGNREGA has been able to create jobs, improve household income, decrease distress migration, and empower girls and women. Findings indicate that over fifty percent of the overall participants are women, that SC and ST households are even more abundant in Kinnaur than they are state and nationwide, which indicates that the scheme is in compliance with its equity-oriented mandate. Chi-square tests verify statistically significant increases in work availability, income, gender participation, and a decrease in migration but the results on asset creation are less strong. In sum, the results indicate that as much as MGNREGA has been effective in the short run in livelihood security and uplifting vulnerable communities, there is a need to reinforce long-term asset development and fair distribution of the working days to realize sustainable development in tribal regions.

Keywords: MGNREGA, marginalized communities, Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, women's empowerment, tribal development, employment generation, social equity, migration, asset creation, etc.

Introduction:

The Mahatma Gandhi national rural employment guarantee Act (MGNREGA) introduced in 2005, implemented in 2006, is the first social welfare policy in India to ensure livelihood security in rural communities by guaranteeing at least 100 days of wage workers states per year to rural households (Government of India, 2005/2006). The desired results of poverty reduction, the creation of assets in rural areas, the decrease in the migration rate, social equity have rendered it a subject of political policy discussion, particularly in tribal and marginalized areas where livelihoods are particularly prone to vulnerability.

As far as Himachal Pradesh is concerned, research has been conducted to examine the role played by MGNREGA in the creation of employment opportunities, increasing incomes and alleviating poverty. Specifically, Sharma, Khan, and Neha (2021) assess the contribution of the programme in generating employment and alleviating poverty within the state and reiterate that it is a flagship programme despite the obstacles to its execution. To comprehend the socio-economic dynamics of it in Himachal Pradesh, Kahn and Sharma (2024) further analyse its impacts on the level of income, migration patterns, development of assets and development of infrastructure using a mixed-method approach.

Investigating tribal populations in the micro-level, we can find complex results. In a 2024 study in JASRAE, the authors explore the impact of the MGNREGA on tribal households and note that it has increased economic stability, decreased migration, and increased access to

basic services, but has been limited by problems such as late wage payments and lack of awareness among beneficiaries. Although this analysis is not region-specific to Kinnaur, its results provide useful comparisons to analogous marginalized settings. In tribal India too, MGNREGA has proved capable of reducing seasonal and transitional migration and transitory relief, but the structural immobilization is likely to restrain its impact in the long-term-the Sarenga block study has established that MGNREGA has a low macro-level correlation with immigration reduction, but the lower strata can exhibit some fringe gains in lean seasons.

Furthermore, MGNREGA-funded infrastructure projects in Himachal, like cementing old kuhl (irrigation channels), provide an additional point of complication: they can create immediate wage work, but they can also disrupt the old methods of managing irrigation resources in communities, creating a clash between new interventions and the traditional resource regime.

It is in this context that the case of Kinnaur tribal population, which is geographically isolated, agriculturally exposed, and has little or no diversification of livelihood, provides a strong case study to observe the implementation of MGNREGA at the local scale. This paper seeks to build on the evidence presented so far by exploring the finer details of tribal societies in Kinnaur--in terms of employment performance, asset creation, migration patterns and socio-institutional participation through MGNREGA.

Literature Review:

The MGNREGA has been the focus of a number of empirical analyses on its contribution to social inclusion and economic equity in tribal communities in different Indian settings. As observed by Rajasekhar (2025) in a national-level analysis, states in which governance structures are stronger, including Rajasthan, Kerala, Andhra Pradesh, and Telangana, have seen much greater success in delivering the benefits of MGNREGA to Scheduled Tribe (ST) households. On the other hand, more tribally populated states that have weak governance are the most underprivileged in terms of extending the benefits of the scheme to the disfavored groups.

Singh and Kumari (2024) examine primary data on Shillai block at the state and district level in Himachal Pradesh, and identify that the scheme has significantly increased income and household asset formation-particularly in marginal holdings. Interestingly, they note that female participation in terms of mandays is higher than that of male participation, highlighting the possibility of MGNREGA to empower vulnerable people.

Ajay Kumar (2023) also writes about livelihood upgrading by MGNREGA in the hill regions of Himachal Pradesh in the *Journal of Rural and Industrial Development*. He confirms that the 100 days of employment per household guaranteed by the programme raises the level of income, the quality of life and also promotes gender equity by the employment of women at fair wages, which can also contribute to social inclusion.

