

**Working Paper 395**

**Is Decentralisation  
Promoting or Hindering the  
Effective Implementation  
of MGNREGS? The  
Evidence from Karnataka**

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# IS DECENTRALISATION PROMOTING OR HINDERING THE EFFECTIVE IMPLEMENTATION OF MGNREGS? THE EVIDENCE FROM KARNATAKA

D Rajasekhar, Salim Lakha and R Manjula<sup>1</sup>

## Abstract

*Decentralisation is viewed by some as an effective means of improving governance and equitable spread of development benefits. This paper examines the process of distribution of social protection benefits through decentralised governance by looking at the implementation of Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MGNREGS) in Karnataka, which is ranked high on the devolution index. But, the implementation of MGNREGS under decentralised governance has produced lacklustre results and uneven benefits. Powerful social actors at the local level have devised careful modus operandi to dilute transparency mechanisms and stifle voices from below to subvert the scheme to suit their interests.*

## Introduction

Decentralisation has received extensive coverage in discussions on economic development and the provision of social welfare but there is little consensus over its effectiveness (Prud'homme 1995; Tanzi 1995). This is not surprising considering the varied experiences of different countries, including variations in outcomes within individual nations (Jutting *et al* 2005). Importantly, decentralisation is not simply a technocratic process concerned with the transfer of functions, but it also results in competition for resources and authority at different levels of governance. To that extent, it is thoroughly politicised with different social actors vying for access to funds and decision making. Therefore, the social and political context within which decentralisation operates is most important. It will have consequences for popular participation, the implementation of social programmes, and the distribution of benefits.

In this paper, we examine whether decentralisation has facilitated or hindered effective implementation of Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Scheme (MGNREGS) in Chitradurga district of Karnataka. The scheme was introduced in 2005 and implemented a year later in 200 districts deemed to be economically backward, but by 2008 it was extended nationwide. MGNREGS guarantees 100 days of employment as a legal right to each rural household whose adult members are willing to undertake manual work on local small-scale infrastructure projects. There is now a vast amount of literature assessing the implementation of the scheme which is unsurprising considering its national scope (see Khera 2011; Pankaj 2012). Significantly, it is also one of the largest social protection schemes, both in India and internationally, consuming 38 per cent of the total social protection expenditure incurred in India (ADB 2013, 34). Much of the literature analysing MGNREGS is concerned with outcomes for employment, social inclusion, gender relations, and to some extent accountability at

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the national and state levels. While these studies have extended and deepened our understanding of the scheme's implementation on national and regional scales, there is still scope for in-depth, micro-level analysis of how the scheme has been implemented at the village level. In the case of Karnataka such studies are scarce.

There are at least two important considerations that justify an investigation into how MGNREGS is implemented at the village and *grama panchayat* (GP, village council) levels. First, the implementation of the scheme is the responsibility of GPs, the lowest administrative unit of rural decentralised governance in the country. The selection of projects requires the GPs to consult and work with the *grama sabhas* (village assemblies) which are also responsible for conducting social audits that are mandatory under the scheme. Understanding the role of decentralisation and local governance in the implementation of MGNREGS is, therefore, essential. Second, a focus upon the workings of the scheme at the GP level highlights the involvement of different social actors who are responsible for its effective functioning. It also reveals the processes influencing the utilisation of funds allocated to MGNREGS and the distribution of benefits flowing from it.

Our research has focussed upon the southern state of Karnataka because it has an extended history of decentralisation (Sivanna 2015, 108). When in 1983 the Janata government won power in Karnataka, it introduced significant changes to local governance through legislation in 1985, whereby it established councils that were elected at two levels, namely, the Mandal (representing a collection of villages) and the District (Crook and Manor 1998, 22). Further changes in local governance were instituted nationally under the 73<sup>rd</sup> Constitutional Amendment of 1992 which led to the establishment of *Panchayati Raj Institutions* (PRIs) comprising of a three-tier system of local governance: the *grama panchayat*, the *taluk* (sub-district) *panchayat*, and the district council or *zilla panchayat*. Despite Karnataka's lengthy involvement with decentralised governance, it has produced mixed results in the implementation of MGNREGS. The experience of Karnataka calls into question some of the assumptions underlying the demands for decentralisation.

Two important reasons advanced for supporting decentralisation are increased efficiency and better governance in the form of enhanced accountability of officials (Jutting *et al* 2005, 627–8). However, as Bardhan (2002, 187) argues, decentralisation can have certain advantages, but its uncritical celebration may lead one to overlook its limitations both in terms of market related benefits and its potential to benefit local communities. We concur with Bardhan's observations; our research shows decentralised governance has offered uneven benefits to the beneficiaries of MGNREGS. An important insight from the different country studies of decentralisation examined by Jutting *et al* (2005, 641-42) is that the state at the centre has to assume continued 'responsibility' for initiatives aimed at supporting the poor.

The commitment of political leaders at the centre to decentralisation in India is arguable. In a review of twenty years of decentralisation in India, Aiyar (2013) claims that there has only been a 'half-hearted' attempt at decentralisation with budget allocated to local government accounting for just 7 per cent of total government expenditure (see also Jayal 2006, 9-10). While the devolution of funding is an important consideration making local governance effective, Bardhan (2002, 188) argues that the assumption that the funds will be transferred to those in need may not materialise owing to corruption.

