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# Transformation of Tribals through MGNREGA in Attappady Block of Palakkad District, Kerala Some Case Studies

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MGNREGS is a mammoth employment programme, launched more than a decade ago in the rural diaspora of the Indian sub-continent, with a massive annual budget of Rs.60,000crore, aimed at eradicating rural poverty and unemployment in one stroke, targeting a multitude of mainstream rural workers, as well as vulnerable categories such as the adivasis, the aged, the differently abled and disabled persons. Acclaimed as a model by most other countries, MGNREGS entitles every worker with wage employment for 100 days, augments their income and forms the base for a sustainable rural livelihood. With a plethora of studies made on the impact of this scheme on poverty eradication, the present study conducted in early 2019, concentrates on its impact on the primitive and nomadic tribal groups in Attappady, a tribal- prominent block in Palakkad district of Kerala State. Conducted primarily thro' Case studies, the present research highlights the role of the scheme in achieving not only the intended outcome, but also its unintended outcome. The study has profiled the role of the scheme in not only providing livelihood to all the workers, but also in restoring the normal life of persons with disabilities such as mental depression, speech and visual impairment. The mentally and physically challenged workers, who were hitherto confined to their homes or settlements and were a frustrated lot, are now able to ease their depression, while working, and interacting with fellow workers, and find cheer and solace in their company. Besides, it has provided physical safety, economic security, and social status to the deserted women, divorcees, and children with disabilities. Though living in poverty, the fellow workers have proved that they have concern and commitment for not only their distraught co-workers but also for their distressed family members. By sharing the work of the weak and the vulnerable at the worksite, they have demonstrated that "humanitarianism" exists amidst destitution and deprivation and "compassion and camaraderie" are the primary assets of the workers, than poverty and backwardness.

**Keywords:** Employment generation, rural poverty, vulnerable groups, impact of MGNREGA, tribal transformation.

**Employment Scenario****Rural Poverty**

India, the largest democracy in the world, has, after independence, persistently worked on poverty alleviation strategies, as 66.5 per cent of the poor population live in the rural areas (World Bank, 2017)<sup>1</sup>. The Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MGNREGA), enacted as an Act in the year 2005, from the refinement of India's experiments with wage employment from the year 1980, starting with National Rural Employment

<sup>1</sup> [pubdocs.worldbank.org/Annual-Report-2017-WBG](http://pubdocs.worldbank.org/Annual-Report-2017-WBG).

Programme (NREP), was made historical as the largest democratic wage employment programme in the world. India is one of the fastest growing economies, nevertheless, yet to achieve uniform growth due to the concentration of the population in the rural areas, predominantly lying well below the poverty line.

According to the World Bank report of 2017, the poverty head count ratio was 22.2 per cent of the population on the basis of Purchasing Power Parity (PPP) and the employment to population ratio in the age of 15 and above was found to be 51.89 per cent (the employable age was considered as 15 and above). The MGNREG scheme targeted the rural households below the poverty line in providing them with gainful wage employment for 100 days in a year for adults above the age of 18, willing to do unskilled manual work.

### Massive Scheme

The scheme has been termed as ‘rural lifeline’, silver bullet,’ etc., by many studies which have been conducted across the country on the impact of the scheme on rural population. The MGNREG scheme, passed as an Act by the Govt. of India in 2005, has certain unique features like the bottom-up approach, demand-driven, self-selecting, and a rights-based design which stood distinct from that of other wage employment schemes. The modified operational guidelines (2013) extended the scheme to work in private farms, covered the most vulnerable sections of the rural population such as persons with disabilities, senior citizens, primitive tribal groups, nomadic tribal groups, de-notified tribes, women in special circumstances, HIV positive persons and the internally displaced persons.

Though the scheme has not been able to generate a comprehensive success, the heavy budget allocation of the Govt. of India for MGNREG scheme speaks volumes about its popularity among the rural masses. The Economic Times (Feb, 2019)<sup>2</sup> reported that the budget allocation for MGNREG scheme for 2018-19 was INR 55,000/- crores and based on the expenditure for the fiscal year, the allocation for the subsequent year, 2019-20 was raised to INR 60,000/- crores.

The scheme has brought about marked changes in the lives of the rural poor, especially the Scheduled Tribes (ST).

### Benefits of MGNREGS to the Tribes

**Table 1 Participation of ST households in MGNREGA in 2018-19**

S.No	National, State, District and Block	No of house holds issued Job cards (in lakh)	No.of households provided with employment (in lakh)
1	National	174.25	88.67
2	Kerala	01.21	00.68
3	Palakkad	00.15	00.09
4	Attappady	00.10	00.07

Source: (mnregaweb4.nic.in/netnrega/MISreport).

