

Topic: Dignity of Labour

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NOTE

This paper deals with the issue of 'Dignity of Labor' in the Indian context only.

Abstract:

The goal of this paper is to study the issue of 'Dignity of Labor' in the Indian context. It implies that all labor is significant and hence should receive dignity. India is a hierarchy oriented society wherein discrimination based on one's profession is prevalent. The policy used to address this issue is Safety, Health and Environment at workplace by the Ministry of Labor and Employment, Government of India. Primary data collected through a survey of slum dwellers and formal sector workers has been used to analyze the issue. Pie charts have been used to depict the analysis. The analysis revealed that the issue is predominantly sociological and economic rationality of labor while choosing a job is pivotal in addressing the issue. Hence labor welfare policies coupled with skills development and vocational training would help to bring about dignity of labor.

SECTION 1:

Introduction to the issue:

Dignity of Labor implies that all professions or jobs are treated equally and no occupation is considered to be superior or inferior to others. It is therefore an extension of the universal Principle of Equality making it a fundamental right of every worker. In India, however, certain professions like doctors, lawyers, corporate sector employees at higher posts have respect in the society whereas other professions like drivers, manual laborers (domestic help, cobblers, artisans, rag pickers etc) are looked down upon. Jobs which involve higher pay and require intellectual skills are considered dignified against others which involve physical labour. Hence there is no dignity of labor.

Dignity in retrospect:

Goswami (2014) reported that Prime Minister Narendra Modi proudly announced that he had worked at his father's tea-stall before he entered politics. Congress chairperson Sonia Gandhi and Human Resource Minister Smriti Irani had been waitresses in their youth. The society respects them today for their achievements but the appreciation is towards the politician position that they hold, but does the job of a tea stall owner or waitress have dignity? It is commendable that the society is accepting of such leaders who have come up a hard way. Those like Mr. Modi or Mrs. Sonia Gandhi are few, the rest of the workers are denied a respectable treatment all their life. Dignity in retrospect is not going to result into the wellbeing of the laborers. The country needs a dignity of labor in the true sense of the term.

The lingering caste system

Goswami (2014) reported that one of the reasons why there is absence of dignity in India is because of the existence of the practice of an occupation based caste system in the Hindu culture. According to the caste system, society was divided into five classes-Brahmins (the intellectuals), Kshatriyas (the warriors), Vaishyas (the merchants) and Shudras (menial workers). The lowest in the hierarchy were the 'untouchable' whose condition was miserable. The caste system was a socially approved means of discrimination.

Basis of discrimination in the employment market:

White collar and Blue collar jobs

Jobs are widely classified as white collar and blue collar. A white collar job is one involving mental exertion whereas blue collar job is the one involving physical exertion. Professionals such as lawyers, doctors, teachers etc. or top notch corporate sector employees are considered to be doing white collar jobs. Jobs of factory workers, domestic help etc. are considered blue collar. The general social perception is associating a white collar job with decision making and significant contribution to the returns earned. Such jobs are considered respectable and dignified in the society as against blue collared ones which are associated with groundwork and are not respected. Nanda (2014) reported that an Indian's approach towards employment is 'elitist' which is 'Brahmanian'(uppermost caste) hence portraying a bias towards 'white collar' jobs involving intellectual work rather than taking up a job of a skilled professional which might prove to be more lucrative. This attitude of the youth is not favorable to a country's economy which is labour abundant.

Pink collar jobs

After the World War I, a term called Pink collar jobs emerged when women took up various jobs in the place of men who went to war. In the 1980s the term called 'pink ghettos' became synonymous with 'glass ceiling effect' implying sexism preventing women from being board members of a company or other significant positions. Various jobs such as receptionist, teaching, domestic help, dental assistant, librarian etc are classified as 'pink collar jobs'.

Impact on Dignity of Labor:

- Distortion of Labor supply dynamics:

Such perceptions of jobs as reserved for women, results in a sexist approach towards employment. Men do not prefer to do certain jobs because they consider them to be a woman's work and therefore less important. Similarly women are not allowed to take up other jobs as they are supposed to be a man's work. This brings in rigidity in the supply of labour.

