

Working Lives in India: Current Insights and Future Directions

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Abstract

India presents a rich context for research on work and employment, epitomising the paradox of an 'emerging economy' but one where 92.4% of the workforce is informal – insecure, unprotected, poor – and women and disadvantaged groups most vulnerable. It displays a wide range of production relations in its formal/informal economy, embedded in diverse social relations, and the related forms of exploitation and resistance. This WES Themed Collection aims to review existing WES scholarship on India since 2001, identifying both gaps in scholarship and fruitful avenues for future research on India. The purpose is to showcase some of this scholarship while also advancing the internationalisation and expansion of the journal's presence in countries in the Global South. This effort is timely as decolonisation of scholarship and increased focus on the South is on the intellectual agenda, challenging established structures of power and knowledge in academia.

Keywords

employment, exploitation, India, informality, labour, production, reproduction, social relations, technology, work

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Introduction

As a large, diverse and ‘emerging economy’, India presents a fertile context for research on work and employment. The Indian economic structure continues to transition from agriculture to the manufacturing and services sector since the liberalisation reforms in 1991. Its historical trajectory offers valuable insights into exploitation along with complex and overlapping arenas of production and social relations, their role in capital accumulation, and the related forms of resistance (e.g. Olsen, 1998 a, b, c; Harriss-White and Gooptu, 2001 for an overview article; Agarwala, 2013; Breman, 1996; Raj and Sen, 2016; Sanyal, 2007). Attempts at radical social transformation post-independence meant scholarship in India is largely rooted in Marxist and post-Marxist political economy, while *Work, Employment and Society* (WES) debates have been firmly based in western sociology. Both scholarships are likely to reflect ongoing changes in the global political economy and in academia. Marxian roots of Indian scholarship face challenges from post-structuralist approaches, while WES scholarship would benefit from theoretical and methodological insights from India, and the South more broadly (see Hammer and Fishwick, 2020 and Hammer and Ness, 2021 for such efforts). The key would be to hold the universal and particular tension in analyses of work and employment in India.

In this Themed Collection, we review WES scholarship on work and employment in India with an aim to identify both gaps in scholarship and fruitful avenues for future research. The articles in WES over the past two decades have succeeded in capturing some key developments in the world of work in India and the global political economy, such as the informal economy, privatisation and offshoring, technology and work, and the globalisation of work. A key focus is on women in the informal economy – self-employed, domestic work, construction, and commercial surrogacy (Hill, 2001; Jana and Hammer, 2021; Khurana, 2017; Raghuram, 2001). The size and role of the informal economy, where women workers predominate, and the significance of informal work to Indian capitalism has been long emphasised by Indian scholars but remains neglected in northern scholarship on work and employment. Gender, inequality and workplace control are further examined in articles focusing on Science and Information Technology (Gupta, 2015; Gupta and Sharma, 2003), and feminised garment factories (Jenkins and Blyton, 2017). The emphasis on women and the informal sector is followed, not surprisingly, by a proliferation of publications on call centre work (Murphy, 2011; Nath, 2011; Russell and Thite, 2008; Taylor and Bain, 2005; Vaidyanathan, 2012). India was a major destination as this work was offshored to English-speaking countries of the South. The increasing role of non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and associated understanding of work, injustice and activism are being recognised in the ‘On the frontline’ piece by Humble and Mani (2018). These articles explore cross-cutting themes of caste, gender, ethnicity and class using analytical frameworks from labour process theory, feminist political economy, mobilisation and organising, and supply chains, among others. Their interdisciplinary approach facilitates rich engagement with different perspectives and concepts, ranging from emotional labour, social reproduction, moral economy, patriarchy, social capital and social downgrading.

Despite these contributions to knowledge, the number of publications on India in WES remains limited compared to India’s size, and the focus of the articles remains

narrow compared to the diversity of work and employment in India. The contributions from Indian scholars remain few. This special issue offers a corrective by recognising current insights and efforts and suggesting possible future areas of research. Support through mentoring and co-authoring with PhD and early career researchers from India, and the South more broadly, would further break the barriers to critical knowledge production and exchange.