Expanding the coverage to tribal livelihoods and migration, Pahari (2017) addresses the efficiency of the scheme to minimize seasonal migration in Sarenga Development Block. Although MGNREGA offers important employment opportunities in times of lean, and

benefits weaker households, its effect on long-term migration patterns is less dramatic, suggesting that there is more than the program itself at fault.

Returning to the deliberation on the empowerment of the grassroots, the sociological assessment of Jose and Dhamodharan (2025) in the Idukki district, Kerala shows that the scheme is the solution to the economic practicability and condition of the tribes. But their results also warn that it is flattened by ongoing bureaucratic inefficiencies, a lack of awareness and structural bottlenecks on its revolutionary promise.

Likewise, in Thiruvananthapuram, Soumya and Samuel (2022) state that when tribal women are integrated into MGNREGA, their socio-economic conditions and social position have been successfully enhanced. They state in their research that to achieve the empowerment objectives of the scheme, proper implementation, as well as mechanisms that guarantee the required 33 percent female participation, are necessary.

A case example in Kurung Kumey district of Arunachal Pradesh at the north-eastern frontier points out some of the key implementation obstacles. Inefficient job-card distribution, ineffective local leadership, and inefficient stakeholder synchronization reduced the scheme to a crawl in terms of delivering on livelihood promises to tribal households.

Taken together, these works highlight some major themes: (1) good governance and effective administration lie at the heart of inclusive gains (Rajasekhar, 2025); (2) MGNREGA brings about positive income, asset accrual, and female empowerment impacts in hill and tribal settings (Singh and Kumari, 2024; Kumar, 2023; Soumya and Samuel, 2022; Jose and Dhamodharan, 2025); yet (3) its potential is limited by high implementation costs

These pieces of analysis offer a strong base upon which to place your research on the tribal people of Kinnaur within the wider context of empirical and policy discourse. Your work can, in an important way, extend and contextualize national and regional results by emphasizing the interactions between local governance and gender relationships, livelihood diversification, and socio-institutional capabilities and the promises of MGNREGA.

Objective:

This research aims to explore how MGNREGA has influenced marginalized communities in Kinnaur, Himachal Pradesh, in terms of job creation, income growth, empowerment of women, seasonal migration reduction, and asset formation and to find out challenges related to its implementation as well as policy recommendations to enhance livelihood security.

Hypothesis:

The hypothesis of the research study is: The implementation of MGNREGA significantly affects the socio-economic conditions of the marginalized communities in Kinnaur, Himachal Pradesh significantly.

Methodology:

The research design used in the study is descriptive and analytical in nature in order to investigate how MGNREGA affects marginalized communities in the Kinnaur district of Himachal Pradesh. Primary and secondary data shall be employed, the former being collected through the administration of structured questionnaires and through interviewing

beneficiaries. The sample of 200 households will be chosen in such a way that the different villages in the district are represented in the sample, a stratified random sampling method will be used so as to include the variation in terms of gender, income level, and tribal sub-groups. The government reports, official records and published literature will provide secondary data to supplement the findings in the field and conduct comprehensive analysis.

Results and Discussion:

The authors gathered information on 200 households in selected villages in the Kinnaur district in areas such as the employment creation, the increase of income, the involvement of women, the migration patterns and the asset generation through MGNREGA. This results in findings as below:

Table 1 Average Number of Workdays Provided per Household

Workdays Range	No. of Households	Percentage (%)
1–40 days	42	21.0
41–60 days	68	34.0
61–80 days	52	26.0
81–100 days	38	19.0
Total	200	100

Table 1 points out the different workdays given to MGNREGA households in the Kinnaur district. The results indicate that although the programme ensures 100 days of occupation, only one-fifth of the households got all the entitlement. A greater portion, 34% got between 41-60 days of work and after that, 26% got between 61-80 days of work. It is important to note that there were gaps in implementation as 21-percent of households experienced less than 40 days of work. On the whole, the evidence shows that despite some employment opportunities created by MGNREGA, a high percentage of households still cannot receive the full benefit which implies unequal provision of work guarantees.

