

# MUSTER ROLL WATCH

Guidelines for Verification of NREGA Muster Rolls

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*How to verify muster rolls, prevent fudging, and protect people's right to work under the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act.*

## PREVIEW

The National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA) came into force on 2 February 2006 in 200 districts. In spite of its limitations, this Act is a ray of hope for working people in rural areas. However, the survival and success of the Act depends on preventing the spread of corruption in NREGA.

Many safeguards for transparency and accountability are built into the Act, and also in the NREGA Guidelines. For instance, the NREGA Guidelines require muster rolls to be available at the worksites, displayed at the Panchayat Bhawan, and submitted to the Gram Sabhas. This can go a long way in preventing corruption in wage payments, since it makes the muster rolls available for public scrutiny and social audit. However, public vigilance is required to ensure that these and other transparency provisions are implemented.

Fudging of muster rolls is the principal means through which funds have been embezzled from public works programmes for many years. This practice must not be allowed to persist under NREGA. One way to prevent it is to conduct public verifications of muster rolls. This booklet has been written to facilitate this process.

A "muster roll" is essentially a labour attendance register, pertaining to a particular worksite and a particular period (e.g. two weeks). It is also used as a receipt, to claim funds from the Programme Officer for the payment of wages. Typically, the completion of a particular work would involve several muster rolls. For instance, in Rajasthan each muster roll covers a period of two weeks (called a "pakhwada") and has space for up to 20 labourers. Thus, if a worksite has 50 labourers and lasts six weeks, 9 muster rolls would be involved.

This booklet begins by explaining (in Section 1) how to verify muster rolls for *one completed worksite*, i.e. a worksite where work has come to an end and wages have been paid. This involves three steps: (1) "consolidating" the different muster rolls to find out how many days each labourer has worked at this worksite, and how much he/she has been paid; (2) checking this information with the labourers themselves, and (3) checking the information from their job cards, if available.

In Section 2, we discuss other types of muster roll verification: (1) verification of a single completed pakhwada, (2) verification of a single "live" muster roll, and (3) verification of all worksites in a particular Panchayat.

In the Appendix, we present a sample of *Verification Sheets*. Careful design of the Verification Sheet is essential for the success of the exercise. If these Verification Sheets do not suit your purpose, or if they require modification in the light of special administrative arrangements in your area, you should revise them carefully. And in any case, the Verification Sheets should be field-tested before the actual verification exercise.

## MUSTER ROLL WATCH

### Guidelines for Verification of NREGA Muster Rolls

Below are some simple guidelines on how to verify muster rolls, using the appended “Verification Sheets”. Don’t worry if some of these guidelines sound a little complicated. Actually, this is a simple exercise, but it has to be done carefully. “Learning by doing” is the best approach. After you conduct a test verification exercise, the issues will be much clearer.

#### 1. MR Verification for One Completed Worksite

##### A. Obtaining the Muster Rolls

1. The first step is to obtain all the muster rolls (hereafter MRs) for the selected worksite. Both the Employment Guarantee Act and the NREGA Guidelines clearly state that MRs should be available for public scrutiny, and that anyone is entitled to request a copy of the MRs.<sup>1</sup> Further, fees charged for this purpose should not exceed photocopying costs. In short, it is your right to ask for a copy of the MRs. Any officer who denies this information to you is liable to be fined under the Right to Information Act.
2. In spite of this, you may find it difficult to obtain the MRs. If you face resistance, don’t give up: this may indicate that the MRs have been tampered with. If necessary, make a formal application under the Right to Information Act.
3. In principle, you should be able to obtain the MRs from the relevant “implementing agency” (e.g. the Gram Panchayat, or the PWD, or the Irrigation Department). If that fails, you can approach the Programme Officer at the Block level.

##### B. Consolidating the Muster Rolls

Note: No “field work” is necessary to consolidate the MRs. All you have to do is to fill the relevant columns of the Verification Sheet (see Appendix 1) using the MRs themselves.