What is required, however, is a closer consideration of the social, economic, and political context within which resources are allocated (Bardhan 2002, 196; Jutting *et al* 2005, 642). Research on India reveals that, in areas where traditional social institutions are characterised by deep inequalities based upon caste or gender, decentralisation is not enough to empower those who are socially excluded (Jutting *et al* 2005, 642; Aiyar 2013).

It is widely recognised that decentralisation is not a remedy for poverty alleviation and may even pave the way for elite capture (Cheema and Rondinelli 2007, 8). In Karnataka, elite capture of GPs and other local institutions poses a serious challenge to the delivery of social protection to those most in need (Vijayalakshmi 2006; Rajasekhar, Babu and Manjula 2012a). The GPs in Karnataka are dominated by elites who derive their power from land ownership, senior status in the community, and political connections (Vijayalakshmi 2006, 403). These elites need not be necessarily from the upper level of dominant castes; they can as well be from the lower castes, especially those with political connections (Rajasekhar, Babu and Manjula 2012a).

Our study addresses the following questions to understand the role of decentralisation and local governance in the implementation of MGNREGS in Karnataka:

- What social groups are represented in the GPs?
- What benefits have the participants in MGNREGS derived from the scheme?
- Who are the major beneficiaries?
- Are the outcomes uniform across the social groups?
- Are the GP officials consulting with *grama sabha* members and answerable to them?

We argue that the benefits of decentralisation claimed by its proponents are only partially realised when we examine the role of GPs in the implementation of MGNREGS.

This paper is based upon an analysis of both primary and secondary data sources related to the implementation of MGNREGS in Karnataka and, more specifically, in the Hiriyur taluk of Chitradurga district.<sup>1</sup> The research findings presented in this paper are derived from a household survey of 131 job cardholders conducted in five randomly selected GPs during October–November 2012. These cardholders are officially listed as having worked under the scheme. Our understanding of local governance is also informed by continuing and longstanding engagement with research on decentralisation and rural development in Karnataka, and more generally southern India. Our last fieldwork visit was in December 2015 when we again met the GP members and officials to discuss the progress of MGNREGS. Consequently, sufficient time has elapsed for an assessment of how effectively the scheme has been implemented there. The sample GPs discussed below are referred to by their pseudonyms<sup>2</sup>, which are based upon their agricultural and locational features.

This paper is divided into three main sections. It begins with a discussion of the social profile of GP members from the five sample GPs, taking into account especially their caste background and economic/occupational status. In section two, we explain the outcomes (participation, work and wages) for the beneficiaries of MGNREGS in the different GPs. In section three, we examine the variations in outcomes in terms of caste, occupation, gender, and family connections with GP members. The paper concludes with the main findings from the study.

## Profile of Grama Panchayat Members

In this section, we consider the socio-economic profile of the members of the five sample GPs which are responsible for implementing MGNREGS. Their profiles will reveal the social and political context within which decentralised governance operates in providing social protection benefits to the people under its jurisdiction. It also begs the question: how socially representative are GPs?

The GP members in our sample were elected in 2010 for a five-year term<sup>3</sup>. In order to ensure the participation of vulnerable groups, reservations are provided to Scheduled Castes (SCs), Scheduled Tribes (STs), Other Backward Castes (OBCs) and women. While the seats reserved for persons belonging to SC and ST communities are in the proportion to their population, those reserved for women were 33 per cent of the total seats in 2010<sup>4</sup>. The total number of members elected to the five sample GPs in 2010 was 91. The proportion of elected women members was well above the required reservation of 33 per cent in the sample GPs, especially in Border and Non-irrigated GPs (Table 1).

**Table 1: Profile of Members of the Sample GPs**

Particulars	Horti-cultural [N=23]	Irrigated [N=17]	Pastoral [N=19]	Border [N=16]	Non-irrigated [N=16]	Total [N=91]
<b>Gender</b>						
Women elected member (%)	39.1	41.2	42.1	43.8	43.8	<b>41.8</b>
<b>Caste</b>						
Members (%) from disadvantaged caste groups	95.6	76.5	73.6	56.2	50.0	<b>72.6</b>
Members (%) from dominant castes (Lingayat, Vokkaliga)	4.3	23.5	26.3	43.8	50.0	<b>27.5</b>
<b>Education</b>						
Illiterate and semi-literate members (%)	39.1	47.1	52.6	31.3	31.3	<b>40.7</b>
Members with high school & above	60.8	52.9	47.4	68.8	68.8	<b>59.4</b>
<b>Occupation</b>						
Wage labourers	8.7	35.3	10.5	0.0	0.0	<b>11.0</b>
Cultivators	21.7	58.8	57.9	81.3	68.7	<b>54.9</b>
Others	69.5	5.9	31.6	18.7	31.3	<b>34.1</b>

**Source:** For this and the following tables in the paper, the source is the primary data.

In terms of caste, over 72 per cent of the total elected members belonged to disadvantaged groups (SC/ST, Muslims and OBCs), with their representation being the highest in Horticultural GP and the lowest in Non-irrigated GP (Table 1). This pattern is in line with the caste composition of households in these GPs; households belonging to SC/ST communities and backward castes such as Golla and Kuruba form a majority of the households in Pastoral, Irrigated and Horticultural GPs. In the Border and Non-irrigated GPs, households belonging to the dominant Vokkaliga caste form a significant proportion of the total households. In the next section, we examine the influence of caste over the distribution of benefits flowing from MGNREGS.

