

# Indian villagers

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Behind the Story: TIME's Krista Mahr Discusses How the Indian Government Became the Largest Employer in the World TIME's South Asia bureau chief talks about how she reported on the steps being taken by the Indian government to provide employment opportunities for every one of the country's 1.2 billion citizens By SORCHA POLLAK | October 19, 2012 | 16 inShare12 Log In with Facebook Sharing TIME stories with friends is easier than ever. Add TIME to your Timeline. Learn More SOHRAB HURA Villagers work at a site set up under the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act In 2005, India launched one of the most ambitious social-welfare programs in the world. Known as the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA), the law promises at least 100 days of paid work to any household that wants it. In a country of 1.2 billion people, that is a big promise to make. In 2011, 50 million households took part in the scheme. Working for minimum wage, millions of Indians who would most likely otherwise be making less money or out of work build roads, dig wells and plant crops – mainly in the vast expanses of rural India. But is a project of this magnitude sustainable in the long term? Critics worry that the program will sap the government's finances and undermine entrepreneurial initiative among a population that has long been economically stagnant. Even the project's supporters say MGNREGA is inefficient and unfair, hamstrung by corrupt local officials and an ingrained caste system. For this week's magazine story (available to subscribers here) about MGNREGA, TIME's South Asia bureau chief Krista Mahr traveled to the predominantly rural northern province of Uttar Pradesh to see for herself the successes and failures of a program that has turned the Indian government

into the largest employer in the world. (MORE: Open for Business? Why Indian Entrepreneurs Need a Hand) Mahr has been living in New Delhi for six months. She previously lived and reported from Tokyo and Hong Kong for the magazine. TIME spoke with Mahr about how she reported on this week's magazine story. What specific criticisms have been made of MGNREGA? There is a voice in India, among the business community in particular, which believes the government is overspending on social-welfare programs like MGNREGA. They say the government is partially focusing on this legislation because they are appealing to a popular vote in order to secure their political position. They also argue that the government is spending more money than it should on the program and making worse the big deficit that already exists in India. Some would argue it's not the government's role to be this involved in guaranteeing work for people. There is no cap on the budget for this program. If everybody mobilized and asked for jobs through MGNREGA the government would have to fulfill its promise and pay for it. One of the goals of MGNREGA is to increase employment opportunities for women. How are women treated when it comes to job distribution in Uttar Pradesh? Uttar Pradesh is very conservative, and the attitude toward women is more problematic than in some other parts of the country. As I mention in the article, last year, women in Uttar Pradesh only did 17% of all the days of work registered under the program, while in other parts of the country that was in the 90s. What tends to happen is that when the women get organized, they become involved in the program in a really encouraging way. I spoke to several women who were clearly benefiting from the program in terms of household finances and how it makes them feel more a part of

their village. They recognize their legal right to go ask for something. This is something that I don't think existed before the program came along. (MORE: A 12-Step Program for India's Economic Recovery?) What were your first impressions of Uttar Pradesh? Once you get out of the Lucknow, the capital of the state, it quickly goes from an urban to an extremely rural environment. It's largely agricultural and is organized into small villages and hamlets. The lifestyle is really basic and simple. You hear a lot about India's crowded cities and its growing middle class, but getting out and visiting villages gives you a strong sense of how most of the country lives. People are living hand to mouth, and they feel really far away from the influence of places like New Delhi. Where did you stay while you were there? Did the people speak English? When we went out to the countryside we stayed in a town called Chitrakoot in a government-run type of tourist hostel. It was an old, crumbling colonial building where you could get a cheap room for the night. In terms of language, nobody spoke English. They speak Hindi so I worked with a translator from Lucknow. Did you experience much caste discrimination in the villages you visited? In the village of Byur we saw a real caste divide. The village was physically split into two sections – one side was Dalit, which is the group of castes that used to be called untouchable. The other side of the village was Brahmin, which was historically the highest caste. We listened to the Brahmins explain how the leader of the village was Dalit. The perception was that the Brahmins were not getting enough work because the Dalits were playing favorites. But at the same time, the Brahmin side explained that they refused to do some of the work that was happening in the village under MGNREGA, like drain clearing, because it's not the type

of work they consider appropriate for their caste. So they could have been working, but they chose not to. You've relatively recently arrived in New Delhi after living in two of Asia's other great cities, Tokyo and Hong Kong, for several years. Do these cities feel like they're part of the same continent? Yes, and no. In terms of infrastructure, they couldn't be more different. Getting regular power and water at my house in New Delhi is never a sure thing, even though I'm paying the same rent that I paid in Tokyo and almost the same electricity prices. Both Hong Kong and Tokyo are also crowded places, but both cities are incredibly well planned and efficiently run. Efficient is not a word I would use to describe my day-to-day life in New Delhi. On the other hand, one thing that I think Hong Kong and New Delhi have in common is a shared sense of optimism – a feeling that the best is yet to come. That's definitely not the feeling you get in Tokyo, or in the U. S. when I go home. It's a big part of what I find addictive about living and working in this part of the world. You feel like you're watching the future unfold. Read more: <http://world.time.com/2012/10/19/behind-the-story-times-krista-mahr-discusses-how-the-indian-government-became-the-largest-employer-in-the-world/#ixzz29nVlxBc7>