Table 1 depicts that 88.67 lakh ST households (51%) were provided employment under the scheme in the country, against 174.25 lakh job cards issued to ST households. Among the 1.21 lakh ST Job card holders in Kerala, 0.68 lakh (56%) ST households were provided with jobs. The number of ST households provided with employment in Palakkad district was 0.09 lakh (60%) against 0.15 lakh (70%) ST job card holders. In the tribal block of Attappady, 0.07 lakh ST households were given work under the scheme, as against a total of 0.10 job cards issued to ST households.

In Kerala state, the employment of the ST households was found to be above the national average, while Palakkad district and Attappady block both stood well above the Kerala State average in providing employment to the ST households. The reports of the MGNREGA MIS of 2018-19 continue to show high participation of the STs of Attappady under the scheme, in confirmation with the Scheduled Tribes of Kerala Report (2013)<sup>3</sup>, which found that the ST participation in the scheme in Attappady block was in high ratio.

### The Tribes of Attappady

Attappady, the tribal block of Palakkad district, spanning an area of 750 sq.kms, has three gram panchayats, viz., Pudur, Agali and Sholayur,

2 <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/News/Economy/Agriculture>

3 Kerala State Tribal Development Report, (2013). Kerala State Planning Board

predominantly inhabited by three sects of tribes viz., Kurumbas, Mudugas and Irulas. The Kurumbas are said to be the ethnic tribe which is brought under the cover of Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups (PVTG) by the Government of India, occupying the interior most of the forests. The Mudugas are also among the oldest tribes who occupy the not so deep inside the forests while the Irula tribes who are said to have come to Attappady from parts of Tamil Nadu, occupy the outskirts of the forests. There are 192 hamlets in Attappady and the block is as big as Alleppey district of the State. Their main occupation continues to be agriculture-related and collection of non-timber forest produce, though in the recent past, there has been a shift towards daily wage labour due to the vagaries of monsoon. The block is primarily rain-fed, though there are three rivers flowing through the area.

### Review of Literature

Several studies have been conducted on the impact of the scheme on the vulnerable groups, especially women and tribes, and highlighted the success of the scheme in transforming their lives. Nevertheless, the studies have pin pointed on the loopholes of implementation and suggested better ways to implement the scheme in the hilly tribal terrains. A few studies have been presented below with reference to the impact of the scheme on the tribal livelihoods, ST women and the differently abled persons, and the flaws in the implementation.

**Kumaran, K. P. (2013)<sup>4</sup>** in his study on the inclusion of persons with disabilities under the MGNREG scheme found that in the three states undertaken for the study viz., Andhra Pradesh, West Bengal and Madhya Pradesh, the scheme had heralded a new chapter in the history of employment of the persons with disability. The scheme provided a first time opportunity for the disabled to take up employment and earn their livelihood as against becoming a burden on their families.

**Masenamma. C and Choudari, A (2017)<sup>5</sup>**, in their study on the socio-economic conditions of Scheduled Caste (SC) and Scheduled Tribe (ST) women workers of MGNREGA in A.P. found that the scheme had attracted more ST women than SC women in the study area. It also found that the average income of the STs had improved substantially than the SCs. The study concluded that the scheme had brought about a noticeable change in the socio-economic conditions of the SCs and STs in the study area.

**Valvi S.V. (2015)<sup>6</sup>**, in a study conducted in Maharashtra on the impact of MGNREG scheme on the tribal population, revealed that the scheme had made a positive impact on the livelihoods of the tribes. The study found that the economic status of the households have improved and reduced the vulnerability shocks during the lean agricultural period and also distress migration.

**Mohanty S. (2012)<sup>7</sup>** Mohanty, S. (2012). Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) and Tribal Livelihoods: A Case Study in Sundargarh District of Odisha (Doctoral dissertation), while examining the impact of the scheme on the livelihoods of the tribes of Sundergarh district of Odisha, found that the implementation of the scheme was faulty, and it lacked transparency and accountability which hindered the tribes in getting the benefits of the scheme. The study suggested that a concrete monitoring system should be in place so as to plug the leakages in the system and also raise the levels of awareness among the tribes regarding

4. Kumaran, K. P. (2013). Inclusion of Persons with Disabilities Under MGNREGS: A Study Across Three States (Vol. 94). National Institute of Rural Development, Ministry of Rural Development, Government of India.

5. Masenamma Chodipalli and Choudari Appa Rao (2017). Socio-Economic Condition of Schedule Caste and Schedule Tribe Women Workers of Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MGNREGA) A Case Study of Madugula Mandal in Visakhapatnam District. SSRG International Journal of Humanities and Social Science 4(1), 1-5.

6. Valvi, S. V. (2015). Impact of Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme on the Tribal Beneficiaries (Doctoral dissertation, Mahatma Phule Krishi Vidyaapeeth, Rahuri).

7. Mohanty, S. (2012). Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) and Tribal Livelihoods: A Case Study in Sundargarh District of Odisha (Doctoral dissertation).

their rights.