INTERNATIONAL CASE STUDY:

Bangladesh: Collapse of the Rana Plaza Plant.

The collapse of the Rana Plaza Plant is considered to be the deadliest garment factory accident in history. It portrays a lack of dignity and consideration given to workers' conditions.

The Rana Plaza Plant in Dhaka, the capital of Bangladesh, collapsed on 24th April, 2013. It was an eight storey commercial building. The shops on the lower floors closed down when cracks were discovered and the building was no longer considered to be safe. It was later discovered that the upper floors had been built illegally. Despite being fully aware of all the facts and therefore the risk involved, the managers and owners of the plant forced the workers to continue working. The death toll of industrial workers climbed up to about 1100 people with another 2500 injured badly. The Dhaka city development authorities filed a case against the owners of the building and the five garment factories operating inside it. On 1st May, 2013, International Worker's Day, many workers protested in Dhaka, demanding safer working conditions and death penalty for the owner, Sohel Rana.

The accident received worldwide attention and a lot was said about improving the working condition. However after a few days everything subsided and the words never materialised in the form of effective action. Appelbaum, Lichtenstein (2014) responded, most astonishing fact was that the incidence did not receive global attention which its impact demanded because such disasters have been occurring with respect to apparel plants and another addition to the same was no news to people

Policy Implications:

The major difference between the professions considered to be dignified and others is that of work conditions. The formal attire, air-conditioned offices and better facilities create a sense of importance. This causes the 'elitist' perspective towards employment. Hence a way to change the outlook towards jobs socially considered to be below dignity is to improve their work conditions.

A policy to address this issue is 'Safety, Health and Environment at workplace' by the Indian Ministry of Labour and Employment. This policy ensures the protection of workers working in risk prone environments like mines, chemical factories, firecrackers etc and facilities like insurance and sick leaves are provided to the workers. The policy also states that a favorable work environment in which the workers are not unduly pressurized and have the freedom to express themselves is essential. Encouraging organizations to incorporate the policy objectives as part of corporate governance and working in tandem with non-government organizations to achieve the same.

Objectives of the policy:

The policy aims at elimination and prevention of accidents at workplace by building a statutory framework on occupational safety and health. Increasing expectations of workers regarding safety standards and continuous evaluation and improvement of the same is prime. Creation of 'green jobs' which involve the use of risk free technology is crucial for the sustainability of the organization and the policy's ultimate objective. Awareness among workers regarding the provisions of the policy is a crucial aspect and would be instrumental in implementing it successfully.

Action plan for policy implementation:

The Ministry has proposed the following measures for policy implementation:

- Suitable provisions for the rehabilitation and compensation such as loans and subsidies to affected persons.
- Ensuring the enforcement of all labor laws and regulations through effective monitoring systems.
- Amending the existing labour laws to benefit the present work environment and labour conditions and bring them in line with international instruments (eg. International Labour Organisation)
- Encouraging organizations to incorporate the policy objectives as part of corporate governance and working in tandem with non-government organizations to create awareness regarding the same.

Pink collared jobs:

The labour welfare policies are not sufficient to deal with this issue. It results out of sexism and hence a change in the condition of women is crucial. Policy aimed at improving the condition of women is required to address this issue. The Department of Women & Child Development in the Ministry of Human Resource Development has prepared a "**National Policy for the Empowerment of Women**" in the year 2001. The goal of this policy is to bring about the advancement, development and empowerment of women.

Policy efficacy:

Two surveys conducted to test policy efficacy which revealed the following results.

Survey 1:

A survey was conducted with the target group being individuals with non-taxable income. It revealed the following results:

Awareness of labor rights:

The survey revealed that, 92% of the sample size is unaware of their labor rights. Figure 1.1 depicts this.

Fig 1.1

Working hours:

The working hours of about 54% workers were more than 10. Out of these 54%, the percentage of men was almost 100 who work at a construction site. The remaining 46% are women who work for less than 10 hours. (depicted by figure 1.2). All the workers (100%) are part of the informal sector. Hence they do not fall under the coverage of policy.

