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India's Tech Obsession May Leave Millions of Workers Without Pay

The Modi government is forcing low-paid workers to use a glitchy new digital registration system that fails in places with weak internet.

Vaishali Kanal's wages don't depend on how much she works. They depend on whether there is internet in her village or not. Kanal, 25, usually leaves her toddler at home in Palatpada, a remote village in western India, early in the morning, and goes to work on a nearby building site. But when we met on a scorching May afternoon, she was cradling her daughter in her arms. "If she is awake or crying, I take her with me," she says. "It is tough to do backbreaking labor and take care of the toddler at the same time."

Often she puts in a whole day of grueling labor but doesn't get paid for it, due to a glitch in a government system that was supposed to help some of the country's most marginalized people—like Kanal, a tribal farmer from Maharashtra's Palghar district. Kanal is a worker under the Indian government's Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act, 2005, or MGNREGA, which gives rural workers a guaranteed income for working on public infrastructure project, such as roads, wells and dams. The aim of the scheme was to give people in rural areas employment opportunities close to home, so they wouldn't have to move to cities to find work. With 266.3 million registered workers and 144.3 million active ones, it is probably the largest employment scheme in the world.

Until last year, workers' attendance at their jobs was often marked on a physical muster roll by a village employment guarantee assistant or worksite supervisor. However, in January this year, the national government made it mandatory to log the attendance of workers on an app, the National Mobile Monitoring System (NMMS). The official on site now has to upload pictures of workers to the system to prove their attendance. But the app doesn't work in remote areas with weak or infrequent internet connections. Critics of the policy say the lack of connectivity was an easily foreseeable problem, and that workers from marginalized groups are—not for the first time—being left behind in the government's obsession with rolling out glossy, but poorly thought-through technologies.

"The government's focus is not on workers, but on technology, regardless of whether it helps workers," says Brian Lobo, an activist working in Palghar.

The Ministry of Rural Development, which oversees the MGNREGA scheme, did not respond to a request for comment.

Workers using the NMMS have to have their photos taken twice—once when they start work, and once when the day is over. "If the internet is sluggish, the photos don't get uploaded," said Jagadish Bhujade, a guarantee assistant in the block of Vikramgad where Kanal's village is located. "In our block, it is always a problem."

Kanal says that there have been days she's rushed to work, only to find that the internet is down and there's no way to log in. "That means I have to walk back all the way to my home," she says. "Some of the worksites are quite far, and I can't afford to take the bus each time."

But this is still better than when the internet works at the start of the day but doesn't at the end. "That means there is no proof we worked the whole day and we risk losing our wages," Kanal says. "It is insulting."

Often, she says, she works for 15 days in a month but logs only seven or eight days in the system, because the internet is down so frequently in her village. "I have lost wages because of it," she says. "This is our only source of income. We can't afford to lose money." Her husband now often goes to the nearby cities of Thane or Vasai to look for work, she adds.

This is a common problem, according to Vinod Thackre, another assistant in the same block of Vikramgad. Since the introduction of the app, 300 workers from his village have dropped out, he says. "There were 500 that had enrolled under MNREGA when 2023 began. Now there are just 200. Many of them now migrate to cities to find work."

The government claims that digitizing the attendance records helps curb corruption in the system. However, critics say the system doesn't add much in the way of accountability. "There are innumerable examples where photos of crowds, boats, books are submitted and even accepted," says Nikhil Dey, founding member of the Mazdoor Kisan Shakti Sangathan (MKSS), the

organization for the power of laborers and farmers. "That means you are not even looking at them."

Osama Manzar, founder of the Digital Empowerment Foundation, an NGO, says that the rollout of NMMS is symptomatic of the government's belief in creating digital tools as an end in itself, without thinking about the people who will actually have to live with the consequences.

"The way our bureaucrats and policymakers approach technology, they love to show that we are technology-friendly and adopting new technology," he says. "That is the attitude. We have to prove that we are technologically advanced."

In 2015, Modi launched Digital India, a campaign launched to ensure that government services are made available to citizens electronically. Since then, Manzar believes, the administration has been pushing to make the campaign a visible success.

"It helps the government say we have digitally delivered these services to millions of people," he says. "It makes for a great story internationally." But although the sheer size of India's population means the absolute number of people reached by these digital services looks impressive, "the government's PR machinery won't talk about how many people were excluded in the process."

Raman Jit Singh Chima, Asia policy director at Access Now, a digital rights group, says that the private sector has also driven some of the momentum. "There has been a lot of private sector influence to drive the creation of tools," he says. "People develop tools in order to justify the usage of other existing digital infrastructure, rather than seeing what people actually want."

Chima says that even though there have often been problems with the rollouts of these digital services, lessons are rarely learned, because no one is held accountable for failures.

"When there are no consequences, you are incentivizing people to keep doing it," he says. "They never seem to be conducting exercises or properly structured

reviews of the new tool or app, learning lessons on how it can be made better for the future."

Whatever the motivation was for rolling out NMMS, the failures on the ground have led to considerable anger. In February this year, thousands of MGNREGA workers from across the country began a 100-day protest in India's capital city of New Delhi, demanding the app be scrapped.

Sanjay Sahni, an activist and former MGNREGA worker based in east India's Bihar state, who stood for the local assembly in elections on a platform of tackling the issues in the program, says the state is deliberately undermining efforts to improve lives for marginalized people. "The government doesn't want to empower the laborers," he says. "Because if that happened, they would start questioning the government."

The MGNREGA program wasn't broken enough to warrant such a disastrous fix, Sahni says. "Even in its current dilapidated form, hundreds of thousands of poor people are benefiting from it. Imagine what could happen if it was done right."

The problems caused by the rollout of the NMMS app have been compounded by another technological solution that has been imposed on workers in the MGNREGA program. At the end of January, the government declared that MGNREGA workers had to be paid through the Aadhaar Based Payments System (ABPS), which is built on top of the government's controversial Aadhaar biometric identification system.

Moving to ABPS adds more complexity for workers and risks cutting many of them off. To receive payments via the system, workers have to have a job card that's linked to their Aadhaar ID card, and to have a bank account connected to the National Payments Corporation of India's database. Workers have to meet strict "know your customer" requirements and link their biometric information to the system. Any inconsistencies in the documentation that's submitted can lead to workers being unable to access their wages.

When it announced the new policy in January, the government gave workers just two days' notice to register for ABPS. After an outcry, they shifted the deadline to June 30. However, by the end of May, only 53 percent of the workers were "eligible for ABPS"—in other words, had successfully completed the registration process—according to the MGNREGA website. In absolute numbers, that means more than 120 million workers could lose access to payments.

Workers have long complained that their wages were delayed under the old system, and the government has said that moving to ABPS is supposed to speed up payments. However, workers groups say the new system is no faster.

But Dey, the labor leader, says he doesn't believe the government's intentions in rolling out the NMSS app, or insisting on the ABPS, were based on a desire to help workers—otherwise they'd have worked harder to make sure people would be able to access the systems. "When you throw it out there among people who can't use it, it means the intention is not there," he says.

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