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From National Promise to Local Power

Justifying the Panchayat Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme

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Abstract

This article argues for the creation of a *Mahatma Gandhi Panchayat Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MGPREGS)* as a logical extension of India's ongoing commitment to decentralized development and rural livelihood security. While the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MGNREGS) has transformed rural India through wage security, asset creation, and social protection, its large-scale administrative structure often limits responsiveness to hyperlocal needs. MGPREGS is proposed as a complementary, Panchayat-driven mechanism that empowers Gram Panchayats to plan and execute small but critical works tailored to local priorities. By reducing bureaucratic delays, enhancing transparency, and enabling rapid response to village-level challenges, the scheme strengthens grassroots democracy as envisioned in the 73rd Constitutional Amendment. It also boosts rural incomes, promotes women's participation, and fosters community ownership of development. Overall, MGPREGS is presented as a timely, efficient, and socially inclusive innovation that can significantly enhance India's rural development architecture.

Since its launch in 2005, the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MGNREGS) has stood as one of the world's largest rights-based social protection programmes, emerging from India's long history of rural employment initiatives and the constitutional commitment to social justice. Conceived as a legal guarantee of 100 days of wage employment to every rural household, the scheme has transformed rural livelihoods by reducing distress migration, improving income security, and generating durable community assets such as water conservation structures, land development works, and rural connectivity. Over the years, experiences from diverse regions have demonstrated both the immense strengths of MGNREGS—such as its inclusivity, gender-sensitive design, and role as a counter-cyclical safety net—and its practical limitations, especially in addressing highly localized needs that vary widely across India's six lakh villages. While MGNREGS operates effectively at the national and district levels, the complexity of approvals, technical sanctions, and administrative layering often leads to delays and restricts Panchayats from executing micro-level works that directly impact daily rural life. These realities underscore the need for a complementary, Panchayat-driven mechanism that deepens decentralization and makes rural development more responsive and context-specific. It is in this backdrop that the idea of a Mahatma Gandhi Panchayat Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MGPREGS) emerges—a natural evolution aimed at empowering Gram Panchayats, strengthening grassroots democracy, and ensuring that the transformative promise of guaranteed employment reaches the last mile with greater speed, flexibility, and sensitivity to hyperlocal priorities.

MGPREGS can be powerfully justified as a natural evolution and deepening of India's commitment to decentralized development, rural livelihood security, and participatory governance. While the MGNREGS has been transformative, it often operates at a scale and administrative level that cannot fully address the micro-level realities. Rural communities are not homogenous; each panchayat faces its own mix of challenges such as soil erosion, water scarcity, poorly maintained village roads, sanitation problems, or lack of small infrastructure

that supports daily life. These needs are highly localized, immediate, and often too small to fit into larger district-level operational frameworks. A panchayat-specific employment guarantee scheme directly empowers Gram Panchayats to identify, prioritize, and execute works that matter most to their residents, making development more meaningful and context-sensitive.

A key strength of MGPREGS lies in its strong alignment with India's constitutional vision of grassroots democracy. The 73rd Amendment was designed to transfer power, planning authority, and financial responsibility to rural local governments, enabling them to function as true institutions of self-governance. However, in practice, Panchayats often remain dependent on higher administrative tiers for approvals, funds, and technical support. MGPREGS fills this structural gap by placing decision-making authority directly in the hands of the Gram Panchayat. This change not only enhances the Panchayat's administrative capacity but also boosts community confidence in local governance. It ensures quicker sanctioning of works, faster resolution of village-level problems, and a reduction in bureaucratic delays that often slow down MGNREGS work cycles.

Importantly, MGPREGS is not meant to replace MGNREGS but to complement it by covering areas where the national programme faces limitations. Many essential 'village- works'—such as repairing internal streets, cleaning drainage systems, maintaining school buildings or anganwadis, strengthening small village ponds, or improving pathways—require modest resources but have a major impact on daily life. These activities may not always qualify under MGNREGS guidelines, or they may be delayed due to the need for technical approvals at the block or district level. By enabling Panchayats to initiate such works independently, MGPREGS fills a crucial gap, ensuring that no essential local need remains unattended. It also ensures continuity of employment during times when MGNREGS slows down due to monsoons, lack of sanctioned works, year-end fund shortages, or administrative bottlenecks. This improves livelihood security and ensures that rural workers have predictable and timely wage opportunities throughout the year.

From an economic standpoint, MGPREGS strengthens the rural economy in multiple ways. Providing work close to home reduces distress migration to cities, especially during agricultural lean seasons. Stable local employment stabilizes household incomes, allowing families to invest in education, health, agriculture, and small enterprises. Moreover, wages earned under the scheme circulate within the village economy, supporting local shops, vendors, and service providers. The assets created under Panchayat-led planning—such as water harvesting structures, improved drainage channels, plantation drives, soil conservation measures, and community infrastructure—enhance productivity, reduce environmental vulnerabilities, and create long-term economic benefits. These works are typically low-cost but high impact, making every rupee spent more efficient and sustainable.

Another major advantage of a Panchayat-level scheme is the ease of monitoring, auditing, and ensuring transparency. Smaller geographic areas with fewer works make it possible for villagers to directly observe progress and hold local authorities accountable. Social audits become more meaningful, as the community is directly aware of the quality and relevance of the work being done. By reducing the number of layers between the fund sanctioning authority and the worksite, opportunities for leakage, corruption, and manipulation reduce drastically. Public display of works, digital job card management, and Gram Sabha oversight create a transparent ecosystem where beneficiaries feel ownership of the development process.

The social impact of MGPREGS is equally significant. By offering work within the Panchayat, it becomes easier for women—who often face mobility restrictions—to participate. Senior citizens, persons with disabilities, and marginalized groups also benefit from accessible local employment. The sense of community ownership increases as residents collectively decide on the priorities during Gram Sabha meetings, monitor progress, and maintain completed assets. The scheme helps build a stronger culture of participatory development, where villagers feel directly responsible for shaping their local environment. Furthermore, Panchayat-level autonomy encourages innovation. Local bodies can experiment with solutions such as waste management systems, community composting, solar street lighting installation, food forests, local tourism development, or climate-resilient agriculture projects that may not fit neatly into national guidelines but can significantly improve rural life.

Finally, MGPREGS enhances the village's resilience to seasonal and sudden challenges. Panchayats can rapidly deploy workers for flood relief, drought mitigation, clearing blocked roads, crop residue management, or repairing damaged public infrastructure. This ability to respond immediately—without waiting for district-level approvals—creates a more flexible, timely, and crisis-ready rural development framework. In essence, MGPREGS becomes not just an employment guarantee scheme, but a comprehensive tool for grassroots development, community empowerment, and local resilience-building.

In conclusion, a Mahatma Gandhi Panchayat Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme stands as a logical, necessary, and forward-looking step in India's rural development journey. It deepens decentralization, ensures year-round employment, addresses hyperlocal needs, strengthens Panchayats, promotes transparency, boosts the rural economy, and empowers communities to take charge of their own development. By uniting Gandhian principles with modern governance needs, MGPREGS can significantly enhance the effectiveness, responsiveness, and inclusiveness of India's rural development architecture.