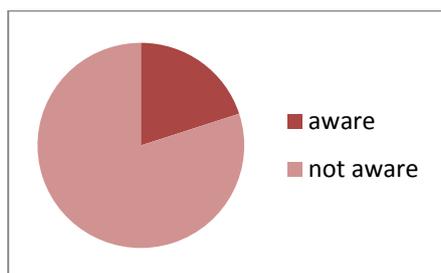
Fig 1.2

Survey 2

A survey was conducted with the target group being formal sector employees with taxable income. It revealed the following results:

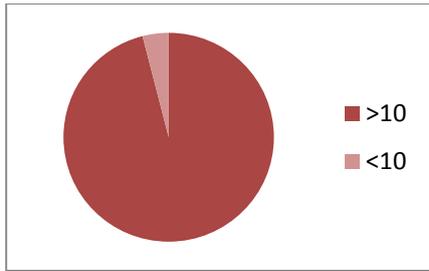
Awareness of labor rights:

80% of the respondents were partially aware of labor rights. Partial awareness implies a basic idea but lack of awareness of the nuances and provisions relevant to their field of employment. This is represented by figure 2.1.



Working hours:

The working hours of 96% of the respondents were more than ten and all (100%) of the 96% belonged to corporate sector. The working hours on paper were less than ten but the organization did not go by that.



Inference from the survey:

The policy does not cover the unorganized sector which is a major part of the workforce. The formal sector which is covered under the policy is unaware of labour rights and policies. Hence the policy implementation should improve. Awareness and inclusion of the informal sector are two aspects which need to be worked on.

Historical Context to Policy:

- The policy is based on Directive Principles of State Policy (DPSP):

The Directive Principles are included in Part IV of the Constitution of India are guidelines considered fundamental for governance in the Centre and the State as well as Policy formulation. Labour being a subject in the Concurrent list in the Constitution, both the Centre as well as the state Governments can take decisions regarding the issue. The Directive Principles are inspired by the Directive Principles in the Constitution of Ireland and Gandhism. The DPSP state that the State must ensure living wages and proper working conditions to all.

The policy is based on the following articles-

Article-39 (e) of the Indian Constitution states that, “The health and strength of workers, men and women, and the tender age of children are not abused and that citizens are not forced by economic necessity to enter a vocation unsuited to their age or strength.”

Article 41 deals with right to work, to education and to public assistance in certain cases.

Article 42 deals with the provision for just and humane conditions of work and maternity relief.

Article 43 deals with wage rate for workers.

The Policy is consistent with the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR): Article 1 of UDHR states that “All human beings are born free and are equal in dignity and rights.” Article 7 of UDHR reads “All are equal before the law and are entitled without any discrimination to equal protection of the law. All are entitled to equal protection against any discrimination in violation of this Declaration and against any incitement to such discrimination.”

- The Policy is consistent with International Labour Organisation (ILO) Convention. The Ministry of Labour and Employment has ratified the ILO Convention of Equality of Treatment (Social Security) Convention, 1962 which will propagate the value of Dignity of Labour.

SECTION 2

Interdisciplinary Perspectives

Sociological perspective:

The issue has predominantly sociological causes. The most fundamental need of an occupation is to earn a living. However social status and approval is given importance over economic rationality in this context making it a sociological issue. It is the collective mindset of the society which needs to undergo a transformation.

High Context Culture:

Sharma (2012) describes India as a high context society. This is a theory popularised by Anthropologist Edward T. Hall of high and low context cultures, classifies India as a high context culture. Such societies tend to be collectivist rather than individualistic. They are characterised by rigid behavioural patterns and formation of in-groups which are hard to be a part of for an outsider. Social pressure tends to take a toll on individual's thought process.

Hence issues like absence of Dignity of Labour are more prevalent in the Indian context and a strong backing of policy to safeguard the interest of workers becomes absolutely essential.

Employment choices such as choosing a low paying clerical job was preferred over a better paying job of driver or career choices (and future fields of employment) like opting for science field even if one is inclined towards humanities are made out of social pressure.

