



# Do Reserved Seats Deliver? Dalit Ward Members and MGNREGA in Bihar

February 2026



## 1. Executive Summary

Gram Panchayats (GP) in Bihar are composed of a directly elected “Mukhiya” and directly elected councillors called “Ward Members” (WMs). These Ward Members are the frontline representatives of the state in citizens’ lives: They voice local preferences in Panchayat meetings, implement schemes, and ensure accountability at the village level. Typically, each Panchayat has about 2500 households (HHs), and each WM represents about 225 HHs.

In this policy brief, we summarise the results of a recent paper by George, Gupta, and Sharan (2025) studying the impact of reservation for Dalit WM on MGNREGA (Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act) implementation at the GP level. Using causal econometric techniques, we find that having an additional Dalit (SC) WM in a GP substantially improves MGNREGA performance. Between the years 2016 to 2020, annual person-days of employment rose by around 15%, with benefits accruing to both SC HHs (27% increase) and non-SC HHs (15% increase).

In short, adding an SC representative improves public service delivery for all citizens in the GP, rather than simply re-allocating services between different sections. We now explain the data and methods used and present some interesting patterns behind the central result.

## 2. Data and Methods

To study the effect of having one more SC WM, we use a rule followed by the State Election Commission. Under this rule, the number of seats reserved for SC in a GP depends mainly on its population. When population crosses a fixed threshold, the GP gets one additional SC-reserved ward.

The core idea we use for our econometric analysis is simple. We compare GPs whose population is just above this threshold with those whose population is just below it. GPs on either side of the cutoff are almost identical in terms of income levels, caste composition, and other social and economic features. The only meaningful difference between them is that one group has one extra SC WM, while the other does not. Because this difference comes purely from the population rule and not from local choices or politics, we can treat it as accidental. Therefore, any difference we observe in MGNREGA

works between these two types of GPs can be attributed to the presence of the additional Dalit ward member, and not to other factors.

Combining the State Election Commission's data on wards with population statistics from the 1991 Census, we are able to map which wards got additional reservations for SC WMs. The outcome variables we use are constructed from the official MGNREGA Management Information System (MIS) portal and innovative use of micro-data from the Socio-economic and Caste Census (SECC 2011). These details are provided in the Appendix.

### 3. Key Results

- Our headline result is that **total MGNREGA work in GPs with additional SC WM increases by about 2,042 person-days per year** (around 15% relative to the median figure of 13,292 workdays in comparison GPs).
- **This effect is driven both by SC and Non-SC HHs:** For SC HHs, workdays rise by about 446 per year, or ~27% relative to comparison GPs. For non-SCs, workdays rise by about 1,647 per year, or ~15% relative to comparison GPs.
- Interestingly, **we find that this improvement in MGNREGA implementation is larger in GPs which have at least 3 SC WMs.** This indicates that there is “strength in numbers” and **a critical mass of SC representation is necessary** to drive bargaining power in the Panchayat.
- SC workdays increase under both SC and non-SC Mukhiyas. However, **the increase is much larger when the Mukhiya is also from the SC community.**
- We are also able to study dynamics over time: **The increase in workdays peaks in the penultimate year of the WMs' tenure (2019-20).** This indicates that WMs “learn-by-doing” and improve implementation with time. It could also indicate rising electoral incentives.
- Within Jatis, which class of citizens benefit? **We find that workdays improve for the poorest SC jatis and the relatively better-off non-SC jatis.** One explanation is the need for strategic coalition building on the part of SC ward members. Previous studies suggest that MGNREGA is captured by local elites and to expand employment, SC leaders may need to work with village elites to ensure scheme implementation.
- Using a similar methodology, we also deduce that simply having a *larger council* i.e., an additional (not necessarily SC) ward member does not improve MGNREGA workdays.

## 4. Policy Implications

1. **Think of local governance as the whole council, not just the Mukhiya:** WMs a central role in mobilising workers, opening worksites, and monitoring schemes like MGNREGA. Government support and reviews should therefore focus on the full council, not only the Mukhiya.
2. **Provide extra support to SC WMs when numbers are very small:** When there is only one or two SC WMs in a council, they often lack the strength to push work through. Targeted training and peer support can help overcome this isolation.
3. **Step in more actively when the Mukhiya is not SC:** Coordination problems are greater in such councils. Closer administrative support and joint meetings can help SC WMs get work implemented.
4. **Front-load support early in the term:** SC WMs need the most handholding in their first years, when they are still learning how schemes work. Early training and peer learning can prevent delays later.

## A1. Appendix

The main outcome variable is the total person-days of MGNREGA employment generated per year in a GP between the years 2016 to 2020. To understand distributional effects, we also use data on person-days generated for SC HHs and non-SC HHs. These are collated from reports for the state of Bihar available on the official MIS portal.

We also study which classes of the wealth distribution (within Jatis) saw most improvements. For this, we construct a novel dataset linking 10 million MGNREGA job cards from Bihar to their Jati. Using the SECC, we then generate a normalised poverty score for each Jati (proxied by the HH head's surname) within a GP, based on six HH assets: land ownership, roof type, wall type, number of rooms, phone ownership, and vehicle ownership. We thus have, for any Jati surname, the asset wealth of that surname in a particular GP. This procedure successfully links 67% of all job card holders in our data.