

Chakravyuh: A Saga of Indian Informal Labour

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ABSTRACT

This research paper delves into the multifaceted challenges of the informal economy in India, evoking an emotional journey that exposes the harsh realities and untold stories of marginalised individuals and communities. By intertwining personal narratives, vivid anecdotes, and rigorous analysis, this study uncovers the human face behind the statistics, giving voice to the voiceless and shedding light on their struggles. It argues that these deplorable conditions prevent workers from transitioning to the formal sector, ensuring an unrestrained growth of the informal economy and exposing an even greater number of people to its perils.

Drawing upon qualitative interviews, ethnographic observations, and an extensive literature review, this research immerses itself in the lived experiences of those engaged in the informal economy. Through intimate conversations with 12 interviewees residing in Delhi who have migrated from all over the country, participants recount tales of resilience, perseverance, and determination in the face of immense adversity, painting a vivid picture of their daily battles against socioeconomic constraints and systemic injustices.

The findings of this study reveal a heart-breaking tapestry of challenges faced by individuals operating in the informal economy. From limited access to healthcare and education to exploitative working conditions and social exclusion, the emotional weight of these challenges is felt through the poignant stories shared by participants. Their accounts of survival against all odds speak volumes about their indomitable spirit and unwavering hope for a brighter future.

Amidst the emotional journey lies a call to action. This research paper highlights the urgent need for comprehensive policy reforms, social interventions, and institutional support to alleviate the plight of those trapped in the informal economy. It advocates for inclusive development strategies prioritising the empowerment, protection, and dignified livelihoods of marginalised individuals and communities, aiming to restore their lost sense of agency and unlock their hidden potential.

I hope to invoke empathy, compassion, and a sense of shared responsibility by presenting this research paper. It is an invitation to confront the uncomfortable truths and challenges permeating the informal economy in India.

Keywords: informal economy, marginalised communities, challenges, personal narratives, social justice, policy reforms, empowerment, compassion

INTRODUCTION

Before I delve deeper into the plight of informal workers in India, it is imperative to discern what an informal economy encompasses. In 2003, the 17th International Conference of Labour Statisticians examined informality from a different perspective: jobs. By doing so, they defined the concept of **informal employment** as "all remunerative work (i.e. both self-employment and wage employment) that is not registered, regulated or protected by existing legal or regulatory frameworks, as well as non-remunerative work undertaken in an income-producing enterprise." According to the International Monetary Fund, about 2 billion workers, or 60 per cent of the world's employed population ages 15 and older, spend at least part of their time in the informal sector."

It makes sense, therefore, to ask why someone would choose informality over something definite to fall back on. On the one hand, businesses may have a capitalist desire to avoid taxes and social contributions or concede to standards and licensing requirements. This relates to the common but misconceived view that informality is driven mainly by firms and individuals "cheating" to avoid paying taxes. On the other hand, individuals may rely on informal activities as a safety net: they may lack the education and skills for formal employment or be too poor to access public and financial services.

Inevitably, like all other social issues, labour informality differs significantly in developing countries like India, Sri Lanka, and Pakistan as opposed to first-world nations. 93% of the world's informal employment is in developing countries. It's obvious why. Limited formal job possibilities, high poverty levels, insufficient education, lack of skills training, and inadequate regulatory frameworks contribute to the informal economy's prevalence in third-world nations. Simply put, as an economy develops, informality shrinks.

As an inverse relationship emerges between informality and development, the relationship between poverty and informality sparks a question. Does one cause the other? Which one came first? It's a chicken and egg situation; only this one might have a definite answer.

Informality thrives in the absence of viable alternatives. With its grip on countless lives, poverty drives people towards informal employment to survive and get a square meal on the table. The lack of access to formal jobs, education, and social protections forces individuals into the informal sector, where work is often characterised by low wages, exploitative conditions, and limited rights. Poverty restricts individuals from acquiring the necessary skills, education, and resources for formal employment. As a result, they resort to informal work to generate income, meet their basic needs and support their families.

As poverty perpetuates informality, the cycle becomes difficult to break, and we're left with a country like India or Sri Lanka.

Informal labour in India is more than just a statistic; it is the beating heart of the nation's economy, representing its people's resilience and indomitable spirit. Informal labourers form the backbone of numerous industries, from agriculture and construction to retail and services. They contribute tirelessly to the growth and sustenance of the economy, often in the face of overwhelming adversity. Their labour fills the gaps left by formal employment, catering to the needs of a vast and diverse population.

