

India: On Your Watch

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Asma Hafiz reports on the intrusive surveillance being forced on often lower caste sanitation workers in many Indian cities.

On a cold November morning, in the northern Indian city of Chandigarh, a group of sanitation workers sit huddled together and seek warmth from a fire burning closeby. Every sanitation worker has a GPS enabled smartwatch also known as Human Efficiency Tracking Systems strapped to their wrists.

As time goes by, more workers assemble to start their work for the day. Paramjit, a 46-year-old sanitation worker from Chandigarh who asked to be identified only by her first name, takes her watch out of her pocket, worriedly telling her supervisor that it had stopped working last evening. If the watch remains off, she fears, she would be marked absent, meaning she won't be paid for the day. Paramjit's apprehension is shared by her colleagues, who say that this project has taken a toll on their mental health.

Paramjit is one of the thousands of sanitation workers in several cities of [India](#) - including Indore, Panchkula, Nagpur and Navi Mumbai - that are being monitored while performing several duties, including sweeping streets, cleaning toilets and maintaining septic tanks.

The smartwatches they are required to wear during work hours have a sim card, a GPS tracker, a camera for sending pictures as proof of attendance and a microphone. Elsewhere in the cities, the workers appear as green dots on a screen at the municipal corporation's HQ.

The workers, especially women, have raised privacy concerns, said persistent monitoring has made their lives miserable, and that they avoid going to washrooms during work hours for fear of being snooped on through the camera.

'We do not know who is monitoring us. We have to take these watches home too. How do we know if they are snooping on us even then?' says Paramjit. 'There is no human dignity when it comes to us.' The municipal corporation in Chandigarh, a city in northern India, pays \$265,000 a year to rent the smartwatches from IMTAC India Pvt Ltd, an IT company. If the authority is capable of spending such lavish amounts on [surveillance](#), workers ask, why wasn't it able to provide basic safety equipment during the coronavirus pandemic?

The digital tracking is part of two popular campaigns launched under the watch of Prime Minister Narendra Modi. One is the Clean India Mission campaign or Swachh Bharat Abhiyan, launched in 2014. Under it, several cities hold an annual cleanliness survey called Swachh Survekshan. Participating cities are ranked and the 'cleanest' city is given an award. Local authorities can earn extra points by adopting technology like GPS trackers to monitor worker movement.

In 2015, the Modi government also launched the Digital India campaign to promote a digitally empowered society. It is under this garb that the invasive and dehumanizing tracking devices have been introduced.

In 2017, the Supreme Court of India recognized privacy as a fundamental right. Advocate Mehmood Pracha says that giving tracking devices to sanitation workers is a grave violation of this right. 'It is everybody's right to live without surveillance, to live without any intrusion from any quarters including the government,' he told *New Internationalist*, adding that for the Dalit community, often involved in sanitation work, its condition 'is going from bad to worse'.

"It is everybody's right to live without surveillance"

'Digital India is actually becoming a tool of snooping and curtailing the individual liberties of the workers rather than improving the governance or improving efficiency,' Pracha says.

Sanitation workers claim their pay gets docked if they stray from a geo-fenced area or the smartwatches run out of battery. Predominantly from the lower-caste Dalit communities, they are also fearful about how this data is being stored or tracked. India's destructive caste system limits the job prospects of Dalit people, who have become associated with menial jobs like cleaning and are looked down upon by the so-called upper castes.

There are technical problems, too. In Industrial Phase 1, a locality in Chandigarh, Gurpreet Singh, a sanitary inspector whose job is to mark the attendance of the sanitation staff every morning, waits for the workers to assemble for attendance.

He takes out his phone to access the IMTAC application which shows how many workers are online, offline and late for work. It contains a database of every employee working in that area. But Singh says that they have experienced numerous glitches with the watches. There have been instances when the workers have reported for work and the application has shown them out of area or offline. Due to this glitch, the workers can be marked absent - and go unpaid for the day's work.

Many workers have protested that the smartwatches do not track overtime outside regular working hours, leaving this unpaid. Singh confirms. 'The duty hours span from 7 in the morning till 5 in the evening with a two-hour break in between,' he says. 'If a worker does overtime outside of his usual work hours, it will not be tracked and they will not be paid for that. So, there are several issues associated with these trackers.'

Krishan Kumar Chadha, the former president of the Chandigarh Sanitation Workers' Union, has organized multiple protests against the Municipal Corporation's order of wearing GPS watches. He has been vocal about the issues related to the trackers.

'Can these watches clean the city for you? It is the workers who toil the whole day,' he says. 'These workers already come from a disadvantaged background and the introduction of surveillance devices has added to their list of woes.'

The municipality argues that supervisors have also been required to wear the devices and that initial resistance from workers has since dissipated. 'We are not really monitoring any personal document or anything like that,' says Anindita Mishra, Chandigarh's municipal commissioner. 'It is only the location and duty hours that are being tracked.'

According to Mishra, a sanitation worker's location is difficult to monitor by using biometrics - used for clerical cadres operating from the office - as they are mostly on the move. The system was put in place to ensure that they have put in eight hours of work. IMTAC, the company that rents out the trackers to the municipal corporation, did not respond to requests for comment.

Addressing the issues of privacy and data security, Mishra says, 'The entire data is stored in a government-owned server which is controlled by a highly rated Indian Government-owned aerospace

and defence electronics company, Bharat Electronics (BEL).'

Workers say they are also held responsible for maintaining the devices, potentially facing pay penalties for disrepair or loss. Mishra denies this. 'The salary deduction might have happened due to some other reasons but not because of the watch having malfunctioned or having got switched off,' she says.

Back to the fire around which sanitation workers had huddled in Chandigarh, Paramjit's watch does not turn on, and her supervisor tells her to hand it in for repair. She is fearful she will not be paid until she gets her watch back. She shows me her empty wrist, and the marks the watch had left on it. 'These imprints speak of unjust treatment of sanitation workers,' she says. 'We have been tied to a system that has no respect for our rights.'

Asma Hafiz

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