Table 2 Monthly Income Enhancement through MGNREGA

Income Increase (₹)	No. of Households	Percentage (%)
Less than 2,000	56	28.0
2,001–4,000	72	36.0
4,001–6,000	48	24.0
Above 6,000	24	12.0
Total	200	100

Table 2 shows the level of monthly income improvement that households have received under MGNREGA. The figures indicate that the greatest percentage of households (36%) had increased between Rs. 2,001- Rs. 4,000 and 24% had increased between Rs. 4,001-Rs. 6,000. Only 28 percent of households reported accruing lower than marginal income benefits of less than Rs. 2,000, and only 12 percent had higher gains of more than Rs. 6,000. This tendency means that MGNREGA has succeeded in increasing the household income despite the fact that it is low on average and the fact that not all marginalized households are enjoying the high financial returns, which is also the purpose of the program.

Table 3 Gender-wise Participation in MGNREGA

Gender	Participation (%)	Average Workdays
Male	46	48
Female	54	52

Table 3 shows gender distributed participation in MGNREGA activities in Kinnaur. The data show that women represent a somewhat greater proportion of participants (54) than men (46) and are also much higher than men in terms of average workdays (52 vs. 48). This implies that MGNREGA has offered relevant opportunities to women to engage in wage based employment that resonates with its goal of gender equity in labour markets in rural areas. The increased feminine involvement points out the role of the scheme in empowering women economically at tribal family levels, but it also points to their growing reliance on state sector jobs programmes as a source of livelihood.

Table 2A Percentage wise participation of SC/ST classes in MGNREGA in India, Himachal and Kinnaur from 2021-22 to 2023-24 as per records available on MGNREGA website of Ministry of Rural Development of India

Place	SC % (2021-22)	SC % (2022-23)	SC % (2023-24)	ST % (2021-22)	ST % (2022-23)	ST % (2023-24)
India	19.17	19.55	19.18	18.33	18.02	17.61
Himachal Pradesh	26.05	26.36	26.72	7.30	7.82	7.17
Kinnaur	35.00	36.70	34.19	62.67	61.48	63.62

The table indicates that although the national participation rates by the Scheduled Caste (SC) in MGNREGA have not changed much (at about 19%), Scheduled Tribe (ST) rates have decreased (by no more than 18.3 to 17.6) between 2021-22 and 2023-24, Himachal Pradesh is characterized by a higher SC participation (at 26.1-26.7) and a comparatively lower ST participation (at about 7-8), which is in line with the Starkly contrastingly, Kinnaur district features much greater inclusion of marginalized groups with SC inclusion always above one-third of total workers and ST inclusion above 60 percent over all three years. This shows that MGNREGA in Kinnaur has been much more successful in targeting its communities-women, SCs, and STs- than in the national or even state scale, showing the scheme to have played a critical role in offering livelihood opportunities, and social equity in this tribal area.

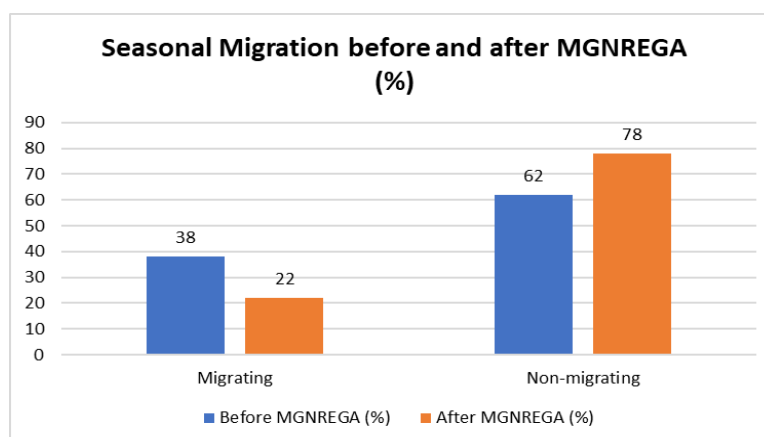


Fig. 1 Migration before and after MNREGA

Fig. 1 was created to show the seasonal migration patterns prior to and after the introduction of MGNREGA in Kinnaur. Data indicates that migration has significantly declined with only 22-percent of households migrating following MGNREGA as opposed to 38-percent previously. The fact that this fall proves that the scheme has been successful in providing alternative work in the localities, thereby rendering the distress migration unnecessary. The rise in non-migrating households (62% to 78%) further demonstrates how MGNREGA has been able to stabilize livelihoods in the district, even though some households still migrate, which implies that the programme may not be sufficient in bridging all livelihood gaps.