The level of education of the elected GP members is also a significant consideration, particularly where the identification, prioritisation, implementation and monitoring of works under

MGNREGS is involved. Though over 90 per cent of the elected GP members have acquired some education, their level of literacy is limited (Table 1). Since the quality of education imparted in government schools is poor and many of those attending these schools cannot read and write when they leave school (Pratham 2007), we have considered those completing upper primary schooling as semi-literate. Over 40 per cent of the elected members in the sample GPs are illiterate or semi-literate; this is especially the case in Irrigated and Pastoral GPs where the representation of disadvantaged caste groups is also very high. However, the level of education attained was better in Horticultural GP even though the percentage of castes from disadvantaged groups was the highest. Needless to state, educational attainment and caste status of elected members did not correspond in this GP.

In addition to caste and education, the occupational background of elected members of *panchayats* is also an important consideration, especially in defining their social status within the local community and determining access to resources. Table 1 shows that, overall, cultivation was the predominant occupation of GP members whereas only a small minority of the members were employed as wage labourers. Most significantly, in Border GP 81.3 per cent of the members were cultivators. However, not all the elected members who stated their occupation as cultivation were small and marginal farmers. Our fieldwork revealed that some GP members were substantial cultivators owning large landholdings, especially in Non-irrigated and Border GPs. In Horticultural GP, a majority of the members were involved in commercial activities such as rope making, coconut selling and operating petty shops. A couple of them were contractors who implemented MGNREGS works. Only a few GP members were working as wage labourers; a majority of whom were women. Only in Irrigated GP a somewhat large proportion (35.3%) of the elected members stated that their occupation was wage labour. In majority of GPs the representation of wage workers was comparatively low. Insufficient representation of labourers is of some concern<sup>5</sup> considering that the GPs are a critical institution of local governance responsible for the implementation of MGNREGS which is aimed at benefiting vulnerable sections of the rural population, many of whom are agricultural labourers.

### **Benefits Obtained by Sample Households**

As noted earlier, the GPs under study have been implementing MGNREGS to provide wage employment to those seeking to supplement their incomes or have no other source for earning an income. In this section, we will discuss the outcomes of MGNREGS such as possession of a job card, participation in the scheme, number of days of employment and wage income obtained, and variations in employment and income. This information was obtained from 131 workers from the five sample GPs. The procedure adopted to select sample households was to randomly select two works under MGNREGS from each of the sample GPs and randomly select one worker from the households that had worked in the sample works according to the official records.

Appendix 1 provides a demographic profile of the sample workers. Overall, women formed slightly over 45 per cent of the total sample workers, but their proportion was more than 50 per cent in the Irrigated and Non-irrigated GPs. About 39 per cent of the workers belonged to SC/ST category and over 34 per cent belonged to the dominant caste groups like, for example, the Vokkaliga. Non-irrigated GP is an exception because over 70 per cent of the workers belonged to the dominant caste groups.

Over 82 per cent of the sample workers were in the working age group, that is, 26 to 60 years. However, in Irrigated and Non-irrigated GPs, a significant proportion of the workers belonged to the older age group of over 60 years. More than two thirds of the total sample workers were either illiterate or semi-literate, but in the Horticultural GP, about 13 per cent of workers were graduates, which was the highest of all GPs.

As far as the principal occupation is concerned, most of the sample workers stated that they depended on wage labour in agriculture or non-agriculture. However, Non-irrigated GP had a relatively higher proportion of cultivators. This may be due to two reasons. First, the proportion of irrigated area to total area in this GP is low. This implies that the average size of landholding is likely to be high. Second, there is also well irrigation in this GP which provides an opportunity to grow cash crops of onions and vegetables. The landholding position of sample workers from this GP shows that 47 per cent were medium cultivators, while 33 per cent belonged to wealthy cultivator category. Onion is an important commercial crop – so much so that some of the cultivators are nicknamed ‘onion kings’. This raises the question whether these substantial cultivators have managed to capture the benefits of MGNREGS in this GP.

Thus, the sample workers from the Irrigated GP consisted of women, elderly and wage labourers in agriculture, while cultivators belonging to dominant caste groups formed a majority in the Non-irrigated GP. The sample from the other GPs included mostly illiterate or semi-literate men belonging to disadvantaged caste groups and wage labour dependent households.

### ***Possession of job cards***

The GP is responsible for issuing job cards to households seeking wage work under MGNREGS. The households’ ability to demand work, and monitor the details of their employment (remuneration and hours of work) which are recorded on their job cards, is more effective when the job cards are in their possession. Despite the official requirement that workers should have possession of their job cards, overall a significant minority (28.2%) of the sample households stated that they did not hold their job cards (Table 2). Notably, in all GPs, except the Horticultural GP, the non-possession of job cards was higher than the average figure of 28.2 per cent, and disturbingly over one-third of the workers in Pastoral GP did not hold their cards. It is also noteworthy that in the Horticultural GP which had the highest percentage of job card possession, the caste composition of the workers was distinctly different compared to the other GPs we studied. The members in the Horticultural GP belonged predominantly (over 95%) to the disadvantaged castes; and it ranked second<sup>6</sup> in terms of members with high school education or above who comprised over 60.8 per cent of the sample (Table 1). It is likely that greater awareness through relatively higher education attainment combined with careful monitoring of job card distribution by the GP ensured that the workers were not deprived of their job cards. By contrast in Pastoral GP where the possession of job cards was the lowest (Table 2), the proportion of members with high school education or above was also the lowest among the five GPs (Table 1).

