

The Indian workers training AI robots to take their jobs

With a smartphone strapped to her head, Nagireddy Sriramyachandra films herself slicing mangoes in her kitchen in India to train AI-powered robots to take on household jobs in the future. Earning just over two dollars for an hour of video, her mundane recordings are invaluable for global tech companies teaching machines how to move like humans in the real world. The 25-year-old is one of a growing army of thousands of AI system trainers in the world's most populous country.



A worker wearing a GoPro camera on his head recording actions through motion capture while folding towels inside a model bedroom at AI data company Objectways' office.

"Who else will give you 250 rupees an hour just for doing housework?" said Sriramyachandra from her kitchen in Chennai in southern India's Tamil Nadu state. "I may get a robot myself in the future," she added. Artificial intelligence chatbots and image generators crunch reams of digital data, but building systems to navigate real-life environments is more challenging. Developers think feeding first-person footage, called "egocentric data", into specialized AI models will help robots copy humans.

Some AI trainers work at home, others in factories or specialized studios -- using video glasses, head-mounted cameras and motion sensors. "It blares 'hands not detected' when I'm not recording properly," said Sriramyachandra, who sends recordings via a special app to the AI data company Objectways. The firm, which has offices in India and the United States, lists

Fortune 500 multinationals as clients. It works with Amazon SageMaker, a platform for machine learning models.

'Better things'

The humanoid robot market is booming, with investment bank Morgan Stanley predicting there could be over a billion in use by 2050, mostly for industrial and commercial purposes. "Folding clothes, coffee making... cooking a very specific thing, sandwich making," Objectways head Ravi Shankar said, listing videos requested by clients. "Some jobs are supposed to be taken over, so humans can go and do better things."

In India, the emerging field of spatial AI is providing new employment -- for now. The 50-year-old CEO is US-based, but hires workers from Tamil Nadu, where he grew up, one of India's international technology hubs.

At a Karur textile factory, busy with



A worker wearing a GoPro camera on his head recording actions through motion capture inside a model bathroom at AI data company Objectways' office.

workers attaching labels to caps and ironing cloth bags, AFP saw eight people wearing head cameras and smart glasses supplied by Objectways. India has positioned itself as a global middleman for the creation, processing and annotation of AI data. "It's likely that these data collection services will increase," said digital labor expert Aditi Surie, from the Indian Institute for Human Settlements in Bengaluru.

Informal workers

India is aggressively developing its AI industry, but its leaders are aware that, alongside the technology's much-



A worker wearing a GoPro camera on his head recording actions through motion capture while filling water bottles inside a model kitchen at AI data company Objectways' office.

hyped benefits, automation poses risks. Government think-tank NITI Aayog said that most discussions around artificial intelligence and labor "focus on white-collar professionals and predict an almost certain loss of jobs in the segment" without urgent action.

"Little attention, if any, is paid to how AI can serve India's 490 million informal workers, the very people who form the backbone of our economy," it said in a report released ahead of a global AI summit in India this year. The think-tank has examined how the technology could help or harm dozens of professions -- from cobblers to sewer cleaners, farmers to tea sellers.

For the last decade, 55-year-old Ponni has sat on a roadside in Bengaluru, the city known as India's Silicon Valley, making flower garlands. She, too, has been paid to have a phone strapped to her forehead. "The next generation... who might have to do work similar to mine -- they will face a problem," Ponni said.

Always wearing a camera

At an Objectways studio, AI system trainers film themselves performing household tasks in fake, fully furnished apartment rooms. After several thousand hours of filming, the wallpaper is changed to provide clients with variety. "Today I sit here, tomorrow I stand

there," said engineering graduate Rani N., 21, on a break from filming herself, once again, folding a towel.

Each video lasts about four minutes, and she records around 90 a day -- on nearly every conceivable spot on the bed. She said the job is "tolerable", but feels like she's always wearing a camera. In other rooms, colleagues arranged pencil sharpeners, water bottles and crayons in patterns, recording with depth-sensor cameras.

Qanat Consulting Services in Andhra Pradesh, an Objectways subcontractor, supplies about a dozen larger data firms with recordings. Some of its 2,000 contributors perform tasks with motion-sensor bands on their "wrists, hands and legs", CEO Thaslim Pattan said.

Manish Agarwal of Bengaluru-based Humyn Labs, not related to Objectways, records conversations as well as videos. Contributors discuss assigned topics -- ranging from politics to entertainment -- for clients wanting to process speech patterns. Agarwal denies that robots will steal jobs, believing that networks of humans and robots "will work together" one day, he said. "A welder in India could be managing a welder-robot in Prague," he said.--AFP



An Indian housewife Nagireddy Sriramyachandra wearing a smartphone on her head as she records her actions through motion capture while watering plants.



Workers wearing GoPro cameras on their heads recording actions through motion capture inside a factory in Tamil Nadu's Karur district.



An Indian housewife Nagireddy Sriramyachandra wearing a smartphone on her head as she records her actions through motion capture while slicing mangoes at her home in Chennai. — AFP photos