4. Once you have obtained the MRs, arrange them “pakhwada-wise”, from the first to the last pakhwada in chronological order.<sup>2</sup> For instance, if each pakhwada lasts a fortnight, and if the work lasted for two months, you will be dealing with four pakhwadās. Within each pakhwada, keep the MRs in the original order, so that serial numbers follow in sequence across MRs.
5. Fill the general details at the top of the Verification Sheet (name of the worksite, village, Panchayat, etc.).

<sup>1</sup> The term “NREGA Guidelines” refers to the Operational Guidelines issued by the Ministry of Rural Development in January 2006. They are available (in English and Hindi) at [www.nrega.nic.in](http://www.nrega.nic.in).

<sup>2</sup> *Pakhwada* literally means a “fortnight”, and is the reference period for a particular muster roll. In many states, the pakhwada lasts two weeks, but in other states it may be one week, or ten days, or whatever. Make sure you are clear about the local practice in this respect before you start.

6. In the first panel (Columns 1a-1e), write the names and related details (village, sex, etc.) of *all* the labourers who have been employed at the worksite, *as they appear in the MRs*. For this purpose, start by listing all the labourers who worked in the first pakhwada, in the same order as in the MRs; then look at the second pakhwada and continue the list by adding any extra names (i.e. names of labourers who worked in the second pakhwada but not the first), again in the same order as in the MRs; and so on with the other pakhwadās.
7. If any details in this panel (e.g. Job Card number) are not available in the MRs, leave that column blank.
8. Go back to the MRs for the first pakhwada and fill the "First Pakhwada" panel (Cols 2a-2c): "muster roll number", "days of work" and "wages paid", for each labourer who worked in that pakhwada. Note that "wages paid" refers to *total* wages (for that pakhwada), *not* daily wages. If daily wages are given in the MR, and not total wages, you can easily calculate total wages by multiplying "daily wages" by "days of work". Don't forget to write the MR number in Col 2a: this will help you during the verification exercise, and may also be useful later on if you submit a formal complaint against fraud.
9. Do the same with the second pakhwada, third pakhwada, etc. until you have gone through all the MRs for this worksite. (If there are more than five pakhwadās, you will need to use an extra copy of Page 1 of the Verification Sheet as a continuation sheet.)
10. Turn to Page 2 of the Verification Sheet. Copy the "worker's personal details" from Page 1. Then fill the "Total according to MRs" panel (Cols 4a and 4b) by "adding up" across muster rolls, using the information on Page 1.
11. Make sure that you have covered all the relevant entries in all the MRs, and double-check your calculations to avoid any mistake.

### C. Labourers' Statement

12. After the MRs have been consolidated, the actual verification starts. The main task is to find out from the labourers themselves how many days they have worked on this worksite, and how much they have been paid, and then compare this with the information on the MRs. This requires meeting *each* labourer on the list and recording his or her statement. It *also* involves cross-checking between labourers, to ensure that the information is reliable. Make sure that you are carrying all the MRs with you throughout this exercise.
13. You can start the verification in various ways: by visiting the worksite, by going to the homes of the labourers, or by conducting a public meeting – whatever turns out to be most reliable and effective from your experience in the field. Here again, "learning by doing" is the best approach.
14. Once you have traced a labourer whose name is on the MR, make sure to explain clearly which worksite you are referring to. This is vital to ensure that you are verifying information for the correct worksite, and not for some other worksite.
15. Fill the "Labourers' Statement" columns in the Verification Sheet (Cols 5a to 5d). Whenever necessary, probe and cross-check carefully before recording the statement.

The "Labourers' Statement Worksheet" (Appendix 2) is available for this purpose. You may find it convenient to fill this worksheet before transferring the relevant entries to the Labourers' Statement on the Verification Sheet.