Despite this importance, it becomes evident that there is no formal wage policy set by the government in the country, and there is nothing set in place to fall back on. For example, a recent Oxfam India report suggests, "During the lockdown of 2020, out of a total 122 million who lost their jobs, 75 per cent, which accounts for 92 million jobs, were lost in the informal sector."

Estimates of Employment in India²

Industrial Category	No. of persons (in millions)	
	Formal Sector	Informal Sector
Agriculture	1.39	238.87
Non-Agriculture	26.68	131.5
Mining & Quarrying	1.01	1.25
Manufacturing	6.71	37.07
Electricity, Gas And Water	1	0.04
Construction	1.17	16.36
Trade, Hotels And Restaurants	0.49	40.37
Transport, Storage & Comm.	3.15	11.48
Financial Services	1.65	3.29
Community Services	11.49	21.64
All Sectors	28.07	(93%) 370.37

Year: 1999/00 (Total labour force: 406 million) (GDP share: 63%)

From street vendors and domestic helpers to construction workers and agricultural labourers, these workers face a multitude of injustices. They often lack job security or social protection, leaving them vulnerable to exploitation and abuse. Health and safety hazards plague their working environments, with limited access to protective gear or regulations that safeguard their well-being. Their labour is undervalued, and their rights are routinely violated as they toil long hours in gruelling conditions without legal protections.

Keywords: backbone of industries, no formal wage policy, exploitation, abuse

It takes a toll on their lives. The weight of poverty and uncertainty thrashes their spirits, leaving scars of desperation and despair. They are denied the basic human dignity they deserve, their lives marred by the chains of exploitation.

There are positives, however. Initiatives like MGNREGA, Skill India, and Ayushman Bharat, express the government's desire to address the needs of informal workers and improve their currently dire socio-economic conditions. What is evident, though, is that the actions to improve the precarious lives of informal workers fall short of the expressed desires to do so.

Recognising the importance of informal labour means acknowledging the human stories behind the statistics, understanding their challenges, and providing support to enhance their livelihoods. It means ensuring fair wages, improving working conditions, and extending social protections. It means creating an inclusive society where workers' contributions are valued, and their well-being is prioritised.

More than proving a point, this paper is a call to action. We must stand united to break the chains that bind labourers, eradicating the exploitation that stains our nation's conscience. Only then can we forge a society where every worker is valued, every voice is heard, and the dignity of labour is upheld.

Keywords: poverty, dire socio-economic conditions, uncertainty



A Brief History

The history of informal labour in India is a tale of harsh realities and unrelenting struggles endured by countless individuals trapped in a vicious cycle of exploitation and poverty. It is concerning to discern that informal labour in India has always been deeply intertwined with a caste system perpetuating inequality and marginalisation. This oppressive social structure relegated certain groups to menial and low-status occupations, denying them access to dignified work and trapping them in a cycle of generational poverty.

During the colonial era, India suffered under the ruthless exploitation of the British Empire. Farmers were forced into oppressive contracts that bound them to plant indigo and sell it to British planters at low prices. The Zamindari system and the Ryotwari system imposed heavy taxation on Indian farmers. Indentured labour workers in Mauritius, Fiji, and the Caribbean were subjected to harsh living and working conditions, physical abuse, and minimal wages. The colonisers looted the country's resources, robbing away wealth and impoverishing the population. The scars of this exploitative legacy still haunt the present-day informal labour sector.

Post-independence, as Nehru desired, hindrances between caste, religion, and language began to die down. Migrants of Bengali, Brahmin, or Muslim origin, over time, found these identities less paramount than an identity based on their job. Through state-led development, many Indian workers fled the web of the village and ruthless exploitation.