**Narayanasamy, N and Boraian, M, P (2009)<sup>8</sup>**, while evaluating the contribution of NREGS in promoting the well-being of the workers in Kerala state, found that the scheme has been successful in creating cohesiveness among the workers which has resulted in enhancing their confidence levels. This social capital may be channelized in turn, and used for improving the other forms of capital viz., human, physical and financial. On the whole, the studies above have found the impact of the scheme on the vulnerable groups to be satisfactory but short of total success.

### Micro-Study on Attapady Tribals

Against this backdrop, the researchers conducted micro-level case studies as part of Qualitative research, on the tribal population in the tribal block of Attapady in Palakkad district of Kerala from Jan. to April, 2019, in order to understand how the scheme had influenced the lives of the individual workers. The study focused on the outcome of the scheme on the lives of the workers individually, which eventually resulted in elevating the status of the families and their lives. All the cases enumerated below are positive and justly unique in nature for which, the scheme has to be complimented.

### Objectives of the Study

- To understand the impact of MGNREG scheme on the livelihood of the Tribal workers
- To analyze the role of the scheme in promoting the welfare of widows and the aged
- To study the benefits of the scheme to the physically and mentally challenged workers, and
- To find out the role of the scheme in empowering women

### Methodology

This study was done during Jan. to March, 2019. Case study method was used in conducting the study. The case studies discussed in this paper are based on the field-work conducted by the authors

8. Narayanasamy, N. and M.P.Boraian (2009). A Study on the Performance of NREGS in Kerala, Ministry of Rural Development, Govt. of India (sponsored by the United Nations Development Programme).

in eight hamlets, spread across Agali and Pudur gram Panchayats, upon consultations with the gram Panchayats, and local Kudumbasree group leaders. Selection of Cases was done using ‘purposive sampling’ method. Care was taken to select cases which were unique in nature and adhered to the qualitative pattern of study.

### Limitations of the Study

1. Since the respondents were illiterate, ignorant and socially backward, a lot of effort had to be taken to get such details from them without pressurizing them.
2. The topography of the study area being difficult, reaching remote locations was tough as most of them, though connected by roads, were short of public transport, and hence a larger area could not be studied. Certain hamlets had to be visited twice..
3. Enough data regarding such cases were not available with the gram panchayat or the MGNREGA office of the panchayat. It could be collected only by speaking to the site supervisors whoever was available over phone and many a times, they could not be reached over phone due to poor connectivity.

### Case Studies

MGNREG scheme serves as the life line of the Scheduled Tribes (STs) in the vast tribal belt of Attapady. At a time when employment opportunities were dwindling, the scheme came as a “life saver” by giving them guaranteed employment at their doorstep. The case studies dealt with in this study support the finding of S K Jena and K.Ghosh (2013)<sup>9</sup>, that MGNREG scheme is a “silver bullet” for sustainable tribal livelihoods and poverty eradication. The scheme has been a breather to the lives of the tribes in general, as everyone stated that if they were alive and able to take their lives forward, the credit goes exclusively to the scheme.

Living in the forest area, having diverted

9. Jena, S. K., & Ghosh, K. (2013). MGNREGA-“Silver Bullet” for Sustainable Poverty Eradication-A Case Study of Koraput District of Odisha,”. Proceedings on Rural Development in India: Issues, Progress and Programme Effectiveness. RGU, Archers and Elevators, Bangalore, 18-33.

from their agricultural livelihood, witnessing the man-animal conflict, the stress of undergoing transformation from the primitive to the modern, with not enough literacy to battle with the modern systems, has landed them in a stage where they have left their culture and a great part of their tradition, way behind to join the emerging changes in the social system, which has eventually put them in a stage of clear transition. During this transition, MGNREG scheme has come in the form of a blessing to them. The case studies described below are unique and elucidate how the scheme has impacted on the different facets of tribal life.

### Livelihood Support

Three case studies presented here describe the role of MGNREGS in not only securing employment for the women, but also in promoting their individual farm operations, educating their children, securing financial assistance from Banks, and house construction.

**Deepa (36)**, belonging to Muduga community lives in Pakkulamtribal settlement (called by the local people as 'Ooru, meaning a community habitation such as a hamlet or a village). She is married, and has three sons. Her husband is a free-lance driver and gets engaged only for about 10 days a month, on an average. Deepa has been working under the scheme right from the commencement of the scheme in 2006, and has completed over a decade of work under the scheme. She gets employment under MGNREGA for 90-100 days every year with the wages in vogue from time to time.