An observation made in the process of conducting the survey was that men did not prefer to work as domestic help. Instead, they preferred to work at a construction site which is an equally paying but riskier job. This economic irrationality is the result of domestic help being considered a Pink collar job. Empowerment of women would lead to a change in the outlook towards them.

Conflict Theory:

According to the social theory of Conflict there is a conflict between the social groups who possess differing amounts of material and non-material resources. The ones who possess more resources or the 'haves' always have an advantage over the ones who possess lesser resources or the 'have nots' when a transaction or an exchange occurs between the two groups. The theory applies to labour in India. The ones doing a 'white collar' job are the haves and those doing a 'blue collar' one are the 'have nots'. Attempts need to be made to bridge the gap between the two groups. Ensuring proper work conditions would be an initial step in the process.

This distorts the labour supply market and is a cause of voluntary unemployment which in turn will lead to poverty. Improved working conditions and treatment can reduce the gap. However this entrapment of the economy in the vicious circle of unemployment and poverty is alarming and policy in itself would not be sufficient in making the desired difference. Further if this gap continues to widen, it will give rise to economic inequalities and mass discontent. This discontent will lead to lawlessness jeopardising the economic well being.

Based on the survey, education has a significant impact on a rational outlook towards the employment.

Philosophical perspective:

- **Gandhism:**

Mahatma Gandhi was a propagator of the value of Dignity of Labour. He strongly held that the occupation based caste system in India was a breeding ground for absence of Dignity of Labour in the Indian society. Gandhi opposed the ill treatment of the lower caste individuals who engaged in menial

jobs such as scavenger, sweepers, cleaners etc. and voiced his opinion even though it made him unpopular in the eyes of the orthodox Hindus in India. According to Richards (1995) Gandhi empathised with the downtrodden. He was ready to give up *moksha* or liberation (the ultimate stage according to Hinduism) and be reborn as a downtrodden in order to understand the kind of suffering they had to go through.

The DPSP on which the chosen policy is based, are inspired by Gandhism.

- **Ethics:**

Awoniyi (2013) reported that Dignity of Labour is consistent with the very nature of humanity. Doing one's work sincerely is a way of reaching God. Indian culture maintains that 'Work is Worship'. All prominent religions in India - Hindu, Islam and Christianity consider 'Dignity of Labour' as a desirable virtue. Any work that is faithfully performed has supernatural values.

SECTION 3

Economic perspective

Significance of the issue from an economic angle:

1. Marxian Theory of Value:

The Labour Theory of Value implies that the finished product's value is a summation of all the units of labour employed to produce it. This theory establishes direct link between every worker associated with production, regardless of his/her position in the hierarchy of organisational structure and the revenue earned by the firm. Thus every worker has a role to play in the efficiency of an organisation and deserves a dignified treatment.

India being a labour abundant nation, a manual labourer is easily dispensable. Also a major part of the manufacturing and Agricultural sector has informal employment and hence the workers do not benefit from the provisions of the labour welfare policies. Many workers are not aware of their labour rights and hence are unable to exercise them. Hence, manual workers' contribution is considered to be menial. The policy can be useful in creating awareness regarding rights and provisions.

A similar thought is portrayed in the ancient Indian epic Ramayana. In the epic, Lord Rama's army of monkeys was helping him build a bridge to Sri Lanka across the Indian Ocean. The strong monkeys were throwing huge boulders on the water. There was a small squirrel who wanted to be useful as well. So she would brush her back with the sand on the beach and then go and deposit it in the water. Lord Rama was deeply touched by her gesture. He recognised that though she could not lift big boulders, she was doing the best she could. So he caressed her back in appreciation and the imprints of his fingers stayed forever. Hence the contribution of the squirrel's labour added value in building the bridge to Lanka.