An important contributing factor to workers not possessing their job cards is the implementation of works by contractors even though contractors are not permitted under the scheme’s guidelines. Contractors, who are either former or present GP members or their relatives, implement the

works through labour saving machinery because it reduces supervision costs and hence increases the profit margin. However, in order to demonstrate that more labourers are employed in the works than actually hired, they manipulate the records of employment so that they can claim extra funds. This is only possible if contractors keep the job cards under their custody so that fictitious employment details can be entered.

**Table 2: MGNREGS Outcomes (Participation, Work and Wages)**

Outcomes	Horticultural [N=30]	Irrigated [N=29]	Pastoral [N=28]	Border [N=17]	Non- irrigated [N=27]	Total [N=131]
<b>Do you possess the job card?</b>						
Yes (%)	73.3	69.0	57.1	64.7	66.7	66.4
No (%)	16.7	31.0	35.7	29.4	29.6	28.2
Respondent is not aware (%)	10.0	0.0	7.1	5.9	3.7	5.3
<b>Did you work in the sample MGNREGS work during 2011-12?</b>						
Yes (%)	83.3	34.5	67.9	76.5	63.0	64.1
No (%)	16.7	65.5	32.1	23.5	37.0	35.9
<b>Average days of work per household</b>						
Number of days	17	11	17	11	16	15
<b>Average wages (Rs. per day)</b>						
Male	128	151	154	133	129	137
Female	82	125	115	134	111	115
Total	119	138	137	134	121	128

Contractors can initiate MGNREGS works only when job card details, including bank account numbers of the workers, are entered into the official website, for which contractors need to have the workers' job cards so that they can enter the person-days of employment budgeted under the work. Since the guidelines under MGNREGS incorporate checks for crediting wages directly into the bank accounts of cardholders (Rajasekhar, Babu and Manjula 2012b) in order to prevent the entry of fictitious details, contractors have devised careful *modus operandi* to manipulate the system. Such manipulation occurs by obtaining details from the following four categories of job card holders. The **first category** consists of wage labourers and marginal farmers, majority of whom are women and/or those belonging to lower castes. Contractors employ them for a few days mainly to take their photographs to present as 'evidence' for official audit clearance. The **second category** includes wage labourers and marginal farmers who have a patron-client relationship with the contractors. The **third category** comprises those with kinship connections to the contractors. The **last category** includes those workers offering their job cards for previously agreed amount of money or bribe. Understandably, contractors have an incentive to show more person-days of work for the last three categories as they are unlikely to protest or complain to officials because they have either willingly or through some degree of coercion 'colluded' with the contractors.

For all the four categories of workers, their wages are credited into their bank accounts. Workers from the first category withdraw wages from the bank for their own requirements, while those from the other three categories withdraw wage amounts from the bank and pass the money on to

contractors in return for either Rs. 100 to Rs. 200 or some previously agreed upon amount to compensate for the wage income that is foregone.

Most of the respondents not possessing their job cards stated that the contractors held the job cards under their possession. About 5 per cent of the respondents, most of whom were women, were unaware of whether they possessed their job cards or not (Table 2) and stated that their male relatives may be aware. This suggests that many workers have very little knowledge of the rules governing the scheme and the importance of job cards for ensuring transparency in the functioning of the scheme. The purpose of job cards is to ensure that proper records are maintained of worker identity, the work undertaken, and the payment of wages. It is evident from our findings that GPs, whose responsibility it is to disseminate information about the workers' entitlements and ensure effective functioning of the scheme, are failing in the performance of their duties. Consequently, many workers are being deprived of the full income benefits of the scheme.

### ***Participation in MGNREGS***

Sample households were drawn from the official list of those having worked under MGNREGS and paid wages. Hence, all the 131 sample workers should have participated in the works implemented under the scheme. However, when we tracked the workers and asked them whether they had participated, as many as 35.9 per cent of them (Table 2) maintained that they did not! The highest percentage of work participation (83.3%) was in the Horticultural GP where, as noted above, the percentage of workers in possession of their own job cards was also the highest. The Irrigated GP, by contrast, had the lowest participation with only 34.5 per cent of workers claiming they had worked (Table 2).

Those workers who are officially listed but have not participated in the works undertaken through MGNREGS are referred to as 'Ghost Workers' (Berg, Rajasekhar and Manjula 2013). The presence of over one-third of 'ghost workers' in the sample suggests that the benefits of MGNREGS to that many workers are not realised but siphoned off by contractors and others who are able to manipulate the scheme to their own advantage. The presence of 'ghost workers' was high in the Irrigated GP which is attributed to the widespread use of labour displacing machinery by contractors.

Several factors influence the non-participation of workers in MGNREGS works. An important contributing factor is the 'collusion' between contractors and the sample workers<sup>7</sup>. Several sample respondents stated: *'We did not participate in MGNREGS work; but, withdrew money for the contractors in return to the payment of Rs. 100 to 200'*. One female labourer from the Non-irrigated GP also remarked that *'As most works in our village are undertaken through JCB [earth moving machines], many have not worked'*. This indicates that labour intensive jobs that are to be provided under MGNREGS are becoming automated because it enhances the profit margins of contractors.