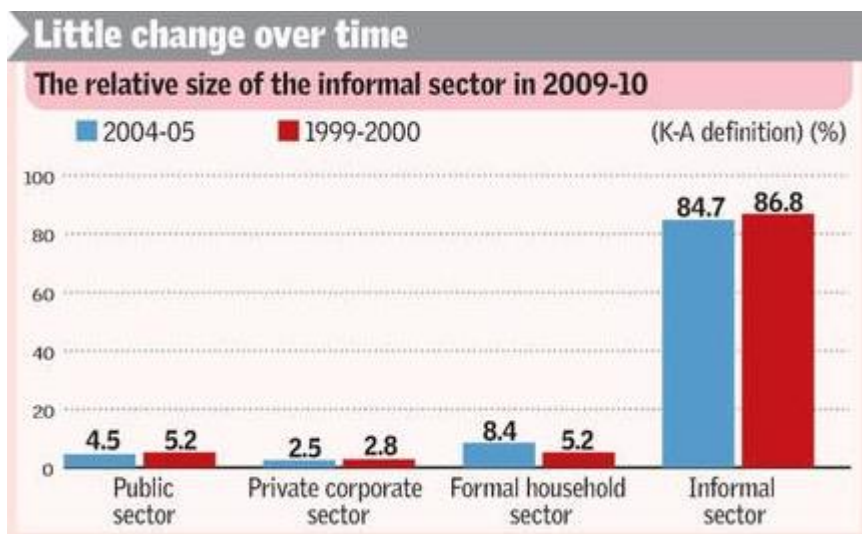
However, these workers, even during the height of Nehruvian "socialism" in the 1960s, still only comprised a small fraction of the whole class, testifying to the general failure of the vision that all was well for those who worked in India. Limited job opportunities, rampant corruption, and an apathetic bureaucracy perpetuated the conditions that allow informal labour to thrive. Workers were left to fend for themselves, with little access to social protections, healthcare, or education.

Even today, there are two major defects of Indian labour law. First, it is not nearly as friendly as Nehru and other Indian leaders of the state-capitalist era presented it. The second significant problem is that parts of the Industrial Disputes Act (IDA, 1947) and the Contract Labour Act (CLA, 1970) favouring workers the most have been systematically unenforced at the central and state levels.

I may be a controversial polemicist for saying this, but it seems like the government will never take concrete action to help those helping them.

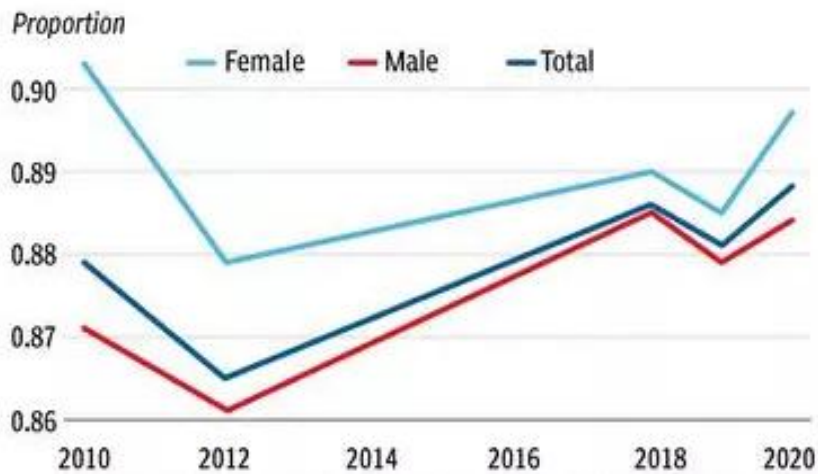
The plight of informal labourers is perpetuated by a society that turns a blind eye to their suffering and, in fact, causes it. The stories I've heard while conducting interviews narrate harrowing tales of exploitation of domestic help. Physical abuse, a single meal of bread a day, and derogatory comments about skin colour, religion and class speak volumes of how far we've come as a nation. The legacy of colonialism, combined with a lack of political will and societal apathy, has condemned millions of individuals to despair and marginalisation.

Only through collective action, empathy, and a relentless pursuit of justice can we hope to create a society where every worker, regardless of their status, is treated with fairness and humanity.



Rising informal employment

By gender (2010–20)



The figure shows time-series plots of the proportion of workers who are informally employed in each year, according to gender

Keywords: caste system, colonial, marginalisation

Unveiling Unheard Voices

In the labyrinthine streets of India, a hidden world exists where dreams and desperation intertwine. This is the unregulated structure of the informal economy in India, a realm marked by shadows and vulnerability.

Behind the bustling streets and glittering skylines lies a harsh reality that often goes unnoticed. In the vast tapestry of the informal economy, workers' lives unfold with distinct hues, shaped by the interplay of region, age, gender, and race. As we journey through the heartaches and triumphs of these workers, we are compelled to confront the injustices and call for change. Because of its unregulated structure, the informal economy is not a monolithic sector but an assemblage of forms of employment and is therefore marked by deep irregularities and heterogeneity.

This means that workers' experiences in the informal economy vary depending on the kind of work due to differences in region, age, gender and race.