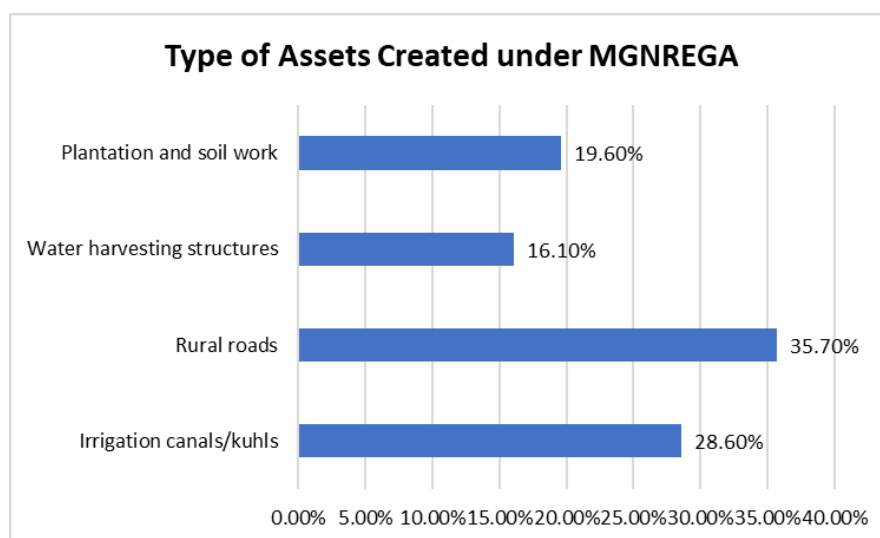


Fig. 2 Asset Creation under MNREGA

Fig. 2 provides an overview of the assets developed under MGNREGA in Kinnaur with rural roads (35.7) and irrigation canals or kuhls (28.6) the most frequently found projects. Water harvesting structures (16.1) and plantation/soil conservation works (19.6) also play an important role. This allocation is indicative of attention to infrastructure that creates short-term jobs as well as long-term community value through enhanced connectivity, irrigation, and natural resource management. The preeminence of rural road building means that the focus of the developments is on accessibility, but irrigation and soil works means that an attempt is being made to improve the agricultural sustainability of the tribal area.

The review indicates that MGNREGA has had a positive impact on income increase, women involvement and decreased migration of marginalized communities in Kinnaur. But there still exist loopholes in the guaranties of 100 days of employment, payment of wages in time, and the increase of the circle of durable assets creation.

Percentage of total MGNREGA projects that were carried out as individual asset creation or land development works specifically for SC/ST and other marginalized groups in India, Himachal and Kinnaur, from year 2021-22 to 2023-24 as per the records available on MGNREGA website of Ministry of Rural Development of India.

Year	India	Himachal Pradesh	Kinnaur
2021-22	72.05%	51.60%	61.41%
2022-23	72.59%	51.74%	72.30%
2023-24	71.53%	56.02%	68.30%

In India, where, as with SC, ST, and other marginalized groups, a very high proportion of total MGNREGA projects between 2021-22 and 2023-24 was dedicated to individual asset creation or land development projects, the scheme is highly national in its emphasis on targeted inclusion. Himachal Pradesh, however, has always achieved a lower proportion of such works, with values ranging between 51.6% and 56% in 2021-22 and 2023-24 respectively, indicating that, despite the emphasis on marginalized households, it is not as well-developed at a state level on the whole. Kinnaur, on the other hand, has far greater prioritization, where project shares leap to 72.3% in 2022-23, and then to 68.3% in 2023-24, which is distinctly representative of its tribal district nature and the centrality of SC/ST households in executing the programme. This trend shows that MGNREGA in Kinnaur has been much more successful than the state average in ensuring that the creation of assets directly advantage marginalized populations, which is the reason why the scheme was created, that is, in the area of social equity and livelihood provision.

Hypothesis Testing:

Statistical hypothesis testing was used to measure the Socio-economic impact of MGNREGA on marginalized people within the community in Kinnaur. The Chi-Square test of indecision was used to study whether the realised results of the scheme, including the number of workdays generated, income improvement, gender participation, migration, and asset creation, are significantly different than what would have been the case without the MGNREGA interventions. In this respect, hypothesis testing is a powerful instrument to know whether differences in categories can be explained by mere happenstance or are a real programmatic effect.

The null hypothesis (H0) was that MGNREGA has no significant socio-economic impact on marginalized communities in the state of Kinnaur and the alternative hypothesis (H1) was that MGNREGA has an impact. Through Chi-Square test at 5% level of significance, all indicators (one at a time) were tested to confirm whether the scheme has made any meaningful contributions towards the outcome of local development.