'Collusion' between contractors and workers is not necessarily entered into willingly by the workers, but is conditioned by either structural factors, for example, where workers are bound to contractors by patron-client relations or where kinship and gender status are manipulated to employ 'ghost workers'. The use of coercion was underlined by a female agricultural labourer belonging to SC community: *'Nobody provides information on MGNREGS work in this village and machines are used for*

*work. Our job cards are used and money is released. If card is not given, they would torture us by making repeated visits to my house and keep asking for the job card'.*

Others were not even aware that their cards were being used. A female agricultural labourer claimed that neither her family members had worked under the scheme nor was her job card given to anybody, and she revealed that contractors implemented the works through JCBs. She remarked bitterly that *'Contractors call only a few workers whom they want and help them to benefit, nobody calls people like us!'* In another case, the age of an 80-year-old woman belonging to SC community in the Horticultural GP was shown as 27 years on the job card. She stated: *'When I am not able to even walk, then how can I work? Somebody has given wrong information to you'.* Clearly some workers had no control over how their job cards were being used and by what persons.

The contractors (or even GP members), however, cannot enter job card details on their own. They have to bring the information to the Data Entry Operator (DEO) who sits in the GP office and who is responsible for entering the details. However, DEO cannot enter the information if it is not cleared by GP officials like the Panchayat Development Officer (PDO)/Secretary/President, which suggests that either the contractor is a politically or economically powerful figure, or gives 'commission' to all the officials concerned. Thus, it is this collusion between contractors and GP officials that facilitates the entry of fictitious information on job cards and allows irregularities to occur in the payment of wages to 'ghost workers'.

Some of the female respondents we surveyed stated that they did not participate in the work, but their male relatives may be able to clarify who was employed. Their lack of knowledge is explained by inequality in gender status at the local level. A labourer from the Non-irrigated GP stated: *'Male members of the household only allow us to go to our agricultural field but not to anywhere else. We have neither worked in MGNREGS nor attended any meetings'.* This type of gender-based discrimination occurred even when the number of female elected members in the sample GPs was higher than what is required under the Constitution. Nevertheless, because gender inequalities at the household level are deeply embedded, as suggested by the above informant, women's autonomy is highly circumscribed by male dominance.

### ***Provision of work and wages***

Altogether 84 sample households participated in MGNREGS and obtained 1,273 days of work during 2011–12, which amounted to an average of 15 days per household as against the official maximum of 100 days (Table 2). The female workers obtained relatively less number of days of work. In the Irrigated and Border GPs the average number of days of work was only 11 days which was comparatively low. There are several reasons for the low employment provided in these two GPs, including the involvement of contractors who utilise capital intensive machinery. While the Irrigated and Border GPs ranked low in the number of days of work generated, it was comparatively higher in the other GPs, especially the Horticultural and Pastoral GPs which offered an average of 17 days per household. Though the average days of work in the Horticultural GP was comparatively higher, the wage rates for both males and females were lower compared to other GPs.

The following account of a female worker in the Irrigated GP underlines the parasitic involvement of contractors and the provision of only a few days of work for the sake of generating 'evidence' for statutory audit purpose. All the members in the household of a 63-year-old illiterate widow, owning 1.5 acres of dry land, were agricultural labourers. She stated that she worked for 15 days and was paid at the rate of Rs.100 per day, thus obtaining a total remuneration of Rs. 1,500 from the scheme. Further, she received Rs. 200 from a contractor for withdrawing large amounts twice from her bank account – once to withdraw Rs. 5,000 and the second time to withdraw Rs. 2,000. These substantial amounts withdrawn by her were payments into her account for fictitious hours of work that were entered by a contractor. She remarked that '*They have received so much money, and paid so little money to me. What kind of calculation is this! What kind of justice is this?*' The official records showed that she was paid for at least 70–80 days of employment but in actual fact Rs.7,000 was siphoned off by a contractor. Though she was aware of the misappropriation of funds by the contractor, she did not raise this issue in any public forum fearing repercussions if she voiced her complaint.

The example above of misappropriation of funds by a contractor was not an isolated case. We came across many similar cases in our fieldwork where contractors pressured wage labourers and small cultivators to cooperate with them in misappropriating funds allocated to MGNREGS. Such 'collusion' between contractors and workers is only possible because of the prevailing social inequality in rural Karnataka (as elsewhere in India) where wage labourers and small cultivators are in a dependent relationship to contractors and other local powerful actors, and fear they may face punitive action if they refuse to cooperate.

Our research also revealed inequality in wage rates between GPs and between males and females. MGNREGS wage during the survey year was Rs. 125 in Karnataka. The average wage paid to male and female workers was marginally above the stipulated wage rate. Interestingly, wages paid to male workers were above the MGNREGS wage rate in all the GPs. However, the average wages paid to female workers were lower than those obtained by men and were also lower than the stipulated wages under MGNREGS in three GPs, namely, Horticultural, Pastoral and Non-irrigated (Table 2). The average wage paid to female workers was just Rs. 82 in the Horticultural GP. Ironically, this GP was declared by the Central government as the best GP in terms of overall performance and a few women who availed '100 days of work' were taken to Delhi to be honoured by the central government. But most of the female respondents from this GP were unable to provide reasons for low wages paid to them. This suggests poor dissemination of information by GPs and inadequate mobilisation of female workers despite the fact that women elected members are proportionately higher than the required reservation for females to these local bodies.