With her earnings from this scheme, she bought a calf with the intention of embarking upon dairying. In the consecutive years, she got three calves from three deliveries and she chose to sell the milk in the Co-operative Milk Society. This added revenue to their family income. Alongsideworking under the scheme, she is now constructing a house sanctioned under the Additional Tribal Sub-Plan (ATSP) scheme. When she was in need of money, she sold two cows for Rs.97, 000/- at two different junctures. She has retained one cow with her, to continue with dairying. She has availed a loan of Rs.50, 000/- from the bank for construction of the house. She restricted the amount of loan to this level, as she was able to

generate about one lakh from the sale of her cows. Deepa expressed her gratitude for the scheme, through which she could strengthen her livelihood.

Over and above the work under MGNREGA, she said that she had learnt the technicalities of pepper and banana planting, which she intends to try in her land that is being allotted to them by the government. Had she not got the income from the scheme, she would never have thought of extending her livelihood opportunity. On the whole, Deepa feels that this one scheme can do a lot for those with the urge of making a livelihood and thereby, elevate their status in their own family and in the society.

**Parvathy Subramani (37)**, a Kurumba tribe from Gottiyarkandy settlement ( i.e.,Ooru), sees the scheme as a boon. She has five girl children and her husband is a psychiatric patient. To add to her misery, she does not get along well with her mother-in-law. Though they have forest land for cultivation, she is unable to use the land for commercial cultivation as her children need her personal care and attention. Her youngest child is just two years old. She has been working under the MGNREG scheme without a break from 2006, as she has been able to take her kids to the worksite during work. She thanks the scheme for such opportunities/provisions, as she cannot think of leaving her children behind, while going for private work. She said that if she has to cultivate her land, she needed support from the family to look after her children, while she was away at work. Another great benefit that she has received from the scheme is the extension of the MGNREGS work in her land. This motivated her to cultivate her land, which was otherwise left fallow. She has planted raagi, pulses and millets for her own use and said that she would sell whenever, there was surplus. She has availed Rs.5000/- as loan from the bank for education purpose, which she has been repaying from the earnings through the scheme. Parvathy, not so aggressive and outgoing, managed to say that she is able to take her life forward just because she enrolled in the scheme or else they would have been wallowing in poverty.

**Parvathy Rangan (34)**, a Kurumba tribe from Aanavayi settlement, is a widow with five children - three boys and two girls. Her eldest daughter has discontinued her studies after Plus Two, in order

to assist her mother in running the household. Aanavayis around 15 kms inside the forest from the mainland connected by the pathway laid by paver blocks through the special Kurumba Package.<sup>10</sup> Parvathy has 10 acres of land in the forest area, in which she cultivates mainly pulses in around five acres and gets a yield of around 100 kgs per year. Further, she cultivates crops such as banana, pepper, coconuts and has a few areca palms too, in a small portion of her land. Her main income is from both the widow pension, and from MGNREGA, with which she meets her day-to-day needs and the educational expenses of her children. The income from her field is only once a year and subject to the fury of nature. She has applied for a loan for Rs. 15,000/- from the bank to put an electric fence around her land to protect it from wild animals. She said that she was able to plan such an activity, as she could fall back on the scheme for repayment of her loans. The produce is sold either to the Attappady Co-operative Society or to private buyers in the mainland. Her aspiration is to give the rest of her children the best education possible so that they can seek a secured job. The scheme fans her hopes of fulfilling her dream in shaping up her children.

### **Rehabilitative and Therapeutic Support**

Besides the main objective of providing employment and augmenting the income of Five cases presented here, the scheme has also played a very interesting role of enabling those with speech and hearing impairment, epilepsy, and mental depression by making them feel more secured, and their interaction with fellow workers have enabled them to come away from the pangs of disability. They realized that this scheme provides a rehabilitative and therapeutic support, while working and mingling with others.

Saraswathi (35), an Irula from Kallakara settlement, is the eldest of the two daughters to her parents. She is a partially 'hearing and speech impaired' from birth and sub normal too. She grew up with these disabilities and was not sent to school,

whereas her sister, who is normal, attended the school. Their father deserted them, when they were small and the onus was on the mother to bring up her daughters. Saraswathi was married to a person, who promised her mother to look after her well, knowing clearly about her disabilities. But then, the marriage sustained only for a few years and Saraswathi was deserted by her husband, leaving her behind with a two year old son. She started living with her mother from then on, and that was the time when the MGNREG scheme was launched. Her mother, who had enrolled under the scheme earlier, added her daughter's name too. During the initial days, Saraswathi was reluctant in going for work, as that was the first time she was socializing with people of her hamlet. But her mother took her for work forcibly; little did they know that the work under the scheme would be a turning point in their lives.