2. Individual's progress

Adam Smith's theory of Value looks at labour as a 'real value in exchange'. So a worker's labour (mental or physical) is something he/she offers in order to earn money and is hence a source of livelihood. The money an individual earns is not only dependent on his/her skills but also on his/her dispensability. The more indispensable an employee is, the more he/she can charge the employer for his/her services. It is purely a question of demand and supply of labour which decides its price. The criteria of an individual while choosing a job is hierarchy in the organisation and not just the salary. A job has to be socially appropriate along with being lucrative. An individual would choose to work at a call centre than drive a cab even if the latter could be more paying. Individuals tend to place their

social goals over their need to earn a living. Hence it would be economically rational for an individual to perceive a job as a means of livelihood rather than a yardstick to measure social status. The policy could help to better work conditions such as uniforms for workers, sanitation facilities and cleanliness measures of providing them with gloves and other aids would give their work a sense of formality improving social perception and workers' confidence.

Dignity at Work

An organisation can increase its level of employee satisfaction by ensuring dignity at workplace for all employees-from sweepers and cleaners to the Chief Executive Officer. Dignity at work is a part of the broader ideology of Dignity of labour. It implies that workers should be treated well at the workplace. Protection from improper sexual advances and inappropriate behaviour from co-workers should be assured to a worker. Proper sanitation, ventilation and other facilities should also be availed. Even emotional environment should be conducive to the progress of the worker. The worker's psychology should be taken in due consideration by the management. Pande (2013) reported that today's youth want their work to mean something more than a fat pay check.

3. Unemployment:

According to Martin Luther King Jr., any discrimination in the employment market with regards to social background (caste, race etc.) or the wages paid will result in discontent among the workers leading to unemployment. Though in economic terms this would be considered a case of voluntary unemployment, Dr. King disagrees and says that this is also involuntary as the worker has no choice. Hence this special case of unemployment distorts the market forces by reducing labour supply.

4. Flexibility of Labour Market:

When India underwent reforms in 1991 and it became part of global market economy, the developed nations and some other African nations were already part of the global economy. Freeman (2008) argues that the entry of India and China increased the global pool of workers and calls this '**the great doubling**'. Therefore it is essential for India be able to compete at an international level. Hence flexibility of the market is essential for this purpose. Prevalence of Dignity of Labour would lead to this desired flexibility. If an individual has inhibitions in taking up a particular job opportunity because it not a 'white collar' job that he/she would be doing, its repercussions are going to be on the country's economic growth and ultimately global competency.

Role of Policy:

From an economic viewpoint, the aim of the chosen policy regarding Labour welfare is economic development. India is a labour intensive economy with a dependency ratio of 52% (2013). The size of workforce is only going to grow in years to come. Hence it is crucial for India to be prepared to accommodate the population in its labour market. If a part of the workforce is unwilling to take up certain jobs due to lack of Dignity or unfavourable work conditions, it will reflect poorly on India's economic performance. In education also, it is observed that demand for certain courses and careers is highly competitive while others have seats going vacant. For example professions like medicine and engineering are coveted. Though many aspire for certain courses, the society's demand for those professionals (such as engineering and Chartered Accountancy) is not increasing. Hence it is seen that

qualified individuals are jobless in their fields. A distorted demand and supply dynamics will mar the labour market's employability and efficiency leading to the slowdown of India's growth rate.

A due consideration to the needs of workers today is essential for a better tomorrow.

SECTION 4

Measures other than policy:

Along with labour welfare laws and policies, the following measures would lead to dignity of labour.

Innovation:

Innovation is widely used in the designing of like automobiles, cosmetics etc. which predominantly has a market for the upper echelons of the society. However, innovation for improving the work conditions of manual workers and labourers at the bottom of the pyramid is also essential. Hence a National Innovation Council has been set up in India. The council aims at encouraging scientists and innovators to come up with new ideas which would help reduce the drudgery of workers by providing them the required funds.

The Council announced six winning innovations which include novel design of a rickshaw, a human powered motor, display unit for street vendors, a low-cost cycle for physically challenged which would help reduce the drudgery of construction of sanitation facility for workers.

Skills Development Convention:

The Human Resource Development ministry has started a skills development convention. This convention aims at teaching various skills such as plumbing, mechanic work, technical knowledge required for electrician etc. Development of skills would lead to the entry of these workers in the employment market, increasing employment which would also lead to poverty alleviation. These skills have conventionally been looked down upon as they are not 'intellectual' or part of formal education. It is important that a worker is proud of his/her job of manual labourer or a mechanic. Hence this convention is also a means of abolishing the stigma and promoting dignity of labor. The Human Resource minister, Smriti Irani, says that the Convention is a precursor to 'Make in India' movement launched by Prime Minister Modi. A skilled India is a step towards development. The Union Finance Minister Arun Jaitley said that skill development would be given priority so that more and more trained workers join the Indian economy.