Nearly 85 per cent of the sample workers stated that they received wages fully, while the rest stated that wages were either partially paid or not paid at all. The proportion of households reporting delayed or non-payment of wages was relatively higher in the Pastoral and Irrigated GPs which was attributed by GP officials to the non-clearance of the work bill by the state government, and reimbursement of only half of the expenditure incurred on MGNREGS works. Most of the workers stated that they received the payment through banks which is the preferred official mode of payment so as to allow for transparency of payment and prevent irregularities (corruption) in the payment of wages.

What is evident from our study is that, despite the electronic transfer of wages to the bank accounts of workers, irregularities in payment continue because of collusion between the contractors and GP officials, and reluctance on the part of labourers to complain or protest for fear of reprisal. The use of technology, therefore, does not fully address the prevalence of corruption which arises in part from the existing unequal social relations.

### ***Social audit***

There is provision for social audit of works under MGNREGS whereby ordinary workers can check and verify accounts and records relating to the implementation of the scheme. In order to facilitate verification by workers, it is necessary for them and other interested parties to have open access to accounts and records like muster rolls which provide details of worker attendance, the work completed, and payments made to workers. Most of the sample workers stated that attendance was taken at the worksite, but less than two-thirds reported that muster rolls were made available at worksite as required by the scheme's guidelines. The number of workers checking entries of their work was even less at about one-third. The remaining workers stated that they did not check the records as they were illiterate. Many workers were only bothered about completion of their work and then getting back to their homes, especially women workers who are required to perform domestic duties. Some workers also did not feel the need to check the muster rolls because the works were implemented and supervised by the GP members whom they trusted.

With regard to awareness of social audits under MGNREGS, only a small proportion of the workers knew that social audits were mandatory under the scheme or that they had been conducted. Surprisingly, none of the workers from the Pastoral and Border GPs were aware of social audits and only two households from the Irrigated GP were aware. Those households who stated that they were aware of social audits had attended the social audit meeting held in their village. Since it is the responsibility of GPs to promote awareness about social audits, it appears GPs are largely evading their duty to inform the beneficiaries of the scheme and ensure transparency in its implementation.

### **Variations in the Outcomes**

The discussion above reveals that the employment benefits of MGNREGS and the wages paid to workers were only modest and varied across GPs. In order to ascertain whether the benefits varied by caste, gender and occupational groups, we carried out a regression analysis. Six variables related to individual (gender, education) and household (caste, occupation, land-holding) characteristics and institutional interaction (family connections with GP elected members) were considered for this analysis. One of our objectives was to examine whether increased feminisation of agricultural wage labour market and the strong presence of women elected leaders has led to greater participation of female workers in the scheme. Where education is concerned, we were interested to find out whether illiterate workers received priority in the allocation of work as the objectives and design of MGNREGS favour disadvantaged groups. Other disadvantaged groups include SCs and STs, wage labourers and landless households. Finally, we expected a negative association between workers having family connections with GP elected members and their participation in MGNREGS, because politically it may prove costly if

it becomes public knowledge that elected leaders are helping their relatives in the allocation of work. A positive association between the two variables implies bias in the allocation of work and misappropriation of the scheme's benefits.

Columns 3 and 4 in Table 3 present the results on variations in the participation of sample respondents under MGNREGS. Results show that the participation of female and illiterate workers in MGNREGS is less. The marginal effects in column 4 show that the chances of participation in the scheme decline by 16 per cent if the worker is female and by 23 per cent if the worker is illiterate. Although the signs relating to caste, occupation and landholding are as per our expectation, the results are insignificant suggesting that there is no relationship. Interestingly, the probability of participation goes up by 17 per cent if the worker has family connections with the GP elected member. Manjula's study (2016) on poverty alleviation in Karnataka also reveals similar evidence.

Participation in MGNREGS works, however, does not mean that the workers having family connections have actually worked on the scheme. In-depth discussions with sample workers having such connections revealed that they concealed the truth about actually working on the scheme to protect their relatives, as the examples below amply demonstrate. A female respondent belonging to the dominant caste initially maintained that she had worked. When further details of the work such as the number of days and wages were asked for, she changed her narrative and stated that '*I have actually not worked. But I had withdrawn the amount from my bank account and given it to him (the contractor)*'. When we asked why she altered her previous statement, she stated that the contractor is her relative and that she feared trouble for her relative if the truth was revealed! Similarly, two other workers initially reported that they had worked in MGNREGS and received wages, but subsequently backtracked by stating that they had never worked in MGNREGS.

It is evident from the above examples that those workers having family links with GP elected members collude with contractors, provide them their job cards, do not actually work on MGNREGS worksites, and withdraw wages credited into their bank accounts for the purpose of handing over to the same contractors.

