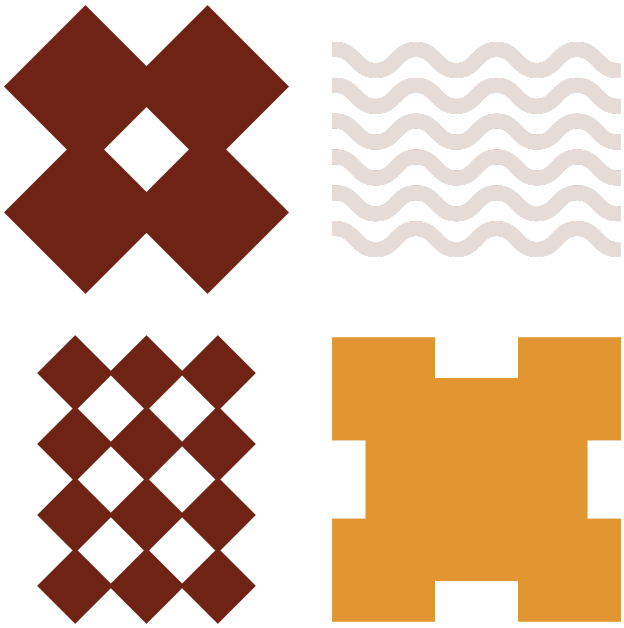
ETHNOGRAPHIC STUDY

BARWANI, MADHYA PRADESH



Estranged Agents of the State

An Ethnographic Study from Bhagsur and Ekalbar Gram Panchayats of Barwani District, Madhya Pradesh

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In this paper, we begin by asking whether frontline work, that is, work that involves direct contact with citizens, is a common category, given that it involves disparate occupations with disparate deliverables and natures of engagement. We argue that the direct contact with citizens, and the impact that their work has on the lives of citizens, make it a common category. But this direct contact, when the state is strategically unresponsive, in terms of not resolving infrastructure deficits or of introducing digital platforms for monitoring frontline work without adequately accounting for the capacity of frontline workers and local challenges, produces a shared estrangement among frontline workers. On one hand, they continue to deliver, but on the other hand, they do not feel they have adequate resources or agency to address the problems. They navigate around these structural limitations in multiple ways: often by reproducing the rigid, legalistic structures, or by finding local allies, or through technological workarounds. We articulate these workarounds and consider them a critical entry point into understanding how policy implementation takes place at the locality.

Being a study on an extremely small scale, of Rajpur Block, Madhya Pradesh, this study is not meant to be representative. It invites questions towards understanding the complexities of frontline work, and it proposes questions that can be explored on a larger empirical base: the impact of structural constraints, such as the introduction of new technology, on the work of frontline workers, and the factors within the frontline work system that inhibit or catalyse policy implementation.

Introduction

We begin this inquiry by asking the question of why seemingly disparate professions (in terms of entry eligibility and process, salary, performance based incentive, promotion, nature of engagement, retirement benefits and health insurance coverage and most importantly deliverables) of Anganwadi Workers, Anganwadi Helpers, Primary school teachers, Panchayat Secretaries, and Gram Rozgar Sahayaks, can be analytically grouped under the single category of 'frontline workers.' To explore this, it is necessary first to understand their differences and their shared structural position.

Criterion	Anganwadi Worker (Karyakarta)[1]	Anganwadi Helper (Sahayak)[2]	Primary School Teacher[3]	Panchayat Secretary[4]	Gram Rozgar Sahayak [5](GRS)
Entry Eligibility	Selected from the local village. Minimum qualification: Class X (matriculation). Age limit: 18–35 years.	Selected from the local village. Minimum qualification: Class X (matriculation). Age limit: 18–35 years.	No locality requirement. Age limit as per government notification. Must pass MPTET eligibility test.	Must be a resident of the district. Age range: 21–35 years (relaxation for SC, ST, OBC, Women, and Persons with Disabilities as per rules).	Must be a resident of the concerned Gram Panchayat (registered in the electoral roll). Minimum qualification:

[1] Ministry of Women and Child Development. (2024). *Handbook for Anganwadi workers and helpers*. https://cdnbbsr.s3waas.gov.in/s34c144c47ecba6f8318128703ca9e2601/uploads/2024/12/2024121116634619 18.pdf

[2] Ibid

[3] Madhya Pradesh Employees Selection Board. *Prathmik evam Madhyamik Kakshaon mein Adhyapan kar rahe Shikshakon ke liye Patrata Pariksha 2026: Pariksha Sanchalan Niyampustika* [Eligibility Test 2026 for Teachers Teaching in Primary and Secondary Classes: Examination Conduct Rulebook]. Aug. 2026. PDF file.

[4] Madhya Pradesh. Panchayat and Rural Development Department. “Madhya Pradesh Panchayat Seva (Gram Panchayat Sachiv Bharti, Anushasan aur Seva ki Sharten) Niyam, 2025” [Madhya Pradesh Panchayat Service (Gram Panchayat Secretary Recruitment, Discipline and Conditions of Service) Rules, 2025, draft]. *Madhya Pradesh Rajpatra (Asadharan)* [Madhya Pradesh Gazette (Extraordinary)], no. 308, 11 Nov. 2025, pp. 615–.616

[5] Government of Madhya Pradesh. (n.d.). *Gram Rozgar Sahayak recruitment guidelines* [PDF]. NREGS Madhya Pradesh. https://nregsmp.org/view_rti_guidelines_tiwari_GRS.pdf

Criterion	Anganwadi Worker (Karyakarta)	Anganwadi Helper (Sahayak)	Primary School Teacher	Panchayat Secretary	Gram Rozgar Sahayak (GRS)
					Class XII (10+2) or equivalent. Age: 18–35 years. Desirable: computer diploma from a recognised institution.
Entry Process	Merit-based scoring on prescribed criteria (no entrance test).	Merit-based scoring on prescribed criteria (no entrance test).	Madhya Pradesh Teacher Eligibility Test (MPTET).	There is an eligibility test, through which a merit list is prepared, and then a committee consisting of district administrators based on the list and due verification of documents appoint secretary and place them in Gram Panchayat, the circular also states that "No candidate shall be posted in his home Gram Panchayat."[6]	Applications scored on a merit-based marking system (educational qualification, computer qualification, prior experience). A merit list and waiting list are prepared; objections are resolved before the Gram Panchayat executes a contract with the selected candidate.
Salary	₹8,500 per month for Main	₹4,250 per month (no	₹5,200–₹20,200 +	₹10,000 per month (fixed)	₹18,000 per month

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Criterion	Anganwadi Worker (Karyakarta)	Anganwadi Helper (Sahayak)	Primary School Teacher	Panchayat Secretary	Gram Rozgar Sahayak (GRS)
	AWC; ₹3,750 for Mini AWC.	distinction between Main and Mini AWC).	Grade Pay of ₹2,400.	during two-year probation; thereafter can go upto 20,200 + Grade Pay of ₹1,900.	(increased from ₹9,000).[7]
Performance-Based Incentive	₹500 per month.	₹250 per month.	None.	No formal performance incentive.	Not applicable.
Scope of Promotion	Anganwadi supervisor (limited recruitment)	Anganwadi worker limited recruitment	Promotion ladder: Primary Teacher → Headmaster (Primary) → Middle School Teacher → Headmaster (Middle) → Higher Secondary Teacher → High School Principal.	Process is not clear	50 percent of vacant post in reserved categories can be filled by eligible gram Rozgar sahayaks [8]
Nature of Engagement	Honorarium-based (not classified as regular employment).	Honorarium-based (not classified as regular employment).	Regular salaried employment.	Regular salaried employment.	Contractual employment.
Retirement Benefits	No formal pension. May opt into the Pradhan Mantri Shram Yogi Maandhan scheme	No formal pension. May opt into the Pradhan Mantri Shram Yogi Maandhan scheme	Covered under New Pension Scheme (NPS) for those appointed on or after 1 January 2004;	Covered under New Pension Scheme (NPS).	No pension. Contract-based engagement.

[7] Ministry of Rural Development. (n.d.). *Staff salary status report, Madhya Pradesh, financial year 2024-2025* [Data report]. NREGASoft. Retrieved 20th July, 2026, from https://nregastrep.nic.in/netnrega/staff_salary_status.aspx

[8]

Criterion	Anganwadi Worker (Karyakarta)	Anganwadi Helper (Sahayak)	Primary School Teacher	Panchayat Secretary	Gram Rozgar Sahayak (GRS)
	voluntarily.	voluntarily.	Old Pension Scheme (OPS) for those appointed before that date.		

