Resistance

More than 850 Anganwadi workers have been terminated since a year just because of partaking in the indefinite strike called by Delhi State Anganwadi Workers and Helpers Union on 31st January last year to demand regularization and increased wages. The case against GNCTD and WCD for carrying out illegal termination is sub-judice in Delhi High Court. The treatment meted out to Anganwadi workers by state administration is a manifestation of the paradox that exists within the ‘progressive’ Aam Aadmi Party Government in Delhi, which has occupied power positions as a challenger to traditional politics.

Anganwadis in Delhi, who work under Integrated Child Development Services Scheme, a flagship program under the government of India, have been resisting meager wages and illegal termination for over 14 months now. Anganwadis cater to physical, social, ‘psychological’ needs of children in the age group of 0-6, pregnant women and lactating mothers. Despite performing an impertinent duty, looking after cumulative growth of mothers and children under the Women and Child Department of India, their working conditions remain dire. They are not recognised as workers and are therefore bereft of all government benefits, forced to work at minimal ‘honorarium’, not even a proper wage.

Their case of illegal en mass termination has been taken up by Supreme Court lawyer Colin Gonsalves. Kavalpreet Kaur, another lawyer in Colin’s team, talked to me about the nonchalant attitude of the judiciary and administration towards labor issues. It is reflected enough in their market friendly policies that thrive on exploitation of labor, and suppression of organized voices demanding rights.

One specific policy roll-out that complicates and exploits workers further is ‘Mandatory Digitisation’ with no proper infrastructure or guidance for it in place. In January 2021, the Union government made implementation of Poshan Tracker-an app built by the Ministry of Women and Child Development, Govt of India using centralized data architecture-mandatory for all States and UTs, without ever once laying out a plan of implementation in the face of minimal access and awareness. The Government in its notification said,

“Poshan Tracker management application will provide a 360-degree view of the activities of the Anganwadi Centre (AWC), service deliveries of Anganwadi Workers (AWWs) and complete beneficiary management for pregnant women, lactating mothers and children. The system enables real-time monitoring and tracking of all AWCs, AWWs and beneficiaries on defined indicators. It also ensures efficient audit of the delivery system, by documenting real time attendance of beneficiaries, duty bearers and actual receipt of Supplementary Nutrition through QR Code/OTP etc. Such a robust digital technology platform and management information system will help the nutrition mission to scale efficiently, thereby generating significant positive impact and documentation thereof”
To understand how labor is being technologically mediated, I had many conversations with Anganwadi workers in and around Delhi. Astonishing facts came forth that lay direct fingers at the patriarchal government benefiting from cheap labor of women folk. To put it directly, digitized record keeping has only doubled women’s working hours, without any raise in pay. Almost all the workers that I interacted with complained about the work turning into a full day affair, as on top of register keeping, they now have to feed the data in the portals as well. They said the Anganwadi centers lack basic infrastructure - network, data, etc. - for extensive digital tasks of survey entries and record keeping, forcing the workers to enter data in the portal at their homes, most times with the help of their children. This has led to workers giving extra time to their work, always having to be busy feeding and figuring the smartphone.

Calls of supervisors come at obscure hours, sometimes as late as 10 in the night to demand some work that can now be carried out from far away. Neither is any money for data provided, nor any remuneration in case the phone stops working. Moreover there are complaints that the server works only at night and falls completely flat when workers try to operate it at their Centers.

Attendance, new registration of beneficiary, data entry, support mechanisms have all turned digital. Government is expecting beneficiaries that don’t have food to have a phone if they wish to register and become a beneficiary. In cosmopolitan centers like Delhi, digital access is not too huge an issue. But if we consider the rest of India where Anganwadis function at panchayat level, we can comprehend how such new systems without proper implementation can only exacerbate the inbuilt inequality by implementing technology that is so over-board that rather than helping the workers, it only creates complications.

Words of a UN Report of 2019 rings true, “digital welfare state is underpinned by startling assumption that the individual is not a right’s holder but an applicant.”

Access

In a country where almost ninety percent of the population earns less than 15000 a month, owning and using a smartphone is still a privilege for many. Access to the digital world comes at a price: a smartphone, data, literacy, etc. If digital literacy is added to the consideration, the inhibition becomes stark. According to the CMIE report, only 31 percent of the rural population uses the Internet compared to 67 percent of their urban counterparts. A new report by Oxfam gives us gendered data: only 31 per cent women owned phones in 2021. Even when they do own one, they are 33 percent less likely to use mobile Internet as compared to men, as per Mobile Gender Gap report by GSMA.
In times when operations have been shifting dramatically into the digital sphere in the face of acute lack of even basic digital infrastructure and literacy, something horrendous is happening- the government is only deepening structural inequalities. For example, mandatory digital attendance using NMMS App is playing havoc with NREGA, against which protests have begun around the country. On Dec 9, women workers in Muzaffarpur sat on dharna demanding an end to this mandate. In Delhi’s Jantar Mantar, workers from across the country are sitting on indefinite strike against digital attendance and tracking system.

The digitization has to be rolled out in phases. Literacy campaigns, awareness drives, digital infrastructure, the state has to guide the workers instead of leaving them running from pillar to post. State has to fill in the last mile service before making implementation of such policies mandatory.

**Cyber push on Working Class**

The Indian Government’s unleashing of digitization of every possible process has become just another marker of ‘magnificent progress’. Digital ecosystems are embedded in everyday lives now, operating within socio-cultural-political contexts rather than in abstract. A lot in the lives of workers too, are mediated by technology and there remains no doubt that this mediation will only become multifold in the near future. From welfare schemes to redressal mechanisms-a whole lot of the world has turned cyber for the working class: Digitization of EPF and other benefits, biometrics attendance, mandatory implementation of Poshan Tracker App, Shram Suvidha Portal- the list goes on.

Introducing tech serves the capitalist administrator right, as it is fundamentally based on exploitation of vulnerable labor forces making it an extremely viable business model. The administration says these digital drives are designed to be efficient and make things simple. This belief has to be put under interrogation because tech has origins in urban subjectivity. Its systems are not designed keeping social realities in mind. Therefore, they end up making things simple only for those who have access to technological resources.