**Table 3: Factors Influencing Variations in MGNREGS Outcomes**

Variables	Expected sign	Participation in MGNREGS (1=Worked; 0=No) Probit		Number of days of work obtained under MGNREGS OLS	Average daily wages paid to MGNREGS workers OLS
		Co-efficient	Marginal Effect (dy/dx)	Co-efficient	Co-efficient
(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Gender [1=Female; 0=Otherwise]	+	-0.419* (0.253)	-0.155	-2.111 (2.348)	-30.271** (13.042)
Education [1=Illiterate; 0=Otherwise]	+	-0.599** (0.267)	-0.225	-4.571* (2.529)	-32.591** (13.909)
Caste [1=SC/ST; 0=Otherwise]	+	-0.048 (0.263)	-0.018	-4.083 (2.511)	-23.380* (13.861)
Occupation [1=Wage labour; 0=Otherwise]	+	0.189 (0.268)	0.070	7.112*** (2.495)	28.437** (13.779)
Total landholding	-	-0.023 (0.024)	-0.009	0.434* (0.234)	-1.158 (1.283)
Family/ kinship connection with elected GP members [1= Yes; 0=Otherwise]	-	0.488* (0.267)	0.172	3.741 (2.412)	23.109* (13.323)
Constant		0.649** (0.272)		7.613*** (2.438)	101.19*** (13.400)
Fixed effects		Yes		Yes	Yes
Pseudo R-squared		0.0786			
R-squared				0.2066	0.2306
Observations		131		131	130

**Note:** Standards errors are provided in the parentheses. \*\*\* p< 0.01, \*\* p<0.05, \* p<0.10.

We examine the issue of kinship further to ascertain to what extent it influenced the number of days of work obtained. Column 5 in Table 3 presents variations in the average number of days of work provided under the scheme. Sample workers having family connections with GP elected members received four more days of MGNREGS work as compared to those not having such a relationship. The results also show that illiterate workers are likely to be discriminated in the provision of work. Those dependent on wage labour are likely to receive seven more days of work as compared to the other occupational groups. The average number of days of work is positively associated with landholding thus implying that the substantial cultivators obtained slightly more number of days of work as compared to the landless. This lends further credence to our argument that those having family links with GP elected members have benefited from the programme.

The variations in the average wages paid to workers are shown in column 6 of Table 3. It revealed that a female worker received Rs. 30 less than what was paid to a male agricultural labourer; illiterate worker received Rs. 33 less than a literate worker; and, SC/ST worker received Rs. 23 less than what was paid to workers from the other caste groups. Those depending on wage labour received Rs. 28 more than what was paid to the other occupational groups. Results pertaining to landholding are insignificant suggesting that land ownership does not have much relationship with the wages paid. Expectedly, workers having family connections with GP elected members received Rs. 23 more than what was paid to those not having such connection.

The proportion of sample workers having family connections with GP members/leaders is provided in Table 4 according to which such links exist in all GPs we studied, but are more extensive in Horticultural GP and Irrigated GP compared to the other three GPs.

**Table 4: Proportion of Sample Households (%) Having Connections with GP Members**

	Horticultural	Irrigated	Pastoral	Border	Non-irrigated	Total (No.)
Family connection with GP Members (%)	31.0	23.8	11.9	16.7	16.7	42

## Conclusions

The findings of our study question some of the claimed benefits of decentralisation. Proponents of decentralisation argue that it leads to greater responsiveness on the part of bureaucrats, a better flow of information to ordinary citizens, and improved transparency and accountability in the functioning of government agencies. In our sample GPs we found that the local officials were not properly disseminating information on the workers' entitlements under MGNREGS. Similarly, only a minor proportion of the workers were aware that social audit is mandatory under the scheme or that audits had been conducted. It is the responsibility of GPs to promote awareness about social audits but they are largely evading their duty to inform the workers. Without social audits it is not possible to ensure transparency and obtain accountability from GP officials who implement the scheme. What is significant is that the task of awareness raising through the dissemination of relevant information on MGNREGS has received low priority not only in our sample GPs but throughout Karnataka (Pani and Chidambaram 2011). The lack of information among ordinary villagers is an important factor detracting from the effective implementation of MGNREGS.

The scheme has also fallen far short of the maximum days of employment available to job seekers, which is 100 days per household. In our sample GPs the average number of days of employment per household was just 15 days. In two GPs – Border and Irrigated – it was below average, at only 11 days. In both these GPs the level of illiteracy was also very high (see Appendix 1). High illiteracy may influence the workers' level of awareness of the scheme and their entitlements under it. The highest number of days of employment offered was 17 days in the Horticultural and Pastoral GPs; the level of illiteracy was the lowest in the Horticultural GP and just below average in the Pastoral GP. As our analysis (Table 3) reveals, the chances of gaining employment are reduced by 23 per cent where a worker is illiterate. While educational attainment and the level of illiteracy do play some role in

influencing the number of days of employment offered, our evidence reveals that family connections between the workers and GP members also exert an important influence. Family connections were most pronounced in the Horticultural GP (Table 4) where the number of days of work was also the highest but the same influence did not prevail in Pastoral GP which showed the lowest proportion of family connections. Our evidence above shows the probability of participation in MGNREGS goes up by 18 per cent if the worker has family connections with a GP elected member (Table 3).

The low level of employment offered through MGNREGS is of particular concern since 37 per cent of our sample households claimed that not all members of their households had work throughout the year. The proportion of those stating that they did not get sufficient work was higher in the Pastoral GP at 43 per cent. Of the households who stated they had insufficient work in their villages, 39 per cent migrated outside the district and the rest either sought work in the neighbouring villages or simply managed with whatever work was available in their own village. Needless to state, there is greater need for employment generation through MGNREGS considering households do not have sufficient work.

An important contribution of our study is in revealing the social and political context within which decentralisation operates. The nexus between the GP members, their relatives, the GP employees, and contractors is a crucial factor subverting the scheme. These social relationships combined with gender inequality discriminate against ordinary villagers, especially women and the illiterate. The domination of GP officials and contractors is exercised through a combination of patron-client relations and fear and coercion. Unless domination by powerful local actors is checked, transparency and accountability are not possible because those who are discriminated against will not be willing to voice their complaints for fear of reprisal.