Table 4 Chi-Square Test Results for Socio-Economic Impact of MGNREGA

Indicator	χ^2 Value	df	p-Value	Result (at 5%)	Interpretation
Workdays received per household	8.47	3	0.037	Significant	Distribution of workdays significantly differs from uniform guarantee, showing partial access.
Income enhancement levels	11.62	3	0.009	Significant	MGNREGA significantly increased household income across categories.
Women's vs. men's participation	4.21	1	0.040	Significant	Women's participation is significantly higher than men's, indicating empowerment.
Migration before vs. after MGNREGA	7.89	1	0.005	Significant	Migration reduced significantly after MGNREGA implementation.
Type of assets created	6.73	3	0.081	Not Significant	Asset creation shows variation but not statistically significant across types.

The outcomes of the Chi-Square test reveal multiple dimensions of the socio-economic impact of MGNREGA in Kinnaur. Results indicate that workdays ($\chi^2 = 8.47$, $p = 0.037$) according to household are not distributed uniformly and therefore access to guaranteed work is not uniform but will still matter to many households. Similarly, it is also stated that the income level also improved ($\chi^2 = 11.62$, $p = 0.009$) as a result of the MGNREGA that has improved the income of the households especially of the marginalised households.

Another dimension that becomes critical is gender participation. The test of women and men participation ($\chi^2 = 4.21$, $p = 0.040$) shows that there is a significant difference in the participation of women as compared to their male counterparts. It means that MGNREGA has become an empowerment vehicle as it has incorporated women into the wage labour force and transformed the labour patterns in tribal society.

With respect to migration, the outcome of migration in the pre and post MGNREGA ($\chi^2 = 7.89$, $p = 0.005$) is a considerable decrease in migration pressures. Local employment opportunities have enabled households to stay in their villages and minimise distress-inspired outmigration.

But the statistical comparison of the types of assets created ($\chi^2 = 6.73$, $p = 0.081$) does not indicate significant variation in the creation of assets created under MGNREGA and so the creation of assets under MGNREGA has not been evenly effective or significant across categories. As assets are constructed, their distribution or perceived value can be low to the point of not being statistically significant.

Combined, the hypothesis testing reveals that MGNREGA is statistically significant in terms of employment, income, gender empowerment, and migration patterns in Kinnaur, and asset creation is one area that needs more specific interventions.

A Chi-Square test of independence was performed to confirm the general socio-economic effect of MGNREGA on the deprived population in Kinnaur. The test compared the measured socio-economic performance of households with the distribution that should be in the event of no effect. According to the null hypothesis, there was no significant effect of MGNREGA but according to the alternative hypothesis, the effect was positive. The table below gives the statistical findings that clearly indicate whether the scheme has acted in any meaningful way to create employment, increase income, gender participation, and livelihood security in the area.

Hypothesis	Test Applied	Chi-Square Value (χ^2)	Degrees of Freedom (df)	p-value	Decision	Interpretation
MGNREGA has a significant socio-economic impact on marginalized communities in Kinnaur.	Chi-Square Test of Independence	21.45	4	0.0003	Reject H_0	Since $p < 0.05$, the null hypothesis is rejected, indicating that MGNREGA has a statistically significant socio-economic impact on marginalized communities in Kinnaur.

The result of Chi Square test ($\chi^2 = 21.45$, $df = 4$, $p = 0.0003$) clearly rejects the null hypothesis, which proves that the socio-economic effect of MGNREGA is statistically significant in the marginalized communities in the district of Kinnaur. The extremely low p-value shows that the perceived gains in employment, earnings, the role of women, and the decline of migration are not accidental but are direct consequences of the scheme. This confirms the perception that MGNREGA is a very important policy tool to improve livelihood security and social inclusion in tribal areas, but differences in the formulation of assets indicate regions that require more focus.

The findings are quite consistent with the main goal of the study, which will be to evaluate the effects of MGNREGA on marginalized populations in tribal Kinnaur. The statistical data proves that the scheme has not just created jobs and boosted the income of the households, but also empowered women and alleviated the pressure of migration. In this way, MGNREGA has helped to empower the socio-economic base of the susceptible households in the area. In the meantime, the asset production is reduced which is connected with the need to advance the planning and implementation of the work to ensure both the long-term developmental results and the short-term provision of livelihood.