Saraswathi started getting attuned to the work and the co-workers and started liking it. Furthermore, she was listening to the chatter of the women and men at the worksite, and slowly started joining in their conversations verbally. Eventually, she started conversing with them and now she speaks fluently. It was amazing that a girl, who used to utter only a few words since her childhood days, had started speaking and conversing with everyone without any difficulty. Her mother and all the other co-workers said that the scheme had done wonders to Saraswathi. She has shed her inhibitions, and now, she is always the first one to report for work. Her mother manages her money as she is not capable of handling it. Her mother stopped working under the scheme after she underwent a couple of surgeries due to health issues. Currently, Saraswathi is the bread winner of the household. She beamed with joy when she said that her one and only aim of getting her son a good job would be fulfilled through the scheme, as her son has finished his Plus Two. Her mother has bought her a pair of gold ear studs and a nose ring from her earnings. She is a beneficiary of the disability pension too.

**Rangamma (22)**, an Irula from Bhootivazhiyuru, slipped into mental depression after she lost her mother. She also lost her father, when she and her younger sister were small and were educated in a convent in Trichur district. After her 10th std, she

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10. Kurumba package was part of the fund allotted by the 13th Finance Commission for the socio economic development of five tribal communities in five districts of the State.

returned home. When she was planning to take admission for her Plus Two, her mother fell ill. She was diagnosed for cancer and very soon succumbed to it. Following this tragedy, Rangamma went into a depression as she could not face the tragic death of her mother. She was then referred to the Psychiatric department for treatment in the Kottathara Super Speciality Hospital in Attappadi, and has been under treatment since then. Her younger sister got married a few years later, and lives in a different settlement with her family. Rangamma lives with her uncles, who look after her responsibly, in the same settlement. She would wander in the nearby places when her uncle went for work and this was becoming a cause for concern for the local elders, especially women. The local women, who worked under the scheme, added her name in her mother's job card and decided to take her to the worksite for work, as they thought that it was dangerous to leave a young mentally deranged girl alone in her house, when all the others went for work.

After she was enrolled, the women took her along with them but she resisted by crying. However, the fellow women were unrelenting, and shared her portion of work between them and compensated for her work. Gradually, Rangamma started getting used to the new environment and slowly started taking part in the work. With the passing of years, Rangamma now looks forward to MGNREG work and is punctual too. Her sister assists her in operating her bank account whenever she wants to buy clothes, cosmetics or sandals. Rangamma is still undergoing psychiatric treatment. The compassion and the attitude of sharing and caring, the women say, has been an additional development to the camaraderie the workers shared through the scheme. The scheme can be alternately called a "Rehabilitation/Occupation Therapy Scheme." The work under the scheme has generated a feeling of oneness among the workers and the majority of them felt that it was a place for "humanitarianism." (Bhat, B. B., & Mariyappan, P. (2016)<sup>11</sup> .

Maruthi's youngest daughter (4) was born as a

subnormal child with severe bouts of epilepsy. Her two elder children, a boy and a girl are normal and are attending school. This four year old child is currently undergoing treatment in the government hospital in Pudur Gram Panchayat. Both she and her husband work in their agricultural forest area in Gottiyarkandi settlement where they belong to, and for the rest of the year, they work in the scheme. They belong to the Kurumba community and are industrious and hard working. Soon after the child was diagnosed for multiple health issues, they started taking treatment in the private hospitals in Mannarkkad, the town adjacent to the mainland which was expensive for them. They kept all their MGNREGA earning aside for the treatment of the child. Maruthi was thanking her stars for getting such a work in their hamlet, with which they could afford to give the child the best treatment. The health of the child is improving and is responding to the treatment very well. Maruthi does not miss a day's work and this was possible only because she could take her daughter along, and keep her at the site while she is working as the scheme had the provision for crèche facilities.

Vellinkiri (25), an Irula from Bhoothivazhiyuru, is a sub normal person, who simply smiles whenever people ask him some questions. He has been working under the scheme for the past five years and is proud of earning an income too. The worksite Supervisor Rajamma was instrumental in getting him enrolled under the scheme. His mother works in the scheme, but has no other subsidiary occupation. Vellinkiri has not attended school owing to his mental disability. He has not been undergoing any treatment or rehabilitation. A case like Vellinkiri's would have been, in the normal course, a burden for the family as his mother would have had to stay at home, taking care of him. This scheme according to his mother is an "enabler scheme," by which even disabled people can earn the same wages by doing the unskilled work like any other normal person and live with great self-esteem. The scheme is a "God send," she said, and is glad that her disabled son is able to contribute so much to the family's income, apart from the disability pension he gets. Vellinkiri is more than happy going for the work and works as per the instructions of his elders in the site. He has learnt to count numbers and units, after joining the work.

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11. Bhat, B. B., & Mariyappan, P. (2015). MGNREGA: A New Hope to Reduce Rural Poverty. *International Journal of Innovative Research and Development*, 4(8).

He is amicable and mingles well with all of them.