In the next section, we briefly outline the context of work and employment in India. Section three reviews the WES articles, section four examines the focus of WES, followed by a discussion on avenues of future research in section five.

Context: The political economy of work and labour in India

India is a postcolonial, fast-growing economy with some niche high-growth sectors accompanied by high levels of poverty in agriculture, a large informal economy (comprising informal sector and informal employment) and development rooted in rising informalisation of the workforce. Social relations of gender, caste, ethnicity and religion intersect with material relations, further reinforcing existing inequalities in the labour market and at the workplace. It is in this context of informalisation and fragmentation of labour that work and employment needs to be examined.

The informal economy dominates, characterised almost universally by informal employment marked by subsistence wages, employment and social insecurity. Agrarian reforms have failed to address social and economic inequalities, and industrial growth and urbanisation have also not translated into major formal employment gains. This has increased pressures on agriculture as well as the low wage, low productivity, non-agricultural informal sector to provide employment. The inability of agriculture to sustain livelihoods created a situation of permanent labour surplus, with high levels of informality inhibiting wage growth in the formal sector and preventing any escape from poverty and informality. The informal sector constitutes a vast army of self-employed or petty commodity producers working with unpaid family labour in an extension of the household (Hammer, 2019; Harriss-White, 2010, 2012; Raj and Sen, 2016; Sanyal, 2007). Over 80% of the workforce is engaged in the informal sector, and about 92.4% is in informal employment, a considerably higher share than the estimated 70% average in other developing countries (NCEUS, 2009).

The liberalisation of the economy in 1991 exacerbated these trends in agriculture and the informal economy. Since the 1990s, the Indian economy is characterised by rising informalisation of the workforce, jobless growth, decentralisation of bargaining, deteriorating working conditions and weakened trade unionism (Breman, 2010; Kapoor and Krishnapriya, 2017; Srivastava, 2015). Higher gross domestic product (GDP) growth rates have failed to generate formal sector employment. An average growth rate of 7% has created less than 1% employment growth, leading to fears of entrenched 'jobless growth' (Basole et al., 2018). The significant trend towards a variety of informalised labour relations within the formal sector, such as contract, temporary and trainee workers, has fragmented the workforce along many dimensions including wages, working conditions and job security.

The disconnect between growth and employment and rising informalisation has accompanied a shift towards service-led growth. The services sector contributed 63% of GDP growth over the last decade, but a significantly smaller share in employment at about 33%. Though some niche areas have grown (such as the IT and Business Process Outsourcing (BPO) industries, retail and financial services), over 55% of service-sector employment in India is still made up of petty trade, domestic services and other types of small-scale and informal employment, and – more recently – gig activities by professionals, while the social sector services (education, health and public administration) account for 23% of employment (Basole et al., 2018).

This sectoral skewedness is compounded by the complex intersection of production and social relations of gender, caste and religion (among others). Women and other marginalised groups are more likely to be concentrated in subsistence self-employment and the lowest rungs of employment, with restricted access to education and skills development, health and other public services; low levels of capital ownership; and greater discrimination while seeking employment or credit (NCEUS, 2009). India has one of the lowest labour participation rates for women, and this rate has been declining since 2004–05. Between 2011 and 2012, 19.6 million women dropped out of the workforce, of which 53% were rural women. Participation rates among educated women are lower in urban areas.

The education and skilling systems reflect and reproduce the inequalities for the majority. Education is geared towards higher education, mostly accessible to the elite. Formal education and skill structures provided by the state suffer from poor quality, capacity and outcome. The most vulnerable segments of the workforce in the informal economy have poor access to institutions of training, accompanied by poor information dissemination and take-up – especially by disadvantaged groups – of government training initiatives launched in the last decade (NCEUS, 2009). The weakness of state provisioning has historically been accompanied by firms' reluctance to invest in training, since they prefer training casual labour on the job in order to keep labour costs low for a given skill set and to limit labour turnover (Bremas, 2010). Few firms in India provide in-service training, predominantly to a minority of formal workers. According to the Periodic Labour Force Survey (2017–18), only 1.8% of the population received formal vocational training, 5.6% received informal training, while 93% received no training.

