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The Changing Future of Work: Examining India's Alternatives and Possibilities

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Introduction:

For a country like India with low regular employment growth and high demographic dividends, the question of managing transitions on the world of work bears some crucial significance. Several policy reports have attempted to visualize the future of work by examining the megatrends in jobs market, defining the meaning of work for individuals and society, and by discussing the technological change shaping job creation and governance (ILO 2017). Some of the major findings from these analyses include: i) worker's job switching to different occupations, ii) concentration of employment growth in high-skill jobs and reduction in routine office-jobs with rising use of robotics, iii) rise of e-commerce and investments in green economy, and iv) increased demand for particular goods and services for ageing population. The changes in the nature of work and labour market after the COVID-19 pandemic made us experience job losses, adjustments in the nature of job and work spaces. The pandemic also pushed faster adoption of digital technologies, automation and use of AI. The growth in remote work and E-commerce are further expected to lead to faster adoption of automation, thereby posing the question as what would the future of work signify for employment, skills, and wages. Since issues of social and economic inequality still remain crucial in India, the future of work must also address the questions on equity and inclusion, particularly the participation of women in labour-force.

Context:

It may be mentioned that the ILO Global Commission on the Future of Work suggested a set of measures to address the challenges caused by unprecedented transformational change in the world of work, some of which are: i) universal labour guarantee that protects fundamental workers' rights, adequate living wage, limits on hours of work and safe and healthy workplaces, ii) guaranteed social protection, iii) universal entitlement to lifelong learning that enables people to skill, reskill and upskill, iv) managing technological change to boost decent work, including an international governance system for digital labour platforms, v) greater

investments in the care, green and rural economies, vi) transformative and measurable agenda for gender equality, vii) reshaping business incentives to encourage long-term investments.

It has been pointed out that economic growth did not generate commensurate industrial employment in India. Further, the improvement in literacy, schooling, and higher education or skills have led to a much faster increase in the number of persons seeking regular employment, which was never matched by the employment growth in the country. The analysis on the future of work in India should also bear in mind the structural policy issues: low employment-intensive growth, low female labour force participation, high informal employment, and poor labour market laws and institutions. A study by GoI (2022) examined the significance of India's Gig and Platform economy in the country's future of work for employment generation and suggested measures to provide social security for the workers. Several authors have emphasized that the future job creation in the country would depend on factors such as the pace of technology adoption, government policies, and the adaptability of the workforce to match the evolving industry needs. It is argued that while some sectors may see significant job growth, others may undergo restructuring of employment levels. Overall, the dynamic and evolving nature of the job market will redefine the employment and employability depending on the changing skill-level of the workers. A policy paper by the World Economic Forum (2018) has argued that although the future of work in India is uncertain, it still provides many opportunities on job creation, workplaces, employment trends, and the nature of work itself.

Some Specific Labour Market Issues:

The labour market in India has often been characterized by falling regular employment along with high levels of informal employment and rising self-employment and gig workers. While the Government has taken some positive labour market policies in the recent years, India's readiness for the changing world of work would also involve dealing with following issues: i). whether India can generate new employment opportunities for the growing labour force, ii). whether India create decent jobs with better wage and social securities, iii) whether India can ensure work opportunities for women engaged in unaccounted work, iv). whether the youth population in India or the NEET population can be absorbed in the paid economy, v). whether the workforce be equipped with better skill and educational requirements.

The question is at hand is whether India prepared for the possibilities presented by future of work? The labour market in India are currently observing falling regular

employment along with high levels of informal employment and rising self-employment and gig workers. Some analysts have claimed that self-employment in India is mainly made up of casual work and is just an opening to find regular employment. It is observed that most of India's self-employment are not designers of job creation and are unpaid family workers or helpers in household enterprises. It therefore appears that while the government policies are pushing self-employment as an answer to India's unemployment problem, the academic views have been quiet different that claimed self-employment as a form of disguised unemployment or self un(employment) in India.