(i) Regional differences

Regional disparities cast long shadows upon the lives of informal workers. In rural landscapes, labourers toil under the relentless sun, their calloused hands nurturing the land that sustains them. In urban centres, the streets become a battleground of dreams as migrants from far-flung corners seek elusive opportunities amidst the towering structures of ambition. Their struggles, aspirations, and essence vary, painting a landscape of stark contrasts. The Indian Express takes "Kandanthara" as an example. The Kandanthara district of Perumbavoor, Kerala, has the largest concentration of Bengali-speaking labourers. With labourers dominating the locality, nearly 3,200 migrant workers are living in Perumbavoor municipal area.

What is gut-wrenching is there is zero contact between the labourers and the employer since most of them are taken in through contractors. So when they are not paid salaries, they don't have a provision to complain. There won't be any evidence as no formal contract exists between the employer and the labourer. "There are many cases in which employers owe labourers salary running into several lakhs," says Benoy, Director, Centre for Migration and Inclusive Development (CMID). "They come here since they don't have good employment options back home. The ID cards of the workers are forcibly withheld by employers. At times, this stops them from getting employment elsewhere. If they decide to return home, many sectors will stand a standstill, and our economy will be affected badly. The government and people should adopt a migrant-inclusive nature," he says.



During this project, I interacted with a migrant worker from a small village in Chhattisgarh. Ismita, age 25, shared her personal journey, providing an eye-opening glimpse into the daily life and aspirations of a migrant worker.

Ismita discussed the driving forces behind her decision to migrate from her rural village. She shared her overwhelming desire for a better life, improved income, and opportunities for her education. All of 15 when she came to Delhi, Ismita's story encapsulates the dreams and hopes that often propel individuals to embark on the challenging migration journey.

She openly shared the difficulties of adjusting to urban life, including housing issues, exploitative working conditions, social isolation, and the emotional toll of being separated from her family. "I have bouts of feeling incredibly lonely and worthless. I wanted to become a doctor and study medicine, and I was told if I came to Delhi, I could pursue this dream. But I was soon sent to work as a domestic helper, and there were days I would sleep hungry." Ismita's story is a testament to the resourcefulness and tenacity demonstrated by migrant workers.

The interview with Ismita offers a glimpse into the life of a migrant worker in India, showcasing the determination and sacrifices made in pursuit of a better future. "I don't know of any rights the government has chalked out for us simply

because I feel deprived of them."

As she voiced her daily feelings, missing home was her most significant concern. She missed her family and, when asked why she couldn't go back, explained that she was the only one working in her family. She would send money back home so her brothers could study, even though she had to give up her education.

It hurt to see her wishing her life was different, and as I reflect on the catch-22 she's in, I feel all the more reason to write a paper like this.

(ii) Identity differences

A harsh truth unfolds in India's informal labour sector. Women, old people and individuals with disabilities still struggle, poignantly reminding us of the deep-rooted inequalities in the informal labour landscape.

Children, with their innocent faces and fragile dreams, are often forced into labour at a tender age. Kailash Satyarthi once said, "There is no greater violence than to deny the dreams of our Children."

These young souls carry burdens far beyond their years, toiling long hours in factories, construction sites, and informal markets. Their laughter is replaced with exhaustion as concerns like human trafficking and rape come into the limelight. Although the Child Labour (Prohibition and Regulation) Act, 1986, and Juvenile Justice (Care and Protection of Children) Act, 2015, etc., were set into place, a law is simply phrases in the Constitution unless enforced. I interviewed a child working on a construction site named Garv. All of 8, Garv was sent to Delhi to work from Jharkhand. "Do you know of any rights the government chalks out for young boys like you?" He was shocked because he had never heard of them. The lack of education and awareness among those less fortunate drives them to their life condition today. Many are unaware of their rights, labour laws, and available resources for formal employment. This lack of knowledge leaves them vulnerable to exploitation and trapped in the informal sector. Insufficient awareness about alternative opportunities and support systems perpetuates the cycle of casual labour, as individuals remain unaware of pathways to escape this precarious existence.

The plight of women has several baffled. According to a Hindustan Times Interview, "Savitaben, a resident of Savda Ghevra resettlement colony, said threats of sexual harassment were a serious concern when it came to women who step out to earn for their families." Her words were as follows. "Since we had to cross a jungle to reach around Tikri border to find work, we mostly travelled in groups. Three-four years ago, a group of men attacked four women. Three of them manage to flee, but the one left