In sum, India's work and employment scenario is characterised by high degrees of informal work/self-employment, rising informalisation and fragmentation of labour, low productivity juxtaposed with some high-growth sectors, low female participation in the workforce, and marginalisation of large social groups. The labour movement has reacted by organising a series of general strikes between the 10 major trade union federations under the banner of the Joint Committee of Trade Unions in 2015, 2016, 2019 and 2020, and civil society organisations mobilise on access to rights, resources, institutions and services.

WES articles: The focus so far

WES articles showed an early focus on *women workers in the informal economy* and have joined a widespread global move to analyse domestic work, construction work, reproductive work, and other forms of rural and urban self-employment. All four articles

engage in historically and socially sensitive analysis while engaging with universal theories and concepts of exploitation, inequality and resistance. For example, Hill (2001) was an early voice arguing for an alternative way to conceptualise the work-life experience of marginalised women workers in the informal sector and appropriate development interventions. She uses the example of a collective strategy implemented by the Self Employed Women's Association (SEWA) in India to demonstrate the important role that interpersonal recognition plays in activating worker identity and agency to achieve development. Hill mobilises theories developed by Indian scholars (e.g. capabilities theory by Amartya Sen) and references India's long history of solidaristic action. Societal effects are also evident in Raghuram's (2001) article on the ways in which gender hierarchies intersect with caste in the organisation of paid domestic work in India. In European societies, domestic work is often treated as migrant work but caste is important in India. Drawing upon rich fieldwork in the rural (rapidly urbanising) areas east of Delhi, she highlights how the organisation of labour and the task performance have spatial dimensions and are based on caste division of labour. She concludes that asymmetries and inequality are reproduced through the organisation of paid domestic work; yet, with some scope for gendered re-negotiation.

Khurana's (2017) article on construction labour has important resonance in other contexts; for example, Swider's (2015) article in WES (also included in the China Themed Collection) on informal migrant workers in the construction industry in China. Khurana's research on women construction workers is unusual since construction is widely construed as a male category in lay narratives across most high-income countries. She draws on the concept of the moral economy to argue that in the absence of formal or legal contracts between workers and contractors, women workers mobilise on their social capital to question or resist their conditions of work. These articles support the presence of a diversity of labour market situations, working conditions and work relations in the informal economy identified by Swider in China. And as in so many societies in the Global South, labour is provided by internal migration, racialised minorities and the urban poor.

Importantly, Swider draws attention to the complex triad of the worker, the employer and the state in understanding work and employment relations, shedding light on varying sources of control and exploitation of migrant workers. Bringing the state in and multiple sources of control and exploitation at work is also key to Jana and Hammer's (2021) article on commercial surrogacy in India. Through a qualitative study, they examine the lived experiences of surrogates within the capitalist social relations they are embedded in. Conceptualising surrogacy as reproductive labour that contributes to value generation, Jana and Hammer assess labour relations at the workplace; for example, hostels where surrogates 'live and work', and the mechanisms of recruitment, contracting and control that function through dense networks of social and material relations between various stakeholders. The weak bargaining power of surrogates and the immense power of fertility clinics and agents are compounded by the lack of effective regulation and the state's prohibitionist policy. Not only does the article cut across some of the themes identified so far, it also brings in a key debate on social reproduction into WES.

The focus on *gender, inequality and workplace control* continues in a further three articles, albeit in very different formal work contexts. Gupta and Sharma (2003) and Gupta (2015) analyse the relationship between technology and gender in institutions of

science and technology in India, while Jenkins and Blyton (2017) examine women garment workers in South India. Sensitive to specifically regional social and cultural formations, Gupta and Sharma analyse the problems faced by women academic scientists in four Indian Institutes of Technology using 'patrifocality'. They examine the 'formal environment' and the 'informal' interactions at work, revealing social stereotypes that infiltrate the workplace and place women academic scientists at a disadvantage. These disadvantages stem from a 'patrifocal' structure of Indian society, a general 'lack of critical mass' of women scientists and a lack of 'universalism' in science. In another article, Gupta (2015) analyses an upsurge of women in computer-related courses and professions in India but the labour market continues to exhibit gender segregation. Gupta cautions against fusing the issues pertaining to gender and technology and labour segregation, arguing that these developments are not an indication of a radical revolution in gender relations in society. Jenkins and Blyton (2017) examine the ways in which employers use working time to create debt relations between workers and their workplace as a tool of managerial control. Employers offload risk, maximise flexibility and secure their position at the local level through social downgrading in a feminised sector where the workers' associational power is weak.