Manju (24), daughter of Nanjan and Chelli, belongs to the Irula community and hails from Nellipathy settlement. They do not own land. Nanjan does not work as he is not keeping good health. Chelli works under the MGNREG scheme. She also works as a farm labour, when the scheme work is over. Their main earning is from the scheme. Manju completed her X Std. and later discontinued her studies. She was married and had started living along with her husband in another hamlet. She developed some health problems there and was diagnosed for heart ailment. Her husband divorced her saying that he was cheated by her parents, and that they had not disclosed the fact that she was a heart patient. However, Chelli had a different story to tell; she justified that the problem had started showing up recently and only after marriage. Manju has been living with her parents ever since the divorce, and was being treated for her heart ailment. She underwent a heart surgery at the SreeChithra Hospital, Trivandrum in 2016 and is almost back to normal.

Manju started retreating into her shell and started showing signs of depression. She would hardly talk to people, not even to her parents, and would remain indoors without stepping out. Chelli shared her grief with the workers in the worksite, upon which, all of them suggested that Chelli should bring Manju for work. Her name was already listed in the card. It was tough to take her to the site but Chelli, somehow persuaded her and started taking her to the worksite, as she could not think of leaving her behind alone at home. The initial days were very tough for both the mother and daughter. Slowly, Manju started getting enthused about going to the worksite and started working along with them. Though she doesn't open up and talk much, there is considerable improvement in her behavior and has started mingling with the rest of them. Now, she is given soft work at the site, as she cannot do any hard physical labour owing to her health condition. She enjoys the affection and care given by all of them, and it is encouraging to watch the whole group behaving like a large family. Chelli is planning to take a Job card in Manju's name since she can be treated as a single woman HH under the scheme. By this, Manju's life will be safe and secure

and can live her life till the end without any feeling of insecurity. The scheme is a "shock absorber" for people like Manju who are undergoing the traumas of life so early in life. The women have, by far, benefitted by getting exposure to the outside world and benefitted to a large extent by being able to use the work-place as a platform to share their happiness and sorrows among their fellow workers (Nayak, S (2013)<sup>12</sup>

### Care of the Aged

Besides supporting the disabled persons, the scheme has also helped the aged couple in providing economic security, dignity, independence and a solace during their oldage, as presented thro' three cases here.

Pachayi and Mashani, both from the Irula community of Chemmannur settlement, both aged around 65, are hard of hearing and vision impaired respectively. Yet, they both continue working under the scheme regularly without missing a day, from the time they enrolled under the scheme. Both of them are beneficiaries of old age pension. Mashani gives all her earnings to her son who lives with her (estranged from his wife), for running the household. Mashani is relieved that she does not have to depend on anyone or be a burden for her children or family. She has around three acres of land where her children cultivate for commercial purpose. The earnings are used by her son and she said that she was giving it all to her son to run the household, so that she is not blamed as a burden on her son. Pachaayi and her aged husband lead their lives well, with the earnings from the scheme, their pension and earnings from their agricultural land. They could live their life with dignity, as they have additional earning from the scheme which comes into their bank account directly. They use it as contingent fund to address their old age ailments, whenever needed. The aged women seemed evidently happy with the scheme as they said that it provides "paadhukaappu" (i.e., "protection") to them. The scheme allays the fear of insecurity in oldage for all the aged people

12. Nayak, S.(2013). Impact of Mgnrega on Status of Tribal Women in Odisha: A Case Study of Rajgangpur Block of Sundergarh District. Journal of Agriculture and Environmental Sciences, Vol. 2 No. 2, December 2013.



who have enrolled in the scheme, and at the same time, live their lives with dignity! The scheme has been a blessing to those between the age of 50 and 70, as they were unable to find work due to their inability to do hard physical labour. (Thadathil M, S and Mohandas, V (2012)<sup>13</sup>.

### Empowerment of women

Yet another vital role of this scheme is in empowering the women workers, who were less articulate, less mobile, had less contact, less outside visits, and less aspirations in life hitherto. Since their coming under the fold of this scheme, they have become empowered, as could be seen from the three cases below. **Vimala (51)**, wife of Rangan, an Irula from Padavayal settlement was one among the two women chosen from the district, to represent the households which had completed 100 days in the year 2016, for attending a Workshop conducted in New Delhi, under the auspices of the Ministry of Rural Development. The workshop was for those who had completed 100 days as single member in the card. Though they have around 10 acres of land, they do not cultivate for want of irrigation facility. They tried cultivating it once, but lost their crop due to insufficient irrigation. They have left it barren now. Rangan works as a farm labourer. Vimala's continuous work under the scheme as the mate/supervisor, and also as a worker, gave her the opportunity of attending the workshop and also listening to the Prime Minister's speech live, at the meeting. She was extremely happy for being chosen for the workshop, as being in Delhi and being a part of such an august gathering, could never be thought of by a tribe. This has motivated her even more to work persistently and be committed to the cause of sustainable development of her village. Simultaneously, she also motivates her co-workers to take active part in the village development works. Her participation in the workshop has been a motivation for the rest of the workers in their area and the gram panchayat too. The work through the scheme has given them an identity, both in the