Table 1: Structural Difference among the Frontline Workers

Apart from primary school teachers, it is important for frontline workers to be from the locality, with the exception of the panchayat secretary, who cannot be posted in their home gram panchayat. Locality is an important factor in determining the social distance between the community and the worker, or the proximity the worker has with the community. Only school teachers and panchayat secretaries are admitted into the system through a centralised test. Other frontline workers, such as Anganwadi workers and helpers and Gram Rozgar Sahayaks (GRS), are admitted through a merit list prepared within the locality of the gram panchayat.

Once one in the system, there are few mechanism to move upwards. In the Anganwadi system, for the Karyakarta/ worker to become the Anganwadi supervisor, the eligibility criteria are relaxed, but they still have to appear for entrance tests. The eligibility criterion for an Anganwadi supervisor is a bachelor's degree, but this is relaxed for an Anganwadi worker, provided they have five years of work experience.[9] However, only 50 per cent of vacant posts are reserved for promotion. Similarly, the entry barrier is lowered for Anganwadi helpers to become Anganwadi workers by removing the age barrier.

Similarly, eligible GRS, that is those who have successfully completed five years of service without any break in service; against whom no case or dispute is can be promoted to the post of panchayat secretary. Fifty per cent of vacant posts in reserved categories can be filled by eligible Gram Rozgar Sahayaks, and for them the age eligibility is raised to 50 years, as opposed to 35 years for ordinary candidates, but they must clear the entrance test. The promotion process for contractual workers is thus that they still need to sit for entrance tests; it is just that the entry barriers are modified provided they meet the eligibility criteria.

For school teachers, promotion of eligible teachers, based on seniority and educational qualifications, is decided by the Departmental Promotion Committee, and there is no separate entrance test. However, "for promotion to the post of Principal, High School, it shall be compulsory to pass the departmental examination with the minimum qualifying marks as specified by the Government. There has also been some collective outrage among school teachers over promotions not happening. There was no clear provision for the promotion of panchayat secretaries. The promotion system for all is based on objective factors and is not performance-oriented or the substance service of the frontline worker.

[9] Madhya Pradesh Employees Selection Board. *Paryavekshak Bharti Pariksha-2024: Sanchalanalaya Mahila evam Bal Vikas Ma. Pra. Bhopal ke Antargat* [Supervisor Recruitment Examination 2024 under the Directorate of Women and Child Development, M.P., Bhopal]. Jan. 2025. PDF file.

Regarding the salary of frontline workers, panchayat secretaries (depending on their years in the job) and Anganwadi workers and helpers earn below the minimum wage. In MP in 2025, the minimum wage was ₹10,571 for semi-skilled labour and ₹12,294 for skilled labour.[10] Earlier, Gram Rozgar Sahayaks also used to earn below the minimum wage, but due to a recent increase in salary, they now earn above it. However, the GRS we spoke to often complained that the workload still outweighs the recent salary increase, since panchayat secretaries and panchayat offices often do not have the technological capacity to carry out the data entry work for local development projects, including e-KYC registration and the Samagra portal, pensions, scholarships, etc.

The nature of engagement is further important for frontline workers because Anganwadi workers (and helpers) are considered community volunteers, rather than full-time workers, which allows minimum wage implementation to be bypassed. Further, contractual engagements can easily be discontinued by the state because of budgetary allocations or shifting state priorities. For example, the PESA Mobiliser scheme was funded under the Rashtriya Gram Swaraj Abhiyan (RGSA), which ran from April 2022 to March 2026, and under which the mobiliser honorarium was an optional budget line for states. When the scheme lapsed on 31 March 2026, the Government of Madhya Pradesh issued a directive to all districts instructing Gram Panchayats to relieve PESA Mobilisers from service with immediate effect, with a note that further instructions would be communicated once the Union Government finalised the successor scheme. At the time of the study, those instructions had not arrived, and salaries for the preceding eight months had not been cleared.[11]

Lastly, we come to retirement and what life looks like for frontline workers after retirement. Here, we are specifically talking about a severance package and pension. For Anganwadi workers and helpers, since they are contractual workers and not government employees, there is neither a severance package nor pension benefits.

The workers can opt for the Pradhan Mantri Shram Yogi Mandhan (PM-SYM) Pension Scheme, which is a voluntary and contributory pension scheme for the unorganised sector. Similarly, there is no separate health insurance policy for Anganwadi workers and helpers, but it was announced in the interim budget for FY 2024-25 that annual healthcare coverage of Rs 5 lakh under Ayushman Bharat Pradhan Mantri Jan Arogya Yojana (AB-PMJAY) would be extended to all Anganwadi workers and helpers. [12]The implementation of this, and the experience of availing these benefits, have not been explored in the fieldwork.

For school teachers and panchayat secretaries, who are state government employees, there is a divide within the pension scheme between the Old Pension Scheme (OPS) and the New Pension Scheme (NPS). Employees who joined government service before 1 January 2004 continue to receive OPS benefits, which guarantee a lifetime pension equivalent to 50 per cent

[10] Madhya Pradesh. Labour Commissioner's Office, Indore. *Adhisuchna: Nyunatam Vetan Adhiniyam, 1948 ke Antargat Rajya ke Shramikon ke liye Di. 01.04.25 se 30.09.25 tak Punarikshit Nyunatam Vetan ki Daren* [Notification: Revised Minimum Wage Rates for the State's Workers under the Minimum Wages Act, 1948, from 1 Apr. 2025 to 30 Sept. 2025]. No. 1/11/Anve./Panch/2024/10255, 28 Mar. 2025, pp. 39–42.

[11] Pawar, A. (2026, May 18). एमपी में पांच हजार से ज्यादा पेसा मोबिलाइजर्स की सेवाएं खत्म, पंचायत राज संचालनालय ने जारी किए आदेश [Services of more than five thousand PESA mobilizers terminated in MP, Panchayat Raj Directorate issues orders]. *Amar Ujala*. https://www.amarujala.com/madhya-pradesh/bhopal/mp-news-services-of-more-than-five-thousand-pesa-mobilizers-terminated-in-mp-orders-issued-by-the-panchayat-2026-05-18

[12] Ministry of Women and Child Development. (2026, July 24). *Service condition of AWWs and AWHs* (Lok Sabha Unstarred Question No. 1109). Lok Sabha, Parliament of India. https://sansad.in/getFile/lsapps/loksabhaquestions/annex/188/AU1109_NXz67L.pdf

of the last drawn basic salary, fully funded by the government. Those who joined on or after that date were placed under the NPS—a market-linked, defined-contribution arrangement in which the final pension is neither guaranteed nor determined by the state. Under the NPS, employees contribute 10 per cent of their salary while the government contributes 14 per cent; upon retirement, only 60 per cent of the accumulated corpus can be withdrawn as a lump sum, with the remaining 40 per cent required to purchase an annuity. [13]Thus, among government frontline workers like school teachers and panchayat secretaries, those who qualify under the OPS have a better safety net post-retirement.

Despite the specific differences among frontline workers, we categorise them in one category based on the shared position of direct interaction with citizens and their significant impact on the lives of citizens because of their structural proximity to them. These two factors bring our understanding of frontline workers closer to Michael Lipsky's definition of street-level bureaucrats. He defines them as people employed by government who: "1) are constantly called upon to interact with citizens in the regular course of their jobs; 2) have significant independence in job decision-making, and 3) potentially have extensive impact on the lives of their clients."[14]

But Lipsky's definition, particularly on the independence on job decision, can be contested in the Indian context. Frontline work in India is marked by staff shortages (a pan-India shortfall India shortfall of 30 per cent among Child Development Project Officers, 28 per cent among supervisors, 7 per cent among Anganwadi workers, and 7.6 per cent among Anganwadi helpers), along with limited scope for professional development and promotion, weak ties with communities arising from transfer-based postings and bureaucratic hierarchies, and restricted discretion that confines frontline workers largely to executing pre-defined government orders and meeting numeric targets.[15]

These contemporary conditions must be situated within India's administrative history. Drawing on Rashmi Shukla Sharma's work, frontline functionaries can be understood as products of a bureaucratic lineage shaped by shifting state priorities yet a remarkably persistent administrative grammar. The author traces the historicity of frontline work in three broad phases: the precolonial, the colonial, and the post-colonial.[16]

During the colonial period, frontline workers were integrated into a centralised apparatus oriented towards revenue extraction, characterised by extreme hierarchy, minimal training, and negligible scope for promotion—positioning them as intermediaries of control rather than service providers.

In the post-colonial phase (from 1947), the Indian state expanded frontline cadres in health, education, and welfare, improved salaries, and increased the representation of Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes, yet largely retained the hierarchical structure and restricted discretion of colonial-era frontline roles. From the 1970s onwards, as Gupta (2012) also documents, rent-seeking and political patronage became normalised within administrative

[13] MP Patwari. (2026, February 28). *Madhya Pradesh Civil Services (Implementation of National Pension System) Rules, 2026*. https://mppatwari.com/govt_employee/mp_civil_services_nps_rules_2026/
[14] Lipsky, M. (1969). *Toward a theory of street-level bureaucracy* (Discussion Paper No. 48-69). University of Wisconsin, Institute for Research on Poverty. https://www.irp.wisc.edu/publications/dps/pdfs/dp4869.pdf
[15] Centre for Budget and Governance Accountability. (2023). *Status of Anganwadi services and frontline human resources in India*.
[16] Sharma, R. (2015). Frontline bureaucracy in India: Continuities and change. *Indian Journal of Public Administration, 61*(3), 421-439.

practice, while the fiscal austerity of the 1990s further weakened frontline systems through contractualisation and low wages.

In their paper, while tracing the historicity of frontline work, the author mentions the role of technology, such as direct bank transfers, from the 1980s in shaping frontline work. In our field visits, we see technology playing an ever more critical role in shaping the conditions in which frontline work takes place, in terms of portals to track the delivery of schemes or human resource portals to mark the attendance of workers, and the strategies with which frontline workers engage in their day-to-day deliverables. Our paper contributes further to this discourse on the role that technology plays in the day-to-day life of frontline workers, and how they make meaning of it.

This organisational anatomy has direct implications for policy outcomes. Bhanjdeo et al. in their study of Self-Help Group functionality under NRLM in Madhya Pradesh, demonstrate that SHGs often remain restricted to a 'basic level' of functioning—not due to inherent flaws in NRLM's theory of change or lack of effort by frontline actors, but owing to deficits in state capacity, including unfilled frontline positions and a target-driven administrative culture.[17]

If organisational structures are roughly similar across India, why are policy implementation and development outcomes so uneven? This is the core concern of Mangla's study comparing Uttarakhand and Himachal Pradesh—states with comparable geography and bureaucratic structures but divergent outcomes in the implementation of the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan. Mangla attributes Himachal Pradesh's superior performance to deliberative bureaucratic norms, wherein public officials are encouraged to respond to local contexts by working collectively with citizens and civil agencies and adapting policies during implementation. Uttarakhand, by contrast, operates under legalistic norms that promote strict adherence to official rules and procedures, marginalise citizens from implementation, and stifle local collective action. Mangla's work suggests that deliberative bureaucratic norms can help navigate—and in some instances upend—otherwise legalistic administrative structures, while legalistic norms tend to reproduce and reinforce those structures.[18]

This insight, that structures can be interpreted and made meaningful, is present in the work of Aiyar and Bhattacharya who document how frontline workers make sense of legalistic organisational norms by developing a sense of demotivation and apathy, conceiving of themselves as powerless 'post-office' implementers who lack decision-making authority. [19]

The present paper builds on that finding and attempts to explore the question of where do the frontline workers have agency, and when do they reproduce legalistic norms and structures though their day to day work. While doing this we also identify the strategies through which frontline workers navigate, negotiate with, and—in many cases—reproduce the very legalistic norms and structures that constrain them. This approach draws on Bourdieu's concept of habitus—the internalised dispositions of aspiration, motivation, and meaning that shape how

[17] Bhanjdeo, A., Narain, N., Sheth, S., & Walton, M. (2021). *Understanding India's self-help groups: An organisational anatomy of functionality in a district in Madhya Pradesh* (3ie Working Paper 46). International Initiative for Impact Evaluation (3ie). https://www.3ieimpact.org/sites/default/files/2021-08/WP46-SHG-Madhya-Pradesh.pdf

[18] Mangla, A. (2015). Bureaucratic norms and state capacity in India: Implementing primary education in the Himalayan region. *Asian Survey*, *55*(1), 77-102.

[19] Aiyar, Y., & Bhattacharya, S. (2016). *The post office paradox: A case study of the block level education bureaucracy*. Accountability Initiative, Centre for Policy Research. https://accountabilityindia.in/sites/default/files/pdf_files/The_Post_Office_Paradox.pdf

individuals perceive and act within the world—to explore both the limits of agency and the creative strategies through which frontline workers navigate the bureaucratic structure.[20]

Within this organisational structure and under these bureaucratic norms, frontline workers operate under conditions of estrangement—from the state, from the community, and from their own professional selves in terms of aspiration. They are estranged from the state in the sense that they are embedded within formal monitoring systems characterised by hierarchy, inspections, paperwork, however the state is simultaneously non-responsive when it comes to absence of infra-structural support to frontline workers or context specific problems that directly impacts the deliverables of frontline work, for instance migration when impacts education of childten, in these the FLWs can feel isolated, and often they resort to personal workarounds, as opposed to expecting a state response or solution. They are distanced from communities partly through their structural positioning as delivery agents within bureaucratic power relations, which limits their agency to respond to immediate challenges, and partly through transfer-based postings and their social location that that inhibit long-term relational engagement.

The Estrangement of the frontline workers, is produced in the conditions of work embedded in the frontline work system which involves strict monitoring protocol, job security and infrastructure deficits.

The monitoring processes undertaken by higher authorities—and the expectations around how frontline workers allocate their time—produce a persistent tension between accountability and delivery. For Anganwadi Workers and Helpers, this often means reporting attendance and logging daily activities on digital platforms, frequently at the cost of early childhood care. For school teachers, it means conducting surveys for other programmes, entering data on admission portals, processing caste certificates, and providing field support to initiatives such as Akshar Sathi, the adult literacy programme.

This includes salary, insurance, and retirement benefits, which vary significantly based on whether workers are employed on an honorary, contractual, or regular government basis. The minimum wage for unskilled labour in Madhya Pradesh as per the 2024 notification is ₹10,175 per month. By this standard, Anganwadi Workers and Helpers, primary school teachers in their initial years of employment, and Panchayat Secretaries during probation—as well as GRS workers—do not earn the minimum wage for unskilled labour. Apart from school teachers, no frontline worker category has a clearly defined vertical promotion ladder; for Anganwadi Workers, the maximum career progression is to the position of Anganwadi Supervisor after a minimum of five years of service.

All frontline workers are expected to fulfil their responsibilities with limited infrastructural support. This includes collapsing roofs, inadequate provision of cell phones or laptops for data entry, and the absence of functional washroom facilities.

Beyond estrangement from the state and community, frontline work constitutes a distinct habitus in Bourdieu's (1977) sense: the structural conditions of the job are not merely experienced as external constraints but become internalised as dispositions—shaping what workers expect from the system, what they regard as normal, and what aspirations they permit themselves. The habitus of the frontline worker is formed at the intersection of structural limitation and the biographical experience of navigating it. It is visible in three ways

[20] Bourdieu, P. (1977). *Outline of a theory of practice* (R. Nice, Trans.). Cambridge University Press.

across the field data. First, in the calibration of personal aspiration: younger workers just hope to get a better job that's outside this system while the older workers want to retire without transfers. In terms of expectation from their respective workspaces, FLWs hope for better infrastructure like a functional roof, or adequate human resources. Given the estrangemen they face, FLWs come up with workarounds in their day to day lives. This includes re-using beneficiary videos to satisfy a facial-recognition mandate, or hiring informal GRS workers from the panchayat budget, or restricting admission of school children for not having adequate documents, and these are not considered violations by them, but as ordinary workarounds to a rigid structure. Third, the workers often feel attached to their place of work – like a school or an acganwadi centre owing to the years of service. workers develop affective bonds to the building, the routine, and the community of colleagues, even when the institution itself remains unresponsive. This attachment coexists with estrangement rather than dissolving it.

Methodology

The study was conducted in two village panchayats—Bhagsur and Ekalbara— of Rajpur block in Barwani district, Madhya Pradesh. Bhagsur is located 23 kilmetres from the district headquarters and is socially heterogeneous: Scheduled Caste communities constitute 14 per cent of the population, Scheduled Tribes (primarily Bhil and Bhilala) 53.9 per cent, and Other Backward Classes 31.9 per cent. Ekalbara, located 50 kilometres from the district headquarters, is predominantly tribal: the Barela community constitutes 93.48 per cent of the population, with Scheduled Castes accounting for 5.9 per cent. [21]

Proxy economic variables like Literacy levels are higher in Bhagsur (48.63 per cent) compared to Ekalbara (31.9 per cent). While Ekalbara has a larger geographical area, only approximately 10 per cent of its land is irrigated, compared to nearly 29 per cent in Bhagsur. Given these differences, the two panchayats are not treated as a matched comparison in this study—the demographic, geographic, and developmental variation between them is too substantial for controlled comparison on a small sample. They are instead treated as two distinct field sites whose differences provide useful contextual variation for examining how structural conditions of frontline work operate across different local settings. Where field observations differ between the two panchayats, these are noted explicitly in the analysis.

A total of fifteen frontline workers were interviewed, including Anganwadi Workers and Helpers, primary school teachers, the Panchayat Secretary of Ekalbara, Gram Rozgar Sahayaks, and a Cluster Academic Coordinator. Interviews were semi-structured and explored work routines, aspirations, institutional support, community relations, and perceptions of constraints and opportunities.

The Anganwadi System

Anganwadi Centres (AWCs) are central to the delivery of services under the Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS) programme. They provide supplementary nutrition, non-formal pre-school education, health and nutrition education, immunisation support, health check-ups, and referral services to children under six years of age, as well as to pregnant and lactating

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women. Multiple studies using National Family Health Survey (NFHS) data have demonstrated that ICDS contributes positively to child growth outcomes, particularly among the poorest households.

In Bhagsur and Ekalbara, Anganwadi Centres typically operate from single-storey buildings, sometimes with boundary walls or attached toilets. In certain cases, AWCs are co-located with primary schools and share sanitation facilities. The centres are visually marked through painted cartoon characters, alphabets, numbers, and images of vegetables on the walls. Menus listing breakfast and lunch items from Monday to Saturday are prominently displayed, alongside schedules for the distribution of Take-Home Rations (THR).

Within these visible markers of service provision, there exists a notable disconnect between idealised policy messaging and local realities. Posters depicting animal protein and fruits as nutritious foods are displayed on Anganwadi walls, yet the actual menus include neither animal protein nor fruit. This omission is particularly striking in Barwani district, which records high levels of anaemia and has a significant tribal population whose dietary practices include non-vegetarian food. Menus are standardised across the block, with little or no assessment of local dietary practices or area-specific nutritional needs.

The following table reproduces the weekly menu posted at one of the Anganwadi centres visited in Bhagsur. The menu is standardised across the block by the Women and Child Development Department, and is not aligned with the local dietary preferences and requirements.

Day	Breakfast	Lunch
Monday	Paushtik khichdi / Nutritious khichdi	Sabzi, daal, and roti – vegetable curry, lentil and bread
Tuesday	Namkeen thuli / savoury porridge	Kheer, puri, and sabzi/ rice pudding, fried flat bread, and vegetable curry
Wednesday	Mithi lapsi / sweet porridge	Daal, roti, and sabzi
Thursday	Mithi lapsi / sweet porridge	Dal-chaval, kadhi, and khichri
Friday	Namkeen thuli / savoury porridge	Moong ki daal, mix sabzi, and roti
Saturday	Paushtik khichdi/ Nutritious khichdi	Sabzi, roti, and daal - vegetable curry, lentil and bread

Table 2: Weekly Anganwadi Menu, Bhagsur Block (observed 2025)



Figure 1.From an angawadi centre in Bhagsur

The daily functioning of the Anganwadi follows a relatively fixed routine. By around 8:30 a.m., the Anganwadi Helper arrives to clean the premises and, in some cases, conducts door-to-door outreach to bring young children to the centre. By 9:00 a.m., the Anganwadi Worker arrives and the day begins with prayers and songs, often including the national anthem. Breakfast, prepared by nearby Self-Help Groups (SHGs), is served at around 10:00 a.m. In the intervening period, AWWs conduct early childhood education activities, following modules on applications such as POSHAN Tracker and Sampark. Lunch is served at approximately 12:30–1:00 p.m., though in Ekalbara this typically occurs earlier, around 12:00 noon. After lunch, the Anganwadi Helper escorts younger children home, following which both the Worker and the Helper complete their assigned home-visit tasks.

Despite being officially designated as 'honorary' workers (Government of India 2024), Anganwadi Workers engage in a wide range of responsibilities, including household surveys, maintenance of beneficiary lists, distribution of supplementary nutrition, non-formal pre-school education, immunisation and referral support, health and nutrition education, and liaison with local institutions. Jain et al. find, based on a sample of AWWs in Madhya Pradesh, that workers spend an average of 360 minutes (six hours) per day on Anganwadi-related work—significantly exceeding what would conventionally be considered part-time employment.[22]

In both Bhagsur and Ekalbara, Anganwadi Workers reported a persistent gap between the number of children registered at the centre and actual daily attendance. While registration figures are typically around 40–45 children, the number who regularly attend rarely exceeds 15. According to AWWs in both villages, this gap is largely attributable to seasonal and long-term migration, with families moving to Gujarat and Maharashtra for work, where children are enrolled in local schools and Anganwadi centres.

[22] Jain, A., Walker, D. M., Avula, R., Diamond-Smith, N., Gopalakrishnan, L., Menon, P., Nimmagadda, S., Patil, S. R., & Fernald, L. C. H. (2020). Anganwadi worker time use in Madhya Pradesh, India: A cross-sectional study. *BMC Health Services Research, 20*, Article 1130. https://doi.org/10.1186/s12913-020-05857-4

Field findings reveal that estrangement for Anganwadi workers from the state is produced through a combination of infrastructural neglect, hierarchical bureaucracy, weak institutional support from Panchayats, and poorly designed technological systems. Two of the four Anganwadi Centres visited had roofs that were collapsing, with damp walls and peeling paint. One centre, located adjacent to a Panchayat office and a primary school, lacked a toilet; children were expected to use facilities intended for multiple sections of the school. These conditions raise serious questions about the feasibility of Anganwadi–school co-location in the absence of adequate infrastructure.

Anganwadi Workers reported repeated attempts to raise these issues through written complaints to Panchayat Secretaries and discussions at Gram Sabha meetings. Despite these efforts, grievances remained unresolved, contributing to a pervasive sense of frustration and institutional abandonment. In Ekalbara, stalled ration procurement meant that breakfast could not be served for extended periods. Technological disparities further compounded these challenges: while some workers received government-issued phones, others received only SIM cards, forcing them to rely on personal devices for official work.

A notable difference between the two panchayats was observed in the provisioning of smartphones for Anganwadi Workers. Under the Government of India's Mission Poshan 2.0 guidelines, AWWs are to be provided smartphones to enable digital reporting on the POSHAN Tracker and Sampark applications. [23] In Bhagsur, AWWs had received government-issued smartphones, enabling them to fulfil this mandate from their own devices. In Ekalbara, by contrast, AWWs received only SIM cards and were required to use personal mobile phones—at their own cost—to discharge the same official function. This seemingly administrative distinction had material consequences: it placed the cost of digital compliance entirely on the workers themselves in Ekalbara.

Workers could broadly be grouped into those who had been in service for over two decades and those with fewer than ten years of experience. For both groups, the motivation for joining was often financial necessity. For older workers, Anganwadi work had represented an opportunity to move beyond agrarian labour and apply their education in a socially recognised role, one that, at the time, carried the promise of stability and respect. These workers were, however, less adept at navigating digital systems, often relying on younger colleagues or family members for assistance.

For younger workers and helpers, aspirations were markedly different. Many felt overqualified for their positions and described their work as a stepping stone, either towards supervisory position

In the subsequent section, the paper presents some worker profiles that captures what frontline work looks like in Anganwadi centres,

Camera on Camera : Rani Nangave's technique to navigate strict monitoring protocol.

Rani Nangave's Anganwadi in Ekalbara, is a 15 minute walk from the Gram Panchayat office, and one has to cross what is called a "nala" or in this case dried water channel, that is

[23] Press Information Bureau, Government of India, Ministry of Women and Child Development. (2026, March 18). *Mission Poshan 2.0 empowers frontline functionaries by providing them with smartphones*. https://pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=2241721

essentially an undulated terrain, that does not have a proper walking terrain, making it difficult for children to come on their own to this Anganwadi. As I enter the Anganwadi, I see a couple of registers are kept on the ground on the mat, and Durga sits with the sahayka- helper and updates a register, and she is surrounded by three children.

Although the Anganwadi helper was there, I could only speak to Rani because, she understood and spoke Hindi. Rani has a Bachelors in Chemistry- joined the service in 2016- and ever since her joining she has navigated some critical conditions of work.

At the moment of the interview at July 2025- the SHG group who provides hot meals to the centre-did not receive enough ration-which meant that the centre could not provide breakfast to children. To manage the situation- Rani says she would sometimes bring snacks like peanuts/ mumphali and graam or chana from her house for children- as she is afraid- without the incentive of food, children won't come. She says children primarily come "to eat and play."

One challenge, that Rani is particularly finding difficult to navigate is the technological demands of this vocation . Although AWWs are supposed to receive a smartphone from the government, to fulfil their responsibilities of uploading data on POSHAN Tracker (app initiated by the Central government) and the Sampark app (the App initiated by the WCD- MP where they map their attendance, and receive list of activities), AWW in Ekalbara did not receive a smartphone but were only given a SIM card which they used on their personal devices to manage the Sampark and Poshan Tracker applications- and discharge their duties.

The introduction of face recognition for tracking Take Home Ration distribution posed additional challenges. THR in MP consists of a premix of Halwa and Khichdi, which is distributed every Tuesday. As a monitoring mechanism, in MP Anganwadi workers are supposed to feed data on delivery of THR, through the face recognition of the receipient of THR but sometimes Rani tells us, the potential recipients (women of their household) often send neighbours to collect rations, owing to their prior commitments as agrarian labourers in fields making real-time face capture difficult.

To manage this, Rani recorded beneficiary videos during an initial round of distribution, saved in the smart phone of the Anganwadi helper, and reused them for monthly uploads by scanning the face from the pre-recorded ways, each time she had to feed data into the system. This defeats the monitoring purpose, and also adds to the further extraneous workload. Initially, she could get away with this, as shown in the picture, below, defeating the real purpose of monitoring through THR delivery tracking activity but now, the system began rejecting these videos, citing mismatches, her workload increased further. These workarounds reveal how technologies designed for accountability often fail to accommodate lived realities, shifting the burden of compliance onto frontline workers.

Rani's story tells us that a way to navigate the system, is to actually outsmart it. Rani is right now studying to be an Anganwadi supervisor and her aspiration is to move upwards in the organizational hierarchy.



Figue : 1. 1 A picture of rani doing face capture for the THR

A field visit -becomes a performance – what does the word "visit" mean for Bhanu

Bhanu is a 25-year-old Anganwadi Helper in Bhagsur. She holds a BA and MA in social sciences and lives steps away from the centre, which is located on slightly elevated terrain with a small courtyard and a slide for children. This was one of the few Anganwadis we visited which had a slide and a playground for children.

When I entered the building, I could see, four children were present, accompanied by their respective grandmothers. Bhanu's responsibilities, as an Anganwadi helper, include bringing children to the centre, cleansing their face, or grooming them, and assisting the Anganwadi

Worker in their day to day activities. When the Anganwadi Worker went on maternity leave Bhanu had to assume additional responsibilities, including reporting and paperwork , without formal support or recognition.

On a day of the interview, a block-level meeting with Anganwadi workers from the block was scheduled and since, the Anganwadi worker in her Anganwadi was on maternity leave, Bhanu had to attend the meeting. Hence, she closed it an hour early, and she sent the children off to their home and prepared to leave. However, upon receiving a call from our community mobilizer informing her that a "visit" from our team was expected, she cancelled her plans, recalled children from their homes, and ensured that the centre appeared fully functional. Despite the visitor (me) holding no formal authority, the word "visit" itself carried the connotation of inspection.

Bhanu explained that not knowing who the visitor was made the stakes feel high. This episode illustrates how the anticipation of monitoring permeates everyday functioning, compelling workers to perform compliance even in the absence of material support or when they were actually expected to be in a meeting. The visit in this context, is indeed an event.

when I asked Bhanu about her hopes from this vocation, she looked down and laughed and said " Umeed to yehi hai ki dusra job lag jaye- my hope is this that I get a different job." Bhanu later explained that she considered herself overqualified for the role and expressed a strong desire to find another job, describing her work as a compromise rather than a vocation.

Rita's Anganwadi

I met Rita, at a non-functional Anganwadi, with her helper, who did not speak to me as she could not understand the language. Previously, I had met Rita in a Gram Panchayat Coordination Committee Meeting (GPCC) where she had mentioned to the sarpanch pati (the acting authority) in this panchayat that the Anganwadi roof has collapsed and they are operating out of the house of the Anganwadi helpers house, and the helpers' family members are now asking for rent. She requested the sarpanch pati to repair her Anganwadi centre.

Rita Chauhan, an Anganwadi Worker from the Bhil community, has been in service for 25 years. the Anganwadi Centre under her charge collapsed due to a damaged roof, forcing services to be temporarily relocated to the Anganwadi helper's house. The sons of the AWH are now asking for rent from the AWC. Despite informing supervisor and Panchayat officials and submitting written complaints multiple times, the issue remained unresolved- as in the previous structure has not been restored, and neither was rent given to the helper's family. Although provisions exist for paying rent in such cases, no rent had been provided at the time of the interview.

Rita spoke with pride about the Anganwadi she had decorated herself over the years, describing it as more than a workplace. Having spent decades working there, when she would get her own children, to the centre, the building held a particular emotional significance to her.

At the end of the interview, she asked, in a tone usually reserved for officials, what would happen to her Anganwadi. When told that I did not have any formal authority , she asked me again " so you will not do anything about this?"



Figure 1.2 : Pictures from the defunct Anganwadi

Primary School as an Institution

The school system in Madhya Pradesh presents critical challenges in terms of both attendance and learning levels. According to ASER (2024), only 18.8 per cent of children in Class 3 can read a Class 2 text—compared to a national average of 27 per cent—and only 17.6 per cent can perform subtraction, against a national average of 33.7 per cent. More alarmingly, the out-of-school rate for children aged 15–16 stands at 14.3 per cent, nearly double the national average, despite the state having near-national-average enrolment rates for children aged 6–14. These figures underscore why the education system receives heightened policy attention from the state government.[24]

An important dimension of primary education delivery is the working conditions of school teachers. Teachers receive transferable postings, which are a source of significant anxiety. As

[24] ASER Centre. (2025). *Annual status of education report (rural) 2024*. https://asercentre.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/12/ASER_2024_Final-Report_13_2_24-1.pdf

Béteille documents, teachers often seek the assistance of intermediaries—locally known as 'fixers'—to secure favourable postings, a process that involves collusion with other functionaries or administrative clerks.[25] This illustrates how the upper echelons of the bureaucracy can function as an inaccessible space for frontline workers seeking basic stability.

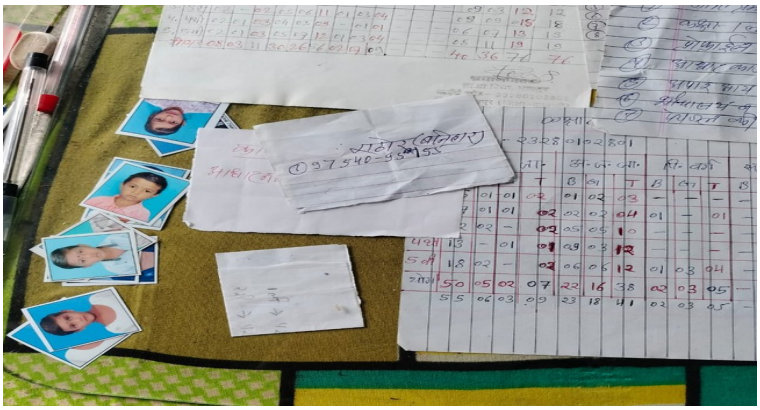
Although no such case was directly encountered during fieldwork, one teacher mentioned that his principal aspiration was to retire from his current posting without being transferred, and noted that local political party workers had considerable influence over such transfers.



Figure 1.3- A classroom holding students from class 1-4



Figure 1.4- Walls of a staffroom



1.5 -Desk of a teacher uploading students details on the samagram- shiksha portal

The OPS/NPS Divide: January 1, 2004

Beyond transfers, the divide between the Old Pension Scheme (OPS) and the New Pension Scheme (NPS) constitutes another significant source of insecurity. Employees who joined government service before 1 January 2004 continue to receive OPS benefits, which guarantee a lifetime pension equivalent to 50 per cent of the last drawn basic salary, fully funded by the government. Those who joined on or after that date were placed under the NPS—a market-linked, defined-contribution arrangement in which the final pension is neither guaranteed nor determined by the state. Under NPS, employees contribute 10 per cent of their salary while the

[25] Béteille, T. (2015). Fixers in India's teacher labor markets: Behind the scenes. *Asian Survey*, *55*(5), 942-968. https://doi.org/10.1525/as.2015.55.5.942

government contributes 14 per cent; upon retirement, only 60 per cent of the accumulated corpus can be withdrawn as a lump sum, with the remaining 40 per cent required to purchase an annuity.

This policy change, combined with the existing transfer system, has made the teaching profession increasingly insecure and created internal divisions between NPS and OPS teachers who may have cleared the same Teachers' Eligibility Test. The resulting fragmentation in professional identity and financial security has tangible effects on the estrangement teachers experience.

Inside the Primary School

The three government primary schools visited in Bhagsur are typically single-storey structures containing one classroom, a washroom, a kitchen for mid-day meal preparation, and an additional room generally kept empty. Walls are painted with numbers, moral science stories, and alphabets. Photographs of Gandhi, Nehru, and Ambedkar are displayed in two of the schools, alongside—reportedly—an image of Bharat Mata, described by one teacher as a government directive. Most schools lack adequate benches; where benches exist, they are insufficient for all students. Children typically sit on floor mats, while the teacher occupies a desk and chair. Most children do not wear school uniforms. One teacher attributed this to an earlier cash-transfer scheme that sent ₹600 to parents' accounts for the purchase of uniforms, noting that many families spent the money on more pressing needs.[26]

Except for the school located closest to the Panchayat office, both other primary schools in Bhagsur have children of all grades (Classes 1 to 5) sitting together in a single room, making adherence to the prescribed timetable extremely difficult.

Documentation and Digital Governance

In addition to their core teaching responsibilities, school teachers are required to perform three primary administrative functions: enrolment of children on the Samagra Shiksha portal, maintenance of caste certificates, and enrolment for the Akshar Sathi Yojana, a community-based adult literacy initiative under the New India Literacy Programme.

Samagra—meaning 'all-comprehensive' in Hindi—is a Government of Madhya Pradesh programme built around the goal of connecting every citizen to the state. It is a continuously updated database of individuals and households across the state, designed to overcome the fragmented nature of government welfare delivery. Each household receives a Samagra Family ID (eight digits) and every individual a Samagra Member ID (nine digits), which together form the foundation of citizen data in Madhya Pradesh.[27]

At the time of school admission, the teacher is responsible for enrolling students on the Samagra Shiksha portal, which connects students to government schemes and functions as a tracking mechanism. This requires valid documents such as an Aadhaar card. When students lack documentation—as is frequently the case for migrant children—the teacher must either coordinate with the Panchayat to obtain documents or assist families directly. One teacher explained:

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[26] MP govt to transfer ₹600 each to 5.8 million students for school uniforms. (2026, September 29). *Hindustan Times*. https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/mp-govt-to-transfer-600-each-to-5-8-million-students-for-school-uniforms-101790692416682.html

[27] Government of Madhya Pradesh. (n.d.). *Samagra portal*. Retrieved October 10, 2026, from https://samagra.gov.in/

"Kagaz nahi dete hain, isliye inko roka hai." [They do not provide documents, so I have withheld their admission.]

Yet the process of obtaining documentats is itself onerous: the Samagra ID is linked to a fixed locality, and if a family migrates within Madhya Pradesh, they must update their Samagra Family ID before their child can be enrolled in a new school and access scheme entitlements. Any correction to a child's Aadhaar card requires an additional monetary fee at the Aadhaar centre at the block level, entailing both financial cost and the time and effort of travel.

This structural gap effectively excludes migrant children from the formal education system—not by design, in practice. The Right to Education Act, 2009, under Section 15, prohibits schools from denying admission on procedural grounds and requires provisional admission pending the production of documents.[28] However, it is analytically significant that the teacher in this study did not experience their action as a legal violation. When the teacher said 'they do not provide documents, so I have withheld their admission,' he was describing what he understood to be a legitimate administrative requirement, a precaution against departmental audit or legal summons in the absence of complete records.

A parallel practice was observed at another school, where children without documentation were allowed to attend classes informally but were not registered on the Samagra Shiksha portal, a workaround that preserved their physical presence in school while leaving them outside the formal entitlement system and invisible to the state. Both responses, exclusion and informal inclusion, reveal the same underlying condition: teachers are caught between a legal mandate to admit all children and an administrative system that makes formal admission impossible without documentation. The RTE's protective provision is not enforced as designed, and teachers who depart from it do so not necessarily out of indifference to the children's rights, but a self-preservation strategy in a system that the teachers believe prioritises data entry on dashboards for monitoring purposes as opposed to the substantive delivery of education.

The result is that the very institution designed to ensure last-mile delivery becomes, in practice, a mechanism for excluding the most mobile and vulnerable children from formal education.

Teachers manage their time by assigning written work to students while attending to what is called “documentation tasks”, this involves administrative tasks like entering admission details of new students, or implementation of the adult literacy programmes, entering school details on the education portal etc. and sometimes leave children unsupervised while completing administrative duties. As one teacher observed: 'If this documentation work were reduced, one could teach the children with peace.'

All teachers interviewed were outsiders to the villages in which they were posted, and none belonged to the Bhil or Bhilala communities that constitute the majority of the student population. Most were, however, from the same block. While language differences between teachers and students are a potential source of social distance, most children speak Bareli or Nimadi as a first language, most teachers, with one exception, indicated that language was not a significant impediment to their work.

While the cluster academic convenor of the area said that the education system suffers mostly because the parents don’t care eough about their childrens education, the attitude of the teachers towards the community was complex. When discussing parents' inability to furnish their children's documents, one teacher who had withheld admission of a few migrant students attributed this to a lack of samajhdhari (awareness) and sakshamta (capability), rather than them intentionally depriving their children of education. This is the same teacher. Yet he felt the

[28] Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act, No. 35 of 2009 (India). https://www.indiacode.nic.in/

constraints of his role prevent them from linking children to the formal education system without the required documentation.

Unlike the younger Anganwadi Helpers, the teachers, most of whom have been in service for at least fifteen years, do not express a desire to change professions, owing to the objectively better job security in terms of salary and social standing. Their aspirations for students are for them to advance to secondary school and beyond. For those approaching retirement, the l concern is to complete their career without being transferred to a remote posting

Finding An Ally in the Cluster Academic Convenor

Shyam Patedar, a 45-year-old primary school teacher in Bhagsur, has been teaching at the same school since 2006. Shyam has polio but says it does not impede his daily commute from his village, Sajwani, fifteen kilometres from the school. He found an ally in Yogendra Patedar, the Cluster Academic Coordinator (locally called Jan Shikshak), for whom he arranged office space adjacent to his school. Yogendra had preferred an office in Bhagsur, which is centrally located in the block, as it facilitates his oversight of other schools; the two have been commuting together ever since, with Yogendra dropping Shyam at school on his motorcycle.

Yogendra also helped Shyam address another pressing problem: the school lacked a physical boundary wall. Together, they constructed a makeshift boundary using barbed wire despite limited funds by salvaging raw materials, including broken concrete and debris, from a non-functional school in a neighbouring village. It was Yogendra who identified the defunct school and suggested repurposing its materials. Shyam used the school's contingency fund for the construction, and was able to stretch it further precisely because the CAC knew of the nearby non-functional school. A boundary wall is considered important in the village context to guard against encroachment; in Shyam's case, the more immediate concern was protecting the plants he had cultivated on the school grounds from grazing cattle.

This reflects a broader pattern among frontline workers: rather than approaching the state directly, they often navigate informal channels and personal networks to find workable solutions. Several issues in Shyam's school remain unresolved, the washroom has a tank but no running water, benches remain inadequate, and the concrete boundary wall is yet to be built, but Shyam prioritises what he can address through his own efforts and within his capacity. When asked about his hopes and aspirations, Shyam says he wants a brighter future for his students. He feels deeply attached to his school and to teaching young children. Given his disability, he finds it easier to work with younger students. He is, by his own account, content as a primary school teacher and do not aspire to teach at a higher grade.

'Keep Your Head Down and Do the Work'

Mahesh Verma has been teaching at his school for thirty years, with six years left until retirement, and is covered under the Old Pension Scheme. He commutes daily from Barwani, 25 kilometres away, by bus.

His school is one of the larger ones in the study in terms of enrolment: 60 students are on the rolls, of whom around 50 attend regularly. The school has three classrooms: Grades 1 and 2 share one room, Grades 3 and 4 share another, and Grade 5 has its own classroom. On Mahesh's desk during the visit were passport-sized photographs of newly admitted students, a list of students with their APAAR IDs, and a list of students whose caste certificates were yet to be processed. The photographs were required under School Admission 3.0, which mandates

uploading a photo of each newly admitted student to the portal in a specific format and size. Mahesh does this entire process on his phone.

As one of the most senior teachers, Mahesh oversees much of the school's administrative work and represents its interests at Gram Panchayat Coordination Committee (GPCC) and panchayat meetings—an engagement that most other teachers in the study do not undertake, owing to the school's physical proximity to the panchayat office. On the long-standing issue of the school's boundary wall, he observed:

> *"For instance, we have given letters for a boundary wall—to every sarpanch—I have been doing this for twenty-five years. A boundary is important; I keep telling every panchayat official. I keep trying, to prevent encroachment."*

Mahesh describes his job as primarily administrative " documentation" with teaching fitted in when time permits. He personally prefers teaching but, as the most senior teacher familiar with local stakeholders, administrative and infrastructure-related work falls to him. During the interview, his class was unattended.

On transfers and job security, Mahesh is acutely aware of his vulnerability. Local political leaders—" chote-mote netas" as he says, have the power to transfer teachers, and he believes any misstep could cost him his posting. *'If they do something like an encroachment and I report it, they will transfer me. They can send me somewhere where there is no water. You cannot do anything—today there are too many small, local leaders.*'

This vulnerability shapes his approach to the job. His strategy is straightforward: 'I just come on time, do my work—and that is it.' He is careful never to express any political opinion in public, particularly given that he serves as a Booth Level Officer (BLO). 'You never know who is what,' he says. 'I do not say anything politically leaning in front of anyone—otherwise, they can transfer you.'

On his hopes for his students, he is simple and direct: 'It is only this—that they grow up and become somebody bigger, somebody better than me.'

Frontline Work in the Panchayat and the Division of Labour

The frontline workers at the panchayat level include the Panchayat Secretary, the Gram Rozgar Sahayak (GRS), and—in certain Gram Panchayats in scheduled areas—the PESA Mobiliser. For this study, interviews were conducted with the GRS of Ekalbara Gram Panchayat and the former GRS of Bhagsur, as well as the acting Panchayat Secretary of Bhagsur.

At the time of the study, both the GRS and the Panchayat Secretary of Bhagsur had been transferred following complaints from community members, the GRS on grounds of alleged rent-seeking and corruption, and the Panchayat Secretary on grounds of absenteeism. In their absence, the Panchayat Secretary of the nearby Gram Panchayat of Bhami, Mr. Pannalal, was assigned additional charge of Bhagsur without any GRS being allocated.

The Panchayat Secretary is responsible for the overall day-to-day functioning of the panchayat, working alongside the GRS, who is employed on contract and whose role is formally defined around MGNREGA implementation: maintaining job cards, recording worker attendance,

ensuring worksite facilities as specified in the Operational Guidelines, updating job cards, and maintaining all MGNREGA-related registers at the Gram Panchayat level.[29]

The PESA Mobiliser, where the position exists, is responsible for implementing the Panchayats (Extension to Scheduled Areas) Act, which includes strengthening and empowering the Gram Sabha, educating PESA Committees about their rights and responsibilities, protecting natural resources, and overseeing migrant welfare and beneficiary selection under government schemes. In the study area, however, this position had already been discontinued at the time of fieldwork.

The PESA Mobiliser scheme was funded under the Rashtriya Gram Swaraj Abhiyan (RGSA), which ran from April 2022 to March 2026 and under which the mobiliser honorarium was an optional budget line for states. When the scheme lapsed on 31 March 2026, the Government of Madhya Pradesh issued a directive to all districts instructing Gram Panchayats to relieve PESA Mobilisers from service with immediate effect, with a note that further instructions would be communicated once the Union Government finalised the successor scheme. At the time of the study, those instructions had not arrived, and salaries for the preceding eight months had not been cleared.

Despite this formal division of labour, roles and responsibilities are not strictly separated in practice. One reason is the frequent occurrence of transfers, vacancies, and sudden termination of contracts. In the case of Bhagsur, with neither a GRS, a Panchayat Secretary, nor a PESA Mobiliser all responsibilities were assigned to Mr. Pannala- the Panchayat sec of a nearby GP Bhami . He has sought relief from higher tiers of local administration but has not received a definitive answer. He has divided his week between the two panchayats attending to Bhagsur on Tuesdays and Wednesdays, and Bhami for the remaining days. He has informally hired young people from each panchayat to perform GRS functions, managing their payments from the panchayat budget; he has even lent his personal laptop to a young person in Bhagsur who is acting as an informal GRS in the absence of a formal appointment.

Another reason for the blurring of roles is that when the Panchayat Secretary lacks technical proficiency, digital governance functions are assumed de facto by the GRS, who is typically provided with a laptop by the office and is therefore better placed to perform data entry work. This includes tasks formally unrelated to MGNREGA: eKYC registration of household members on the Samagra portal, processing birth and death certificates, and uploading development plans on the eGram Swaraj portal.

The Duality in the position of Gram Rozgar Sahayak

The GRS of Ekalbara has been working in the same village for twelve years. Speaking about his position, he observed: *'The GRS is the only karamchari/ worker in this country who does all sorts of work with very little salary '*, a reflection of the contractual nature of the role and its meagre compensation.

In Ekalbara, it was difficult to reach the GRS; at the time of the visit, he was supervising the painting of a wall for a government campaign. He described the breadth of his responsibilities: conducting eKYC for each household under the Samagra scheme, processing birth and death certificates, and undertaking MGNREGA work, which now includes the added technological burden of geotagging and uploading the Gram Panchayat Development Plan (GPDP) on the eGram Swaraj portal—all for very what he believes is “very little pay”.

[29] Ministry of Rural Development, Government of India. (2013). *Mahatma Gandhi NREGA operational guidelines 2013* (4th ed.). Department of Rural Development.

Krishna holds a BSc and entered the sector hoping that the position might eventually lead to a permanent appointment.. He says he arrives at the panchayat office by 10:00 a.m., but on days with field visits his day begins as early as 6:00 a.m., and calls from community members can come in as late as 10:00 p.m. When asked about his achievements, he noted in a measured tone that he had overseen the construction of approximately 500 houses under the Awas Yojana, provided employment under MGNREGA, and implemented the Samagra ID scheme. When asked whether he receives institutional support, he fell silent; when pressed on how he copes, he spoke of a *mansik tanav*, a sense of mental stress and depression. He does, however, draw some comfort from the fact that, as a member of the village, the community is unlikely to turn against him unprovoked.

When asked about his primary motivation for continuing, Krishna said plainly that fear of losing his job keeps him going. His prescription for improving the system was direct: hire more people and pay them adequately to reduce the workload.

Krishna's account is contrasted with Mr. Rakesh's experience of being a GRS worker, where on one hand he thinks he is the victim of local politics, while community members accuse him of corruption. The former GRS of Bhagsur was transferred to a distant village following complaints of corruption from community members. In conversation, he expressed frustration with the community, particularly with local leaders and more vocal members, whom he held responsible for the complaints against him. He did not acknowledge the specific allegations: when pressed on the matter of unpaid wages and MGNREGA irregularities, he maintained that 'some people had problems with him,' framing the complaints as the product of local politics rather than substantive grievance.

This account could not be fully corroborated or refuted: the conversation was brief—the GRS took one phone call but did not respond to subsequent contact—and this paper does not have access to MGNREGA muster rolls, job card records, or any documentary evidence that would allow independent verification of either account.

However, a separate, unprompted account from an active SHG member from the same village who lead the campaign against him. She stated that the GRS had allocated land for a community nutritional garden but failed to ensure that the women received payment for fifteen days of labour they had put in. She also alleged rent-seeking in relation to MGNREGA employment collecting money from people seeking work but failing to deliver the jobs. She explained that the community became aware of this only when he failed to provide work after having taken bribe money; until that point, most community members had not spoken up, out of fear that raising concerns might result in exclusion from future schemes.

We do not know whether the GRS engaged in corruption, but this conversation reveals that the position of GRS despite being contractual, can hold immense power on the lives of the people, it tells us , at least in this case, citizens take mechanisms to hold the frontline workers accountable. But the frontline workers in the case of the GRS and the school teacher articulate these as political interest, rather substantive complaints.

Technology and Estrangement

One thread that is tying the experience of frontline work, is the role that technology plays in their day to day deliverables. In the table below, I have outlined the applications frontline workers are expected to operate. These apps essentially serve as monitoring devices for the supervisors above.

Occupation	Apps	What it does
Anganwadi workers	Poshan tracker	A Union government application for attendance of children, home visits, and ECCE instructions
	Sampark app	A state government app to monitor attendance of Anganwadi workers, malnutrition (SAM, MAM) and Take Home Ration (THR) verification, and to upload daily activities
Primary school teachers	Samagra shiksha portal	Student enrolment details and admission
	Rajya Shikha kendra portal	All data related to the school (Class 5 registration, exam results, etc.) is uploaded here
	Unified District Information System for Education Plus	Enables schools to efficiently record and submit data on their profile (infrastructure and facilities) and on individual students and teachers
	EHRMS	Allows teachers to mark their attendance, a "tap-in, tap-out" equivalent for public administration
Gram Rozgar sahayak And Panchayat secretary.	E -gram swaraj	Uploading village development plans and budgets
	Samagra -Ekyc registration	Social security accounts of citizens
	Miscellaneous	Any other digital work related to government programmes.

Anganwadi workers and helpers are expected to upload their data on both the Poshan Tracker and the Sampark app. The Poshan Tracker is a Union government application, while Sampark is the Madhya Pradesh government's, and there is considerable overlap of data entry between the two. For instance, the Poshan Tracker contains the following:

a. The AWC daily tracker, with the attendance and monitoring "snack" button (workers can mark children's attendance here, and mark whether snacks have been given).
b. Tracking of day-to-day deliverables, such as THR distribution and data from home visits on

the health and nutrition of children and mothers. Workers must also upload a picture of the functional Anganwadi every day to demonstrate that it is functioning.

The Sampark app, meanwhile, holds detailed records of the registration, health and weight of children with Severe Acute Malnutrition (SAM) and Moderate Acute Malnutrition (MAM), reports on the status of infrastructure, and carries Monthly Planning Reports. It is also used for marking workers' own attendance with photo capture.

The two apps overlap in purpose where attendance and the monitoring of day-to-day deliverables are concerned. This raises the question of why two applications that take similar data, apart from a few differences, could not have been merged into one. It also raises the question of what happens to the data, in terms of state response. A significant chunk of the Anganwadis we visited had serious infrastructure deficits, namely fragile roofs and delays in receiving ration, yet there was no panchayat response. The applications do not bring the state closer to the frontline worker, despite that being their intent.

School teachers work on the Samagra Shiksha portal, where they enrol students with their Samagra ID (the MP equivalent of a social security number) and also ensure that students' caste certificates are made.

At the time of the interviews, primary school teachers said that they have a WhatsApp group with the cluster academic convener, where they send pictures of the activities conducted. Unlike secondary school teachers, primary school teachers do not yet have to report classroom activities on these applications. The monitoring of primary schools through apps and technology is not as strict as in Anganwadi centres.

Despite there being an application for each task, teachers, like Anganwadi workers, do not receive a timely state response to infrastructure deficits. Shyam Patedar relies on his informal relationship with the cluster academic convener to get the boundary wall built, and Rita Chouhan, despite reporting the condition of her Anganwadi's roof to her supervisor, did not receive a new centre or get the roof fixed. This may therefore make frontline workers feel that data entry, which they call "documentation", has no tangible, direct impact on improving the conditions of their work.

In fact, as our interactions with both school teachers and Anganwadi workers reveal, they often compromise on their teaching footprint to do this work, particularly since none of them has a laptop and the apps are used on their cellphones. One of the school teachers we interviewed left the class unattended, at least for the duration of the interview, to do the data entry for the admission of his students.

The technology designed to monitor frontline work and the frontline worker, in the cases we saw at least, distances them from the state and estranges them from it. It also distances the frontline worker from society, or the community they serve. One school teacher told us he has held back the admission of a few migrant children because they do not have valid documents and thus cannot be admitted on the Samagra portal. This is a clear violation of the Right to Education Act, 2009.

Among panchayat officials, the Gram Rozgar Sahayak (GRS) is a contractual worker hired by the state to verify MGNREGA job cards. In practice, however, the GRS is involved in all technology and data-entry work. Panchayat secretaries often lack the technological capacity to

track applications for pensions and PM Awas, or the e-KYC registration for Samagra (a social security system run by the MP government), and so it is ultimately the GRS who does it. The GRS also uploads the development plans on the e-Gram Swaraj portal, an integrated system for panchayat development work. MGNREGA work often involves building village infrastructure through MGNREGA workers, which makes it a natural mode of convergence. The GRS, who issues job cards, processes applications and assigns works, therefore needs to track the development works of the entire Gram Panchayat, with the support of the panchayat secretary.

Hence, despite doing a significant chunk of the extra labour, the GRS does not receive the security that the panchayat secretary does, as they are a contractual worker. Other problems include infrastructure deficits (a lack of devices or of adequate human resources), the monitoring protocol, and further issues of job security such as contractual work and non-payment of salary. The case of the PESA mobilizers is an example: their position was discontinued, which increases the workload on other panchayat officials. Thus, technology without the capacity and infrastructure for frontline workers adds to the difficulity of the profession

Conclusion

Talking to frontline workers (FLWs), one gets the sense that their work is shaped by a context of poverty, which leads to migration within and outside the Gram Panchayat locality. It is also shaped by infrastructure deficits, such as damaged roofs, an insufficient number of bathrooms for students, and the lack of cellphones for Anganwadi workers to upload their data. Human resource deficits matter as well, as when a post is discontinued or when panchayat secretaries lack capacity, which puts the workload on Gram Rozgar Sahayaks (GRS). Finally, there is the allocation of resources from the Centre, such as the discontinuation of the post of PESA Mobilisers.

As Sharma (2015) points out, the frontline work system does not allow workers to respond to immediate or urgent challenges, or to solve problems at the immediate level. For example, one school teacher told us they had halted the admission of a few migrant children because the children had been mapped to a neighbouring Gram Panchayat, and unless their mapping changed in the current system, the teacher could not admit them. This is a violation of the Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education (RTE) Act, 2009. It might not be a representative case, but it tells us that the system as it exists, with the technology and data mapping of its citizens, is not adaptive to the issue of migration.

Immediate problem resolution, however, does take place. For instance, when the roof of one Anganwadi collapsed, the Anganwadi helper offered her house as a shelter, but institutionally it took one year for the state to provide her rent. Another Anganwadi worker said she had arranged for gram (chana) to be provided to make up for the lack of breakfast. A school teacher built a boundary wall to prevent encroachment on the school land. One panchayat secretary, who serves two Gram Panchayats, hired technical support to manage the work of both.

It seems that frontline workers resolve problems at their own level, which indicates that the higher echelons of administration are mostly perceived and are unresponsive (in terms of infrastructural issues like collapsed roof in Anganwadis, lack of water facilities in washrooms,)

Here, then data entry on infrastructure and activities on digital platforms can seem purposeless, or not immediately useful except strictly for monitoring purposes.

In such a context, coming back to Lipsky's definition of street-level bureaucrats, the question of agency, or independence in job decisions, is a complex one. What our interviews reveal is how workers perceive their own agency, and that perception is uneven.

On one hand, frontline workers feel they have no agency when it comes to their monitoring responsibilities: the data entry into the system, such as uploading village development plans on eGramSwaraj (by the panchayat secretary), marking attendance, and enrolling students on education portals. On the other hand, they exercise, and feel, considerable agency in their immediate work. One teacher withheld the admission of migrant children since they were mapped to their native village's education system locality while another did not formally admit such children but allowed them to attend classes. Similarly, Anganwadi workers feel they have no agency in uploading data on the [Poshan Tracker and the Sampark app], yet they can arrange an immediate solution by finding an alternative place of operation if the Anganwadi collapses.

Our interactions suggest that frontline workers feel limited agency in terms of the monitoring protocol but exercise a fair amount of agency in their work with the community, in their classrooms and Anganwadis, and in their interactions with citizens, which has a profound impact on the lives of those citizens. But this agency does not translate into structural problem solving, due to the fear that it might interfere with the vertical hierarchy or the legalistic norms in place.

One way to read this is through Bourdieu's (1977) concept of habitus. Workers who have learned over time that the higher echelons are unresponsive come to develop dispositions of their own: they solve problems locally, do not escalate them, and treat data entry as something to be completed and not as a means of being heard. These are the internalised dispositions that shape what workers consider possible, and they help explain why local problem solving is not formalized into systems . This reading is an interpretation of our findings, and a longer period of contact with the field would be needed to test it.

Governance Implications

A key theme that must be further explored how the **technological demands of the profession often interfere with the primary deliverables.** For Anganwadi workers and helpers, there are two applications, one from the central government that demand overlapping data on the attendance of the Anganwadi workers and nutritional status of beneficiaries as opposed to a single central application that could further reduce the workload. An audit of the applications must take place to determine how they can be streamlined to add efficiency and ease to frontline work.

Further, the devices needed for this, which are just cellphones, are often inadequate. The Anganwadis in one Gram Panchayat did not receive a cellphone at all, and the Anganwadi workers in another complained that the cellphones they received were too slow.

Additionally, the **monitoring of the performance of frontline work**ers is linked to their fulfilling data entry, as opposed to the substantive delivery of their primary responsibilities. This is revealed in the fact that one of the school teachers we interviewed left their classroom unsupervised to complete the enrolment of students on the admissions portal, while other school teachers said they often complete their administrative responsibilities while giving students additional tasks.

The **conditions of service** discussed earlier in this paper bear on all of this. Anganwadi workers and helpers earn below the minimum wage and have no severance package or pension. Promotion for all categories is based on objective factors and not on performance, and the vacancy shortfalls documented by the Centre for Budget and Governance Accountability (CBGA, 2023) add to the workload of those in post. The abrupt end of the PESA Mobiliser scheme, with salaries unpaid, shows how easily a contractual engagement can be discontinued. Workers who are insecure in these respects are unlikely to take the risk of exercising agency that might antagonise their supervisors, and we think this is one reason that local problem solving remains informal.

Lastly, the state must acknowledge the ability of frontline workers, owing to their proximity to the community and locality , to solve problems, and it must reinforce and formalise these attempts. For example, it took the government one year to pay rent to the Anganwadi helper who was operating the Anganwadi out of her house after the old building collapsed. The state could also bring in civil society partners to ease the workload, where it can do so.

Possible questions for further research

1. How do frontline workers exercise agency when they do, and what happens to them afterwards? This would require sustained contact with the field and a closer look at their relationships with supervisors.
2. How do overlapping digital applications and monitoring targets change the way frontline workers spend their time and set their priorities, compared with the primary deliverables of teaching, care and local development?
3. Can the data systems for admissions and welfare delivery be made adaptive to migration, and what do local workarounds such as informal admission or alternative sites tell us about how that might be done?
4. How do conditions of service (pay, pension, contractual engagement, and promotion) affect workers’ willingness to exercise discretion?