

APP-BASED ATTENDANCE HITS RURAL WORKERS

Relevant for: Developmental Issues | Topic: E-governance - applications, models, successes, limitations, and potential incl. Aadhaar & Digital power

The app users complain that they face technical glitches and there is minimal support available. File Photo KIRAN BAKALE

The Union government has made capturing of attendance through its app, National Mobile Monitoring System, compulsory at worksites where 20 or more workers are employed under the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MGNREGS). The decision comes despite many problems, including patchy Internet connectivity in rural areas and little or no technical support.

The Rural Development Ministry had started the exercise on a pilot basis on May 21 last year. Initially, the utilisation of application was to be voluntary, but from May 16 this year, it has been made mandatory.

The Ministry's directive claims that the app, which requires two time-stamped and geotagged photographs of the workers in a day, encourages transparency and increases citizen oversight.

Women employees, especially the supervisors or "work mates", have faced the biggest setback from the move.

Women drop out

In a majority of cases, the employees' families are averse to giving phones to women, especially smartphones. Hence, many women have dropped out.

"We had mobilised close to 15,000 women to work at these sites but the mandatory capturing of attendance through the app has led to their exclusion from the process. A majority of them do not have phones and they have to depend on their husbands or other men in their families. So essentially, we are on the reverse gear," Nikhil Shenoy, associated with the Rajasthan Asangathit Mazdoor Union, said.

In the past one year, the Union government has resolved some critical issues. Under the MGNREG Act, the workers can do time-bound or task-based work. The initial guidelines required uploading of geotagged and time-stamped photographs of the workers around 11 a.m. and another one after 2 p.m.

For task-based work, the workers had to stay back after 2 p.m. even if they had completed their work in order to take the photograph to be eligible for the wages. This requirement has now been suitably amended.

Technical glitches

There are other pitfalls that remain, primarily relating to technical glitches and minimal technical support. Additional Chief Secretary of Rural Development L.K. Atheeque explained the issue.

"The app certainly brings transparency and that is appreciated. However, the speed of the application and the strength of the server create troubles. Today, from Belgaum, we received complaints that the workers were not able to upload the attendance which makes them anxious

because the wages are directly connected to attendance,” he said.

The supervisors of the worksites are expected to have a smartphone with Internet connection. According to officials from various States, there have been complaints from the mates that they are not given added incentives to pay for the smartphones or Internet connections.

There is minimal technical support. “Nobody at the village or even at the block level has any clear solution to offer, in case the app doesn’t work or fails to upload a photograph. When we ask for help, the only thing they tell us to delete and reload the app,” Karthik who works in the Ajmer-Bhilwara area with the MNREGA workers said.

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