The rich and nuanced scholarship on *call centre work* in WES was in direct response to changes in the global political economy, especially offshoring of work from the North to the South. Five articles analyse this form of work through differing methodological and analytical frames, ranging from labour process, emotional and aesthetic labour, and Bourdieu's habitus. Interestingly, in India's lively intellectual culture, this topic was intensively analysed within the country (Pandey and Singh, 2005 in *Economic & Political Weekly*), but these works were not routinely cited by the WES authors. In one of the early articles, Taylor and Bain (2005) analyse the political-economic factors driving offshoring of UK call centre work and shaping the forms of work organisation in India. They challenge the seamless migration of this work and conclude that the Indian industry reproduces, in exaggerated and culturally distinctive forms, a contested labour process that has proved problematical for employers and employees alike in the UK and elsewhere. In a similar vein, but using the concept of emotional labour, Nath (2011) examines the emotional complexities and stresses associated with national identity management (accent modification, the use of western pseudonyms and location masking) and customer-instigated racial abuse in offshored Indian call centres. Interviews with frontline employees in Bangalore reveal that although call centre agents can find identity management beneficial in easing customer apprehensions and in achieving organisational performance targets, such identity regulation can result in the experience of stress, role ambiguity and work alienation. The article demonstrates that employees need to manage the stigma relating to their 'Indian' identity in order to fulfil the challenges of aesthetic and emotional labour.

The methodological focus shifts in the two comparative articles. Russell and Thite (2008) use a comparative labour force survey of Australian and Indian call centre workers to examine the question of whether the outsourcing of info-service work portends a new division of labour. They find that the work conducted in both Australian and Indian call centres is semi-skilled in nature and the differences that exist are mainly to be found in the labour forces that perform the work. These give rise to contradictions that are specific to

the Indian context. Murphy (2011) also draws on a large-scale survey and in-depth interviews with Indian call centre workers to explore how participation in the transnational interactive services industry impacts on the social identifications of Indian call centre workers. Building on Bourdieu's work on social stratification, contemporary theorisations of aesthetic labour and conceptualisations of the commodification of self as integral to aesthetic labour, the research finds that Indian call centre workers can be characterised as part of an emergent global middle class sharing common lifestyles and values with their counterparts in western countries.

In a slightly different vein, Vaidyanathan (2012) examines mobilisation potential in call centres using the ideology of professionalism, which can be contestable and situated. The research reveals how professionalism is understood by employees as an ideal that is binding on managers as much as on workers in call centres. Respondents draw on it to articulate grievances against managerial abuse, corruption, sycophancy and negligence, and to express their preference for so-called 'western' management practices to protect their rights and dignity in the workplace. This evidences a form of professionalism 'from below', fostering mobilisation potential, which unions seem to tap into. Yet professionalism may also serve as an obstacle to later stages of mobilisation and organisational commitment.

Finally, and in keeping with WES's commitment to 'On the Front Line', Humble and Mani (2018) set out arguments that integrate collective action, professionalisation, the public-private divide, and the typical workings of small NGOs in India. Through the experiences of an NGO worker, the article engages with issues of injustice, inequality and exploitation, and analyses notions of activism, work and life history in a context shaped by class, gender and caste divisions.