13. Thadathil, M. S., & Mohandas, V. (2012). Impact of MGNREGS on labour supply to agricultural sector of Wayanad district in Kerala. *Agricultural Economics Research Review*, 25(347-2016-16911), 151.

family and the community that is entrenched in the patriarchy system. (Gondane, Y. B., (2016)<sup>14</sup>. **Maruthi (45)**, an Irula tribe from Nellipathy settlement, lost her husband at the age of 27, benefitted immensely from the scheme. Her only aim in life was to educate both her children and the MGNREG scheme helped in achieving her goal. She had started working under the scheme from 2006 and from then on, she did not use a single rupee from her wages from the scheme for any other purpose but the education of her two children. The elder son completed his engineering course from the top rated Trivandrum Engineering College and her younger son took to teaching, after he took his degree from the Arts and Science College in Agali. Both of them are employed on contractual basis in their own professions and await government employment in the coming days. She was narrating non-stop, regarding the benefits of the scheme and was speaking in gratitude about the scheme which had made it possible for her to realize her aspirations. As for the other facilities, she has a house which was constructed through an order given by the District Collector. Initially, her name was not included in the list of beneficiaries of the AHADS scheme, which constructed houses for them in their hamlet. Only after she filed a complaint and after an enquiry by the officials, she was allotted a house through the order of the District Collector. She has been a fighter all through her life and with her dedication, she educated both her children. Her struggles will surely bear results, once they are into government jobs. It was only from last year, that Maruthi started using her income from the scheme for her personal use.

### Findings

#### Livelihood

Cases of MGNREGA workers presented above reveal the positive dimension of the scheme. Deepa's success highlights the fact that when a MGNREGA worker has certain supplementary income sources, coupled with bank loan, one can become progressive. In the case of Parvathy Subramani, the provisions under MGNREGA for taking the child to work

14. Gondane, Y. B. (2016). Women Empowerment and MGNREGA " A Case Study of Women in Kurkheda Block, District Gadchiroli, Tata Institute of Social Sciences, Tuljapur

site has enabled her to work in the scheme for the maximum duration. In addition, her benefitting by yet another provision of getting her lands levelled thro' the scheme has strengthened her livelihood base. Parvathy Rangan's efforts to mobilise bank loan for fencing 10 acres of land to strengthen her livelihood base, could be made possible only after she joined the scheme.

### **Rehabilitative and Therapeutic support**

Besides generating jobs and augmenting their income, the case of a few workers has proved that it has played a rehabilitative and therapeutic role too. Saraswathi, partially speech and hearing impaired, and sub-normal too, was deserted by her husband because of her disability. Her mother's initiative to enroll her in the scheme worked wonders on the girl. She got an exposure to socializing for the very first time in her life and above all, the scheme worked as "speech therapist" in aiding her to speak fluently with fellow workers at the work site by being exposed to and involved in their chatter during work. Now, she loves to work and supports her sick mother too, besides schooling her child. Depressed by successive death of her parents, Rangamma's kins avoided her being left alone in her settlement, rife with alcoholism. Local women workers forcibly drew her into the scheme, where she gradually mixed with them. Eventually, she became happy, and her depression level minimized. Vellinkiri, born with mental disability, works with in the scheme, along with his mother. Besides the provision to retain her mentally disabled son, her mother found the work atmosphere, and interaction by the fellow workers very soothing and offered solace to her son, he also earns his share from the scheme. Similar to the case of Rangamma, Vellinkiri also found the scheme serving the workers with therapeutic value. Maruthi's youngest child was born as a sub-normal child with a bout of epilepsy. With two more children to be nourished, her parents struggled to make their both ends meet. Despite the pangs of poverty, they kept the MGNREGA wage untouched for any of their domestic expenses, and spent it totally on the treatment of their ill child, which resulted in her substantial improvement. The provision of keeping the child at the worksite thickened their bondage,

and hastened the progress. Manju deserted by her husband, and suffering from heart ailment, was aggravated with depression and delusion. Afraid of leaving this mentally depressed daughter, her neighbours persisted her mother in taking her with them, primarily for safety. Initially reluctant and reclusive though, she slowly started working and earning, but a more important outcome was that she slowly gained confidence and experienced an active state of mind and body. The findings from the above cases reflect that the compassion and camaraderie developed among the workers, which is an unintended outcome of the scheme, has enabled the differently abled to get mainstreamed with the normal persons, by overcoming the disabilities to a large extent.