16. Compare the Labourers' Statement with the corresponding information in the MR (i.e. compare Cols 4a and 4b with 5a and 5b), and fill column 5c using the codes provided at the bottom of Page 2. There are three major discrepancies to watch:
  - a. Fake name: The person listed in the MR did not work at the relevant worksite during the relevant period at all. In such cases, try to note in the "Remarks" column at the end any further details that may help to interpret this case (e.g. "fictitious name", "brother of the sarpanch", "lives in Dubai", "in hospital").
  - b. Days of work: The days of work recorded in the MR may be inflated. For instance, a labourer may state that she worked for 5 days while the MR says 10 days.
  - c. Wages paid: Labourers may have signed, knowingly or unknowingly, for a larger amount than they actually received.
17. If there is any discrepancy between the Labourers' Statement and the MRs, look for any evidence of "tampering" of the MRs. For instance, ask the labourer whether he/she signed the MR or used his/her thumbprint. If the labourer signs, but the MR has a thumbprint, that would be evidence of tampering. Similarly, if you find that the same thumbprint appears for several labourers on the MR, that would also indicate tampering. Note any evidence of tampering in the "Remarks" column at the end.
18. If the Labourers' Statement is missing for any reason, note the reason in column 5d, using the relevant Codes. (If the statement is *not* missing, enter code 6 - "not applicable".)

#### D. Job Card Details

19. Record the corresponding details from the labourer's Job Card (if available) in the "Job Card Information" columns (Cols 6a-6e). Make sure that you record information *for the relevant worksite only*. Compare with the MR (i.e. compare Cols 6c and 6d with 4a and 4b) and fill column 6e using the relevant codes.

#### E. Remarks

20. Use the last column for any further remarks, esp. information that may help to interpret the inconsistencies. For instance, if you are unable to trace one of the labourers, and his/her neighbours tells you that this person has been living in Dubai since the past 14 years, note this in the last column.
21. At the bottom of the Verification Sheet, recapitulate carefully any evidence you may have found of fudging or tampering of the Muster Rolls. If you run out of space, continue at the back of Page 2.

## 2. Other MR Verification Exercises

### 2.1. Verification of a Single Completed Pakhwada

Sometimes you may wish to verify a single completed pakhwada (or even a single MR), rather than all the MRs for a completed worksite. For instance, this may be useful if you want to make many “spot-checks” over a wide area, instead of focusing on one particular worksite. Or you may suspect fudging in a particular MR, and wish to verify it.

However, there are problems with verifying a single completed pakhwada, especially an “old” pakhwada. The main problem is that labourers who have worked on several pakhwadass at the same worksite may not be able to distinguish clearly between the different pakhwadass. They may get confused between different pakhwadass, and this can undermine the whole verification exercise, since “discrepancies” between the MR and the Labourers’ Statement may reflect recall errors rather than any inaccuracy in the MR. If you are considering this type of verification, we suggest that you “test” the approach in the field before you proceed, to check whether it actually works.

The Verification Sheet can easily be adapted for the purpose of verifying a “single completed pakhwada”. The method is basically the same as with a “completed worksite”. It is simpler to the extent that there is no need for “consolidation” of muster rolls across pakhwadass. But it is more difficult to the extent that you have to ensure that labourers focus on the correct reference period when you record their statement.

### 2.2. Verification of Live Muster Rolls

The term “live muster rolls” is used here to refer to the muster rolls currently being used at an active worksite. Live MRs are necessarily “incomplete”, e.g. details of wage payments are likely to be missing since wages are yet to be paid.

The main point of verifying live MRs is to check whether the names entered in the MRs are correct, and also whether the attendance details are accurate. A separate Verification Sheet (Appendix 3) has been prepared for this purpose.

This Verification Sheet refers to the “worksite records”. In principle, this means the MRs, since the MRs are supposed to be available at the worksite. However, in practice the MRs are often kept away from the worksite, and a different document is used to record attendance at the worksite (e.g. a notebook, or an ordinary register, or a photocopy of the “real” MRs, or a so-called “kaccha muster roll”). The term “worksite records” refers to the MRs, if they are available at the worksite, and otherwise to whatever document is used as attendance register at the worksite.