Focus of WES: A critique

The WES coverage of India reflects changing contours of work and employment, globally and locally, to a large extent. It has made meaningful contributions to understanding the diversity of labour market contexts, working conditions and labour relations in the informal economy. It has highlighted how exploitation, and resistance, can take many forms through complex and intersecting material and social relations at work and in wider society. Nevertheless, engagement with the informal economy in India, and how it relates to the formal economy, has been limited relative to its size and heterogeneity. The state is missing from the analyses, as is the reproductive realm, global value chain analysis and the debates over micro-finance-related work. Considering that 60% of the population is dependent on agriculture, directly or indirectly, and there is continuous circular migration between urban and rural areas, rural labour, migrant labour, bonded labour and exploitative forms of work merit greater attention. The focus of WES has tended to be more micro and less about systems of mutually articulated social and economic structures. Other disciplines and journals have been ahead of WES in research on migration, rural work, slum dweller work, value chains, labour regimes and new locations of labour conflicts and organising. To an extent, the narrow focus and coverage stem from limited engagement with scholarship in India. The limited engagement could also account for the lack of an integrated understanding of spaces and worlds of labour. Perhaps the need is to go beyond the dual conceptualisation of labour as rural-urban

or agrarian–industrial, the dichotomy of workplace–living areas and caste–class relations since control and resistance in one sphere cannot be understood without the other.

Indian scholarship is vast and impossible to cover here. As an example, WES would benefit from an engagement with Indian feminist scholarship, which has a long and rich lineage: Sharmila Rege (2006) brought the structural violence of caste and its linkages with sexuality and labour into feminist discourse, Nivedita Menon (2015) questions the relevance of ‘intersectionality’ to the Indian context, and Mary John (2017) argues that the entwined and conflicted histories of feminism and Marxism could offer a fruitful site for pushing the boundaries of feminist approaches to capitalist development in 21st century India. A renewed focus on the significance of social reproduction in analyses of work and capitalism (Bhattacharya, 2017; Kofman and Raghuram, 2015; Mezzadri, 2019; Vora, 2019) has a long legacy in India going back to works of Maria Mies (1986). In terms of academic outlets, while many Indian researchers publish books, the *Indian Journal of Labour Economics* and *Economic & Political Weekly* (EPW) are two key social science journals of long-standing repute. EPW is unique because it is the one forum where there is an exchange of ideas across the social science disciplines. It is a multidisciplinary publication covering economics, sociology, political science, history, gender and environment studies among others, and where most academics, researchers, policy makers, independent thinkers, members of NGOs and political activists publish and contribute to key debates. Still, the long track record of high-quality theory and empirically rich case studies in WES bodes well for the future. We turn now to venues and topics for future research.

Future directions: Multiple and integrated worlds and spaces of work and labour

A review of scholarship in other disciplines, such as anthropology, economics, history and political economy, and analytical frameworks, such as feminist approaches, global value chains, labour process and institutional analyses, provides fruitful insights for future research that complement WES’s. Scholars from India, for example those writing on women, work and employment, often publish in other Western journals (Dhawan, 2005; Desai and Banerji, 2008; Garikipati, 2009; Hirway and Jose, 2011; Chakrabarti and Biswas, 2012; Agarwala and Saha, 2018). Not only would an engagement with this scholarship help widen and deepen WES’s engagement with India, importantly it would hopefully encourage young scholars to explore new areas and draw in cutting-edge research submissions to WES. We identify some areas in this section. These are indicative and by no means exhaustive.

A key trend is the development of links between political economy approaches and sociology and anthropology of work and employment in India. On the one hand, scholars working in the field of development continue to research with political economy approaches grounded in rich, qualitative fieldwork (e.g. Barnes, 2018; De Neve, 2005; Harriss-White, 2002). On the other, those starting at the workplace or adopting a labour process analysis are beginning to engage with political economy (Hammer and Fishwick, 2020) and institutional approaches (Hammer, 2019). Not only does this cross-disciplinary engagement allow for a more comprehensive capturing of the complex, variegated and multiple forms of work, employment and labour struggles in India, it has also focused attention on some relevant as well as novel areas of research. We identify and elaborate

on six in particular: informal and precarious work; social relations and class; production and reproduction; the role of the state; new technologies, automation and the future of work debates; and sustainable work and quality of work.