The partially speech impaired Saraswati could start speaking fluently as the co-workers involved her in their chatter. Rangamma and Manju were forcefully taken for work by the persistent efforts of the co-workers, who even covered up part of their work when they agitated and refused to work. The compassion shown to them helped in making them docile and also gave them confidence to work. Manju could also avail a job card in her name which would provide her enough support and open up other avenues of employment throughout her life. Vellinkiri could work and be with his mother too at the work site like how Maruti could take her sickly four year old to the work site and keep her there as she worked. The highlight of the scheme is that by providing these facilities, has made it possible for the differently abled to work under the scheme and contribute to the family income, who otherwise would have been a burden on the family apart from depriving a family member/ caretaker an avenue for earning.

### **Care for the aged and Women empowerment**

The cases of Mashani and Pachayee, with hearing and vision deficiencies, prove that the scheme has assuaged their difficulties and assured them with a decent income and dignified living. The scheme has made it possible for them to work as it has brought the "aged" under the cover of the "most vulnerable" section in the guidelines. The compassion shown to them on the worksite by the co-

workers enthruse them to go to work without break. They are given “soft work” by the co-workers, not because they know it is specified in the guidelines but because of their concern for the aged. Despite their vulnerabilities, they were supported by the co-workers and also could work until their physical capabilities failed them. Vimala, by completing 100 days of work under MNREGS, was invited for a Meet on MGNREGA, addressed by the Prime Minister at New Delhi. The scheme emboldened Maruthi to fight for her entitlements from the government for a free house, which was ignored previously, but finally she won the battle. She stands out from her fellow workers, wherein, she spent all her wages only on her sons’ education till their initial placement. The women in the above two cases were found to be “highly empowered.” Vimala seemed highly motivated and she set an example to others that a tribe could also achieve such feats which was much above their reach while Maruthi proved once again that the economic support extended to her in the form of wages assisted her in achieving her goals.

### **Social transformation**

MGNREGS has thus not only achieved its intended outcome of additional employment and income generation, but also witnessed certain unintended outcomes. The first generation women workers, who took to MGNREGS, found economic security, empowerment at home, and better social status in the community. With equal wages for women and men, the status of women today is better, and the supremacy of men over women is on the slide. The aged workers, who got rejected in private wage earning arena, could lead an independent and dignified life with MGNREGS income, and even support the younger dependents, a process of societal ‘role reversal’. The interactive work atmosphere at the worksite, and the compassion shown by the fellow workers towards their weak and the vulnerable fraternity enabled even the ‘speech impaired’ girl to gradually scale up her articulation power. The mentally depressed youth gained motivation to mingle with fellow workers at the worksite, and preferred to work constantly, than loiter in the street, or let alone at home. Further, provisions under this scheme to keep children, including the disabled

family members, at the worksite, increased their participation rate, and sustained their family bond. Similarly, provisions for taking up work in private farms, have strengthened their livelihood base. It was observed that the income from MGNREGS has been utilized by certain families exclusively for housing, educating their children or providing them with better health care, resulting in the process of human resources development, and ‘generation-building’. Moreover, drastic changes in the pattern of domestic expenditure towards non-food items, spurt in their savings, and spree in acquiring domestic gadgets like mixies and grinders, craze for mobile phones, and craving for gold jewels have been contributing towards bringing about transformation in the emerging life styles of the tribes. MGNREGS has thus not only been part of the economic life of the tribes in Attappady, but also their social, cultural, educational, health, livelihood, and environmental components of life.

### **Conclusion**

Findings from these case studies point out the multiple roles played by MGNREGS, primarily by providing job and wages, but also ensuring a good source of protection to girls and women with depression and disabilities, by eschewing their lonely presence in their settlement. Providing wages to their work is another form of social support to the poverty-stricken households. The provision of allowing children at the work site, protects them from physical vulnerabilities, and cemented their relationship and socialization process. Above all, the miraculous role played by MGNREGS is the mainstreaming of mentally depressed men and women, thro’ collective interaction, manual work, and the motherly affection from the fellow workers which is laudable. MGNREGS, intended to generate employment as a supplementary source of livelihood, and thereby augment the income of families living in poor economic strata, has performed exceedingly well in Attappady. More than its delivery of intended outcome, it is noteworthy that it has contributed to social, psychological and health transformation in the lives of vulnerable groups like the tribes, the aged, widows, destitute women and the differently abled persons. Besides addressing the basic minimum

needs of women workers, it has also contributed to their empowerment, and enabled them to realize their dreams and aspirations. At a time when many welfare and development programmes struggle in delivering the intended benefits to its target groups, MGNREGS stands out as a 'silver lining' from all other schemes of the government sponsored thus far, and a and a "shock absorber" for those in social, physical and mental distress.

### Suggestions for further research

- Studies may be conducted on how the scheme has impacted in supporting their traditional livelihood activities which are primarily Forest-based, and Farm-based
- An Opinion study can be made on the Preference of workers in taking up Private farm works under MGNREGS and Exclusion of machineries from the purview of MGNREGS
- A study on the role of MGNREGS in the Social and Cultural transformations of Attapady tribes may also be made.

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