Skills Development is also a policy by the Ministry of Labour and Employment which covers the unorganised sector (unlike the chosen policy, 'Safety, Health and Environment at workplace') along with the formal sector. This is very significant in a country like India where 85% of the workforce belongs to the informal sector.

Trade unions:

Trade unions are a representation of the strength and voice of the workers. Backing of strong trade unions can, therefore, prevent exploitation of workers. A representative of trade unions should be

involved in the formulation of the Union Budget so that their demands relating to wages, job security, facilities etc. are looked into.

Finance Minister Arun Jaitley (prior to the Union Budget 2014-15) had said that the Government will give due consideration to the Ten Point Joint Charter of Demands given by the Central Trade Unions while formulating the budgetary proposals.

Participatory decision making:

When workers are involved in the decision making process, their needs are better taken care of and they develop a sense of belonging to the organization. This loyalty is an advantage for the organization from a long term perspective as it would avoid workers' strikes and would improve their performance. Hence it is beneficial to both the parties. A representative of workers can be on the panel of Board of Directors or the Supervisory division. Co-determination is one such practice wherein workers have a role to play in the management of an organization. It was started in Germany where workers play an important role in the management.

Awareness:

An awareness of labour laws and provisions by the Government would alert the workers against any exploitation at the workplace. At the same time, a social awareness regarding 'Dignity of Labour' is essential. An appreciation of an honest job and not being judgmental of the profession is very crucial. The media can make a significant contribution in creating awareness. Coverage to International Labourers' Day which falls on 1st May, publishing articles regarding promotion of trade unions and a say of the representative of trade unions in the Annual Budget are some of the measures that would be taken by the media.

Conclusion:

The survey conducted revealed that the issue of dignity of labour is predominantly a consequence of a lack of economic rationality. This irrationality is the result of a hierarchy orientation and a high context nature of the society makes it vulnerable to a need for social conformity and approval. This is deep rooted issue. Labour welfare policies would be effective in improving people's perception but it would not bring about substantial changes in the social mindset. This transformation in the mindset would be brought about by education. **Hence it is the non-economic aspects which have been the dominant in causing this issue.**

Impact of education:

It is crucial for people to understand that social approval does not satisfy one's basic needs; money does. **The younger, educated generation of the slum dwellers seemed to have grasped this.** There was a monumental difference in their thought process and level of awareness. This was an impact of education and the ideal of rationality which it instils. Education would also lead to empowerment of women and hence reduce 'pink ghettos'.

Vocational training:

Although education is necessary for rationality, it is imperative that education should be employment oriented and not examination oriented. Hence vocational training would benefit. The recommended educational system would be a formal education upto fifth grade (about eleven years of age) and then training programmes for developing various skills such as cooking, plumbing, technician etc. It would be a more practical application oriented system. This would ensure that employment for the children once they are ready to enter the workforce.

A silver lining....

Despite the social pressure, there are those who did 'blue collars' jobs. The value of Dignity of Labour is observed in India's youth. They are willing to take up jobs of delivering services, waiting, cleaning etc. and finance their education on their own like their American counterparts. Political leaders like Smriti Irani and Prime Minister Modi are coming forwards and proudly claiming to have been a waitress and a tea-stall vendor respectively.

Other related aspects for further research

Labour laws and policies:

The implementation of policies regarding labour welfare should be ensured. The provisions of labour laws should be revisited every ten years. (If) Labour reforms are made, they should be discussed with the representative of the trade union before implementing them. This would ensure that the reforms are made in the right direction and worker's needs are taken care of.

Unorganised sector:

85% of India's workforce belongs to the informal sector. Therefore it does not benefit from the labour welfare policies. Hence through skill development and training programmes, efforts should be made to divert the informal labour workforce to the formal economy.

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