As mentioned earlier, one of the most distinctive features of work and employment in India is the level of informal and precarious employment. Considering the gamut of formal to informal employment, informal outwork to dependent self-employment to petty commodity production among others, it is clear that there are multiple dimensions of precarity beyond the formal employment status and associated social rights. Each of these production relations denotes different ways of organising production, different labour processes as well as forms of reproduction (Barnes, 2012; Basole and Basu, 2011) and are further intersected by diverse social relations of caste, gender and community among others. Women, marginalised castes and bonded labour predominate at the bottom of the informal economy (De Neve and Carswell, 2014; Harriss-White and Gooptu, 2001; Lerche, 2010). A key focus, therefore, has to be to go beyond the waged workplace to informal or unwaged types of work and workplaces. As Breman and van der Linden (2014) argue, labour informalisation is fast becoming a global norm and it is the 'West' now following the 'Rest' with regard to precarious labour relations. A focus on everyday experiences and struggles of workers in India, and across the South, where informal and precarious work has long been a distinctive feature of working lives, can contribute to a better understanding of this rising form of work globally.

Secondly, the context of a wide range of production relations in India underlines the pertinence of the broader processes of capitalist accumulation and competition and the integral relationship between exploitation, social relations and class relations in concrete contexts. The asymmetric balance of power between capital and labour and the role of the state in instituting informal and precarious work and labour regimes are critical forces shaping accumulation. Capital actively reshapes the composition of the workforce to restrict the bargaining power of labour and reduce the value of labour power through mobilising social differences and divisions. Nevertheless, the same also creates opportunities for mobilisation and solidarity among formal and informal and precarious workers, often resulting in resistance. This allows both conceptualising the contemporary fragmentation of labour and drawing implications for labour relations, labour's agency and collective action, and political outcomes for formal and informal workers who labour under the same capitalist relations (Hammer and Ness, 2021).

By looking beyond the 'formal' workplace, the multiple forms of exploitation that characterise contemporary capitalism can be uncovered. It can potentially reveal how the heterogeneous conditions that persist within and across global value chains might coalesce into new sites of class formation, offering renewed forms of collective organisation in and beyond traditional trade unions and political parties. Not only could such analysis better locate the interconnections across sites of labour exploitation, but it could also offer new ways to understand the interconnecting demands that could provoke new alliances across 'classes of labour'.

Thirdly, for the majority of workers employed outside formal employment globally, and India in particular, the spheres of 'work and life', or production and reproduction, are not separated but form a totality of livelihoods strategies (Kabeer et al., 2013). Often, spaces of production and daily reproduction are one and the same and impact on the

constitution of workforces, mechanisms of control and the construction of solidarities. Particularly as production is fragmented across different relations of production, geographically and functionally fragmented value chains, there are questions as to how reproduction is organised and by whom it is carried out – for example, in urban or agricultural households, through unpaid and/or commodified labour, and, ultimately, where value is actually produced (Federici, 2012). Not surprisingly, works on India, and more broadly on the South, as well as recent development in social reproduction theory, argue for an integrated analysis of work and living areas and production and reproduction, that is an integrated analysis of production of goods and services and production of life (e.g. Bhattacharya, 2017; Hammer and Fishwick, 2020). They argue that an understanding of the process of reproduction is not an addendum but rather an essential, integral component of production relations and in workplace control. Such conceptualisation underlines the analytical as well as methodological significance of incorporating the spheres of production and reproduction as forming a totality of working lives – pointing to an interesting venue for further exploration.

Integrating the explicit incorporation of nominally distinct spheres of work and life – of production and social reproduction – is invaluable in its endeavour to understand the production of value and the antagonism this produces. Work on India has continually shown how the conditions of work are necessarily shaped by the gendered and caste-based dynamics of capitalist social relations. Not only is this apparent in the clear blurring of work and life in the very concrete contexts in which production is undertaken, but also in the local social relations that determine the form of contestation and conflict that emerges. Pertinent new questions arise when we consider these spheres as a totality in this way. Moreover, it can broaden our understanding of class formation to comprehend the ways in which gendered divisions across these spheres of production and reproduction can provide fertile ground for the constitution of collective action and working-class agency, reflecting the diversity of demands that can emerge beyond the domain of waged work.