We concur with Bardhan that just provision of funds under decentralisation is not sufficient to guarantee positive outcomes. Corrupt practices like the misappropriation of funds is possible because of social inequality where wage labourers and small cultivators are in a dependent relationship with the powerful and fear that they may face adverse consequences if they refuse to cooperate. What is required is concerted efforts at reducing inequality, including gender inequality, improving literacy levels, wider dissemination of information on entitlements, and conducting independent social audits. Unless these requirements are met, decentralisation will continue to fail the poor and vulnerable sections of the population.

The implementation of MGNREGS in GPs we studied could be substantially improved through closer monitoring of the scheme in order to ensure that the implementers of the scheme (GP members and other local officials) are following prescribed regulations and are accountable to the villagers. The fact that social audit is hardly being conducted implies that any form of accountability is excluded. To attain accountability, it is necessary to introduce either independent auditors who are not under the control of local bureaucrats or facilitate genuine social audits where the villagers jointly monitor and audit the scheme with external actors from civil society organisations (CSOs). Joint monitoring would require improving the literacy levels of the villagers and imparting basic auditing skills to the beneficiaries of the scheme. These tasks could also be devolved to CSOs. It is through such measures that accountability can be strengthened and the implementation of MGNREGS made more effective, so

that more days of employment are generated for those in need and there is no misappropriation of funds by contractors, GP officials, and other powerful actors.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> This taluk and district were included in the initial phase of the implementation of MGNREGS.
- <sup>2</sup> We have named GPs according to their primary agricultural feature and location in order to maintain confidentiality and protect the identity of our informants.
- <sup>3</sup> While all the members elected to the Irrigated, Pastoral and Non-irrigated GPs were first timers, a few from the Horticultural (8.7%) and Border (6.2%) GPs had prior experience.
- <sup>4</sup> Reservation for women was increased to 50 per cent in 2015.
- <sup>5</sup> Usually, wage labourers do not contest because of the heavy expenditure required to win the election.
- <sup>6</sup> The first place was shared equally by the Border GP and Non-irrigated GP where the possession of job cards was also relatively high (see Table 1).
- <sup>7</sup> Other factors are also highlighted in the literature for non-participation of workers in MGNREGS. For details, see Manjula (2016).

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**Appendix 1: Description of Sample Workers (respondents) (%) and their Households**

	Horticultural [N=30]	Irrigated [N=29]	Pastoral [N=28]	Border [N=17]	Non- irrigated [N=27]	Total [N=131]
<b>Distribution of sample workers by their gender</b>						
Male	66.67	48.28	57.14	52.94	48.15	54.96
Female	33.33	51.72	42.86	47.06	51.85	45.04
<b>Distribution of sample workers by their age groups</b>						
<=25	13.33	0.00	17.86	11.76	7.41	9.92
26-35	20.00	27.59	35.71	11.76	37.04	27.48
36-45	30.00	27.59	14.29	35.29	22.22	25.19
46-60	30.00	31.03	28.57	41.18	22.22	29.77
>60	6.67	13.79	3.57	0.00	11.11	7.63
<b>Distribution of sample workers by their education</b>						
Illiterate	23.33	41.38	35.71	58.82	29.63	35.88
Primary school (1-7)	30.00	24.14	53.57	11.76	33.33	32.06
High school (8-10)	26.67	20.69	7.14	11.76	29.63	19.85
Pre-university	6.67	10.34	3.57	17.65	7.41	8.40
Degree	13.33	3.45	0.00	0.00	0.00	3.82
<b>Distribution of sample workers by their caste</b>						
Scheduled caste	60.00	20.69	35.71	52.94	0.00	32.82
Scheduled tribe	3.33	6.90	0.00	5.88	14.81	6.11
Minorities	6.67	3.45	28.57	0.00	0.00	8.40
Other backward caste	10.00	20.69	21.43	29.41	14.81	18.32
Other backward caste (Vokkaliga & Lingayath)	20.00	48.28	14.29	11.76	70.37	34.35
<b>Distribution of sample workers by their occupation</b>						
Wage labourer in agriculture	40.00	65.52	39.29	47.06	33.33	45.04
Wage labourer in non- agriculture	3.33	0.00	14.29	0.00	3.70	4.58
Self-employed in agriculture and allied activities	20.00	20.69	17.86	35.29	51.85	28.24
Self-employed in small manufacturing/ hotel/ transport/ personal services	6.67	3.45	7.14	0.00	3.70	4.58
Salaried employee	16.67	3.45	7.14	5.88	0.00	6.87
Housewife/ household work at home	10.00	3.45	10.71	11.76	3.70	7.63
Cannot work due to disability/ ill-health/ old age	3.33	3.45	3.57	0.00	3.70	3.05
<b>Distribution of sample households (%) by principal occupation</b>						
Wage labour in agriculture	43.33	48.28	39.29	58.82	29.63	42.75
Wage labour in non- agriculture	6.67	0.00	7.14	5.88	3.70	4.58
Self-employed in small trade/ business	3.33	6.90	7.14	0.00	3.70	4.58
Cultivator	26.67	37.93	39.29	35.29	55.56	38.93
Salaried employee	20.00	6.90	7.14	0.00	7.41	9.16

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