In the case of live MRs, the whole Verification Sheet should be completed *at the worksite*. It is very important to ensure that your visit to the worksite is *unannounced* – literally a “surprise visit”. Even a 10-minute “warning” may give the supervisor (“mate”) a chance to fudge the attendance register if he or she wishes. The visit should take place during work hours, a time when the mate is supposed to have filled the attendance register, e.g. towards the end of the morning shift. After reaching the worksite, here is how to proceed:

1. As soon as you reach the worksite, ask for the "worksite records" (muster rolls if available, attendance register otherwise). Here again, avoid any delay, to minimise the risk that someone might tamper with the attendance records before giving them to you.
2. Fill the general details at the top of the Verification Sheet.
3. Note the names of all the labourers from the "worksite records", in the same order as they appear there.
4. Check each labourer's attendance status (for the morning of your visit) as per worksite records and fill column 3. Make sure you enter *only one* of the three possible codes ("P" for present, "A" for absent or "B" for blanks).
5. Check whether the attendance status as per the worksite records is correct. You can do this by means of a "roll call" at the worksite. Here there are five possible codes: "P" for present, "A" for absent for the day, "T" for temporarily absent, "F" for fake name, and "O" for other. Make sure you enter *only one* of the five codes. If you select "other", specify what that means exactly in column 5.
6. If the muster rolls are not available at the worksite, hunt them down and match the muster rolls with the worksite records as instructed in the "Consistency Sheet" (Appendix 4).

### 2.3. Verification of All Worksites in a Panchayat

The most reliable approach is to verify all the MRs for all the completed worksites in a Panchayat (for a particular period, e.g. the previous 6 months). Verifying all the MRs together, rather than individual worksites, gives more scope for cross-checking. For instance, suppose that a labourer's name has been simultaneously entered in the muster rolls at two different worksites, for the same pakhwada. If all the MRs are verified together, this irregularity is bound to come up right at the beginning, at the stage of "MR consolidation" (see Section 1.B). But if you verify only one of the two worksites, you will discover this only if you focus on the "rogue" worksite (the worksite where this person's name was entered even though he or she was working elsewhere), *and* if you avoid any confusion between the two worksites when you record the Labourers' Statement.

Full-fledged guidelines for the verification of all worksites in a Panchayat are beyond the scope of this manual. One way to go about it is to replace the term "pakhwada" with "worksite" in the column titles on Page 1 of the Verification Sheet for completed worksites (Appendix 1), and also in the Labourers' Statement Worksheet (Appendix 2). In that case, the MRs would have to be "consolidated" worksite-wise first, before filling Page 1 of the Verification Sheet. We leave the details to your imagination.

## List of Appendices

Appendix 1: Verification Sheet for Completed Worksite

Appendix 2: Labourers' Statement Worksheet

Appendix 3: Verification Sheet for Live Muster Rolls

Appendix 4: Consistency Sheet

Note: The Verification Sheets printed in this booklet are "reduced" to size A4. However, much larger sheets (with adequate space to record the relevant details) are required for effective work. You can produce larger Verification Sheets either by retyping them on larger pages, or by downloading and printing the A3 version of these sample sheets, which is available (in English and Hindi) at [www.nrega.nic.in](http://www.nrega.nic.in).











**MUSTER ROLL VERIFICATION SHEET: "LIVE" MUSTER ROLLS**

**LIVE MUSTER ROLL CONSISTENCY SHEET**

Name of Panchayat: \_\_\_\_\_ Name of Village: \_\_\_\_\_

Name of worksite: \_\_\_\_\_

Muster roll number(s): \_\_\_\_\_

Reference period ("pakhwada"): \_\_\_\_/\_\_\_\_/06 to \_\_\_\_/\_\_\_\_/06

Investigator: If the "pacca" Muster Rolls are not available at the worksite, please hunt for them. Compare the information on the "pacca" Muster Rolls with the "worksite records" (kachha muster rolls) used in the Verification Sheet, and fill the table below carefully:

Number of labourers listed:					
In the "worksite records"			In the pacca MRs		
Also in pacca MR	Not in pacca MR	Total	Also in kachha MR	Not in kachha MR	Total

Make sure that the entries in columns (1) and (4) and that the sub-totals add up to the totals (e.g., columns (1) and (2) add up to column (3)).