Fourthly, the state plays a key role in the constitution of capitalist social relations: by shaping the conditions of work through regulation and repression, in mediating capital and labour relations, in shaping conditions for the reproduction of labour power through welfare mechanisms. As Poulantzas (1978: 115) argues, state institutions and apparatuses ‘do not possess a power of their own distinct from class power’. The state intervention (or lack of it) through policies, regulation and social security provisioning, among others, impacts on power relations at the workplace with contradictory outcomes for labour. In India, and across the Global South, the state holds a key role in creating and instituting informal and precarious work, not only through defining the scope of regulations but also by shaping the power relations between capital and labour (Agarwala, 2013; Hammer and Ness, 2021). Yet, the state has remained largely marginal to WES articles about India.

Bringing the state into the analysis of work and employment may be a fruitful perspective, one which can help reveal the close relationship between state intervention and the changing world of work. Moreover, exploring the impact of welfare policies and the impact on the labour market may shed light on the intensification of exploitation. Incorporating the state can be vital to understand the structured antagonism of the workplace, the way in which contestation emerges can be shaped and conditioned by restrictions on and traditions

of labour activism across societies. Collaborative state-capital dynamics of repression and policies restricting collective organisation, on the one hand, may limit the potential and possibility for resistance to emerge, as well as the form it may take. On the other hand, exploring the potential to extend conflict in the workplace may rely on existing configurations and relations between states and labour organisations, which, in turn, may influence the state to support pro-labour interventions.

Fifthly, automation, artificial intelligence and debates on the future of work provide a new and topical area of research, worthy of deeper investigation in India. The transformational effects of emerging new technologies are key points of discussion in debates on the future of work. Grand narratives about the potential for progress and prosperity from *The Fourth Industrial Revolution* (Schwab, 2015) accompany gloomy predictions of a bleaker future, where robots and automated processes lead to mass casualisation, surveillance and control (Ford, 2015; Graham et al., 2017). These extreme positions are tempered by scholarship that emphasises that these technologies are most likely to impact on the nature and quality of work rather than replacing it (Thompson and Briken, 2017). Scholarship on this area in India is relatively scant as highlighted recently by Hammer and Karmakar (2021).

It is important to situate global narratives in the specific political, social and economic contexts of developing and emerging economies like India because the impact of technology on the future of work will be shaped by a complex interplay of social and material relations. In labour-abundant and large informal economies like India, emerging technologies could potentially be dramatic and pose a challenge for development paradigms; however, technology is not free from the wider dynamics that surround the world of work. An examination of the relationship between technology and social relations of work, which goes beyond the current focus on the transformative or disruptive capacities of technologies to a more balanced scholarship rooted in the reality of work, could make an invaluable contribution to scholarship of work and employment in India.

Finally, and importantly, sustainability – a pressing concern globally – is intimately linked with work through issues around quality of work, health and safety, and wellbeing at work. Sustainability is also integral to worker solidarity through India's long history of nascent struggles to protect resources in both rural areas and among urban slum dwellers. The decline in conditions of work, persistence of informal and precarious labour, and increasing control of state and capital over resources has also made 'Decent Work' central to development interventions of the United Nations (UN) and the International Labour Organization (ILO). Decent work is crucial to the vast majority of workers who labour under insecure and precarious conditions with limited voice or social protection. It is most recently epitomised in the UN's Sustainable Development Goal 8 (SDG 8) on 'Decent Work and Economic Growth'. However, a recent ILO report (2019) suggests progress on SDG 8 is slowing down and most countries have a long way to go towards achieving inclusive and decent work for all. A failure to make headway on SDG 8 would also hinder progress towards other SDGs, such as eradicating poverty, reducing inequalities, promoting peace and achieving gender equality. It is a critical moment for research to focus on sustainable work and the challenges in achieving decent work. Current attempts to regulate 'decent work' often derive from abstract (and northern) presumptions of standard labour relations, withdrawal of the welfare state, and involve a generalisable regulatory fix to protect workers; missing the longer embedded histories,

heterogeneity, and politics of work and labour relations in the South. Rich case studies from India could provide valuable insights and inform policy and development interventions.

Scholarship on and from India would be a crucial step towards decolonising existing structures of knowledge and development discourse. WES welcomes multidisciplinary research that examines work in all its manifestations in India while placing it in its historical and social context; research that breaks new ground in making linkages among these crucial topics while bringing new empirical evidence to light.

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