There has been an ongoing decline in Indian women's work participation and experts have argued that the economic shocks of the pandemic and periodic lock-downs could have further worsened the situation in cities and villages. It is often claimed that women's work participation is better interpreted after incorporating their unpaid contribution both inside and outside of the family. The time use data provides the required information on the aspects of work participation as well as the unpaid family work. It is often argued that the unpaid work burden that is witnessed in many Indian states could be a reason for women's diminished labour market participation.

Previous analysis on the subject of education and skills as an agenda for employment generation in India suggested that skill and vocational training have often fallen short of meeting the demands of the changing job markets. The Government has recently launched Skill India Mission (SIM) aimed at skilling, reskilling and up-skilling to empower the youth of the country with market relevant skills which make them more employable and more productive in the work environment. Under Skill India Mission, the Ministry of Skill Development and Entrepreneurship (MSDE) delivers skill, re-skill and up-skill training through various schemes viz. Pradhan Mantri Kaushal Vikas Yojana (PMKVY), Jan Sikhshan Sansthan (JSS), National Apprenticeship Promotion Scheme (NAPS) and Craftsman Training Scheme (CTS) through Industrial Training Institutes (ITIs), to all the sections of the society across the country. An analysis of various rounds of PLFS data has indicated that among all the categories of persons of age 15 years and above, the worker population ratio was the lowest among those with education level up to "higher secondary" and highest for those with education level 'literate and up to primary'.

India is also experiencing slow worsening of job conditions and dipping access to social security benefits (SSB). India remained among the world's ten worst countries in terms

of worker rights, as informal workers and self-employed persons are not covered under the existing labour legislations and social protection schemes. The social protection gaps for self-employed or informal workers have remained a challenge for the country to achieve target 1.3 of SDG. This paper would attempt to examine the specific challenges that the world of work in India is currently facing and subsequently infer on whether there is an inclusive future of work in the country.

Study Objectives:

An attempt to study the country's preparedness and readiness for changed labour market policies to impact on employment would involve examining several pertinent issues, viz.,

i). what has been the extent of growth in self-employment or own-account enterprises in relation to the employment in regular jobs, and whether there is a low absorption of workers in the industry

ii). how has the current trend been able to deal with the low female labour-force participation and unpaid work

iii). what is the extent of working-age population who are not in employment, education or training (NEET), and the education and skill levels of existing workers, and,

iv) whether there is an inadequate job conditions limited access to social security benefits.

The main objective of the present paper is set to address these issues by an examination of the recent labour survey data from PLFS, 2022-23 as provided by MOSPI-NSC-GOI (2023), and the back issues. We also use the state-wise time-use survey data as provided by the National Statistical Office in India for the survey conducted during January-December 2019 (GOI 2020). We first prepare the ratios and aggregates from the recent labour survey of India and subsequently perform analyses using the cross-sectional data over 31 states in India. The rest of the paper could proceed in the following sequence. We first review the literature and evaluate the arguments on each of the four issues, viz., changing nature of the status of employment, female labour-force participation, worker's education and/or skill aspects, and the social securities in jobs (section 2). Section 3 provides the recent data evidences across Indian states. The results of the empirical analyses and the discussions are furnished in section 4. The summary of the results and policy implications are included in the final section.

Policy Significance:

The pandemic initiated the concept of remote work and caused a structural shift in the definition of 'place of work'. The changing nature or the future of work requires that both the firms and workers make informed choices on the restructuring of work. India has one of the largest young workforce in the world and yet the economy has not been able to create enough salaried jobs in the formal set-up and fully exploit its demographic dividend. The ILO Global Commission on the Future of Work has recommended the governments to commit to a human-centred agenda that is based on investing in people's capabilities, institutions of work and in decent and sustainable work. Our results can provide some insights on the how the country can capitalise on the opportunities presented by changing world of work and make it inclusive.