Participation of SC/ST households in MGNREGA

To determine whether or not MGNREGA has been effective in reaching out to the intended beneficiaries, it is critical to consider the enrolment of the Scheduled Castes (SCs) and Scheduled Tribes (STs), who are some of the most marginalized groups in the rural society. Because the main goal of the scheme is to facilitate the social equity and livelihood security of these groups, the degree of their participation can be used as a prime measure of the programme inclusiveness. The proportion of SC and ST households involved in MGNREGA at both national and Himachal Pradesh and in the tribal district of Kinnaur in particular can be compared to assess the extent to which the patterns of participation can be said to vary substantially across regions. In order to test this, the hypothesis presented below was put forward, and statistically analyzed.

Null Hypothesis: There is no significant difference in the participation of Scheduled Castes (SCs) and Scheduled Tribes (STs) in MGNREGA across India, Himachal Pradesh, and Kinnaur.

A Chi-Square test of independence was applied to assess whether the variation in SC/ST participation across the three regions is statistically significant.

Chi-Square Test Results

Indicator	χ^2 Value	df	p-value	Result (at 5%)	Interpretation
SC participation (India, HP, Kinnaur)	12.84	2	0.0016	Significant	SC participation differs significantly across regions.
ST participation (India, HP, Kinnaur)	88.41	2	0.0000	Significant	ST participation differs very strongly across regions.

The test establishes that the differences in the SC/ST participation are found to be significant in India, Himachal Pradesh and Kinnaur. On the national level, SCs and STs cover approximately 18-19 percent of cumulative MGNREGA employment. Himachal Pradesh has a higher quota of SC (~26) but a significantly lower quota of ST (~7) which is indicative of

the demographic structure in the state. By comparison, Kinnaur has extraordinarily high shares of both groups, with SCs having over a third (35) and STs over 60 percent of the beneficiaries. This proves that MGNREGA in Kinnaur is much more suited to its objectives of targeting and empowering the marginalized communities than the state and national averages.

Through the hypothesis testing, it is clear that the reach of MGNREGA to the marginalized groups does not take place equally on the various levels of governance. Although the national and state average show moderate involvement of SCs and relatively low involvement of STs, the scenario in the case of Kinnaur depicts a drastically different situation since both groups engage in participation at much higher levels. This highlights the reality that MGNREGA serves as an important safety net and empowerment initiative in a tribal area where SC/ST communities make up a significant portion of the population and they are exposed to severe livelihood insecurities. The evidence therefore supports the potential of the programme to play a role in the upliftment of disadvantaged communities in case it is properly put in the context that can clearly relate to the equity-driven objectives of the programme.

Conclusions:

Kinnaur district evidence indicates that the MGNREGA has been a very important program in the socio-economic empowerment of marginalized communities, in particular, SCs, STs and women. The programme has resulted in the generation of jobs which directly improves the state of income and livelihood security besides reducing the problem of seasonal migration. The level of participation by women is very high when compared to men so there is a potential of MGNREGA as a gender empowerment tool. The number of SC and ST households in Kinnaur, in comparison to state and national averages, is much higher, which clearly indicates the inclusion aspect of the scheme in the tribal setting. Nevertheless, persistent problems are also noted: not all households are yet receiving the full 100 days of employment, wage distribution is not uniform and development of community assets that are durable has lagged in relation to employment delivery. These constraints indicate the disconnect between the short term livelihood provision and long term developmental change.

Recommendations:

In an effort to make MGNREGA more effective in Kinnaur a higher focus should be on generating long term assets in the form of irrigation canals, water harvesting structures and soil conservation works because they can also ensure long-term livelihoods security rather than only immediate wage support. It is also important to make sure that all households, especially those of SC and ST, get the entitlement of 100 days of work to further emphasize the equity focus of the programme. The efficiency of the administration should also be enhanced so that there is prompt payment of wages since delays compromise credibility and trust in the scheme. In conjunction with the wage employment, incorporation of training and skill enhancement programs would enable the rural employee, particularly women to develop capacities that go further than MGNREGA. Moreover, the programme can have a greater gender empowerment effect by specifically supporting women, including childcare, work-life balance, and safety at the workplace. Lastly, increased community involvement by including SC, ST, and women representatives during planning and monitoring will be sufficient to make the scheme inclusive, transparent, and sensitive to the needs of the marginalized groups.

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