

Aligning Minimum Agricultural and MGNREGA Wages

What is the issue?

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The gap between the minimum agricultural wages and MGNREGA wages is growing steadily in the last few years.

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What are these wages meant for?

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- **Minimum agricultural wage** - It is paid to agricultural workers.
- It is fixed by the respective state governments.
- The Supreme Court has upheld the minimum wages as a fundamental right.
- Moreover, any labour provided at below minimum wage is a “forced labour”.
- **MGNREGA wage** - The NREGA was enacted in 2005 for livelihood security.
- The Central Government may, by notification, specify the wage rate for the purposes of this Act.
- This is notwithstanding anything contained in the Minimum Wages Act, 1948.
- Different rates of wages may be specified for different areas.
- Wage rate may be specified from time to time, at a rate of not less than 60 rupees per day.

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What is the discrepancy?

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- The union government brought MGNREGA wages at par with minimum agricultural wages in 2009.
- Notably, in 2011, only 4 states, Kerala, Goa, Haryana and Mizoram, had minimum agricultural wages higher than MGNREGA wages.
- In 2016, NREGA wages were lower than minimum wages in almost half of India's states.
- Since then, the gap between the two sets of wages has grown steadily.

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IN MOST MAJOR STATES, NREGA WAGES ARE LOWER

State	Minimum agri wage (in Rs)	NREGA 2018-19 wage (in Rs)	Difference in wages (in Rs)
Gujarat	298	194	104 ▼
Bihar	237	168	69 ▼
Jharkhand	230	168	62 ▼
Chhattisgarh	234	174	60 ▼
Madhya Pradesh	230	174	56 ▼
Punjab	294	240	54 ▼
Uttar Pradesh	228	175	53 ▼
West Bengal	234	191	43 ▼
Jammu & Kashmir	225	186	39 ▼
Haryana	318	281	37 ▼
Odisha	213	182	31 ▼
Rajasthan	213	192	21 ▼
Karnataka	269	249	20 ▼
Maharashtra	194	203	9 ▲
Tamil Nadu	195	224	29 ▲

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What is the latest revision?

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- The Union government recently issued the revised wage rates for MGNREGA workers.

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- The average wage hike for FY 2018-19 is 2.9%.
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 - This is only slightly higher than last year's 2.7%.
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 - In 2016-17, the average wage hike was 5.7%.
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 - Some states have seen only Rs 2 increase in daily wages.
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 - The wages remain unchanged in 10 states.
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 - These include states like Jharkhand, Bihar, Uttarakhand and Arunachal Pradesh.
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 - Notably, these are states where the wages are already the lowest.
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 - Unlike this year, in 2017-18 every state had an upward wage revision, even if marginal.
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 - With the latest revision, 28 out of 36 states and UTs have NREGA wage below the minimum agricultural wage.
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Why is the disparity?

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- The Ministry of Rural Development (MoRD) set up the Mahendra Dev (2014) and Nagesh Singh (2016) Committees.
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- But the Finance Ministry failed to implement these recommendations.
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- The rejection of Mahendra Dev Committee's recommendations led to the lowest ever NREGA wage increase until 2017.
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- Nearly five states received an increase of only a rupee.
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- In 2018, the wages hit a new low after the Nagesh Singh Committee's report was turned down.
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What are the recommendations made?

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- **Mahendra Dev Committee** - Workers should be paid either the minimum wage or the NREGA wage, whichever was higher.

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- The panel estimated the need for an additional allocation of Rs 6,000 crore.

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- This was a 17% increase to the then MGNREGA budget.

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- The annual revision of NREGA wages should be based on CPI-R instead of CPI-AL.

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- Consumer Price Index-Rural (CPI-R) reflects the current consumption pattern of rural households.

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- On the other hand, CPI for Agricultural Labourers (CPI-AL) is based on a 35-year-old consumption basket.

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- The Finance Ministry had turned down these recommendations.

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- It insisted on setting up a panel to study the financial implications of the Mahendra Dev report.

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- **Nagesh Singh Committee** - There was no need to bring MGNREGA wages on a par with minimum wages of states.

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- But, the annual wage revision should be linked to CPI (R).

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- As, CPI (R) is a better indicator of wage increase as it gives lower weightage to food items.

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- Whereas, the basket of goods for calculating CPI (AL) is mainly food items (up to 72%).

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What is Finance Ministry's argument?

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- The Finance Ministry, however, argued that moving to CPI-R was not advisable at this stage.

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- Besides food items, CPI-R gives weightage to expenses incurred on

education, transport and communication, recreation, health, etc.

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- The ministry said that these “miscellaneous items” under CPI-R might not represent the demand of NREGA workers.

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- Moreover, such a move would lead to a bigger fiscal burden.

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Why is raising NREGA wage important?

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- The NREGA was primarily enacted for the enhancement of livelihood security of the households in rural areas.

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- A Supreme Court’s order mentions MGNREGA work as the last recourse while seeking work.

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- A lower payment for this would push the worker and the family into “sub-human existence”.

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- On an average, 5 crore rural households rely on the scheme each year for their livelihood.

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- This increases in times of rural distress, as people use the scheme to make up for falling farm incomes.

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- Nearly 40% of the beneficiaries of the scheme are estimated to have been SCs and STs, bearing a social implication as well.

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- The government should address the disparity in the wages to make sense to the purpose of NREGA.

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Source: Indian Express

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