



NREGA Sangharsh Morcha

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Open letter of NREGA Sangharsh Morcha to the Ministry of Rural Development

Dear Sir/Madam,

NREGA Sangharsh Morcha is a coalition of organisations working with rural labourers, including NREGA workers, around the country. On 8 February 2023, the Ministry of Rural Development released a detailed [statement](#) on NREGA in response to queries from Indiaspend. From this statement, it appears that the Ministry is in denial of the ground realities of NREGA. The following claims are particularly misleading:

1. There is no unmet demand for NREGA work. (“During current FY 2022-23, a total of 99.81% rural households have been offered wage employment against their demand for work.”)
2. This year’s Budget allocation of Rs 60,000 crore for NREGA is adequate since supplementary funds are usually provided later in the year to meet the demand for work.
3. Wages are paid on time. (“As on 7.2.2023 payments generated within 15 days is 95.97%.”)
4. The NMMS digital-attendance App is working smoothly, “technical issues are being resolved on real time basis” and “no major issue has been reported in its implementation”.

We respond to this point by point:

1. What passes for “work demand” in NREGA’s Management and Information System (MIS) can by no means be interpreted as an indicator of the full demand for work. It is only a record of formal requests that may or may not have been submitted by workers themselves. More often, these digital requests are just a formality fulfilled by the implementing agency or middlemen. Independent surveys show that the real demand for work is much larger (see e.g. [Azim Premji University 2022](#)). Many households would like more NREGA work but they don’t know how to apply, and may not even be aware that they have a right to apply. In practice, employment generation depends more on the initiative of state governments and local authorities than on formal work applications. These initiatives are frustrated when funds are lacking.
2. The Ministry is deceiving the public by claiming that the Budget allocation is adequate and will be supplemented in good time to meet the demand for work. It knows very well that the supplementary allocation proves inadequate every year and leads to wage arrears being carried over to the next financial year (more than Rs 10,000 crore this year). Meanwhile wage payments are delayed and NREGA works are often held up. If

only to break this vicious circle of under-allocation and mounting arrears (let alone expand employment), it was important to make a much higher Budget allocation this year.

3. The claim that wages are paid on time is poetry. The Ministry is careful to mention that payments are only “generated” within 15 days in most cases, but it knows very well that wage payments are routinely delayed *after* the generation of payment orders. Many recent studies show that payment delays remain the norm rather than exception. For instance, a [careful analysis](#) of 18 lakh wage transactions in the first half of 2021 revealed that the Centre delayed payment of 44% of the wages beyond 15 days (see also [APU 2022](#)). It gets worse in the second half of each year, when funds run out.
4. We strongly dispute the claim that the NMMS digital-attendance App works smoothly. Wherever we have a presence (Bihar, Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand, Karnataka, Rajasthan, Uttar Pradesh, West Bengal and other states), we observe that the mandatory imposition of this App has caused havoc. In many areas, there have been demonstrations of NREGA workers against it. We have also circulated many testimonies of NMMS-related problems on social media (e.g. [here](#), [here](#) and [here](#)). The claim that “no major issue has been reported in its implementation” is simply false and contradicts the Ministry’s own admission that damage-control modifications have been made in response to requests from state governments. Many NREGA workers today work *without being paid* because of technical problems related to the NMMS App – this is a gross violation of their inalienable right to payment within 15 days.

We are aware that a provision has very recently been introduced for offline uploading of NMMS attendance and photographs. In our experience, this facility is still not operational in many areas, when it is known at all to worksite supervisors. But in any case, this is just another instance where the imposition of an immature and unreliable wage payment system leads to a long phase of damage-control after so-called “teething problems” emerge, only to be followed by another problematic innovation. This constant rejigging of payment systems must stop. It is the Ministry’s responsibility to put in place a reliable and timely payment system once and for all.

The Ministry’s statement suggests that the Ministry is unable or unwilling to see the ground realities. We invite senior officials of the Ministry to visit some of the areas where we work and see the situation for themselves without a priori. Meanwhile, we have launched an indefinite protest at Jantar Mantar from today, to demand the withdrawal of the NMMS App and a lasting solution to the persistent problem of delayed and unreliable NREGA wage payments.

[Attached](#) is the charter of demands from NREGA Sangharsh Morcha.

Yours sincerely,

NREGA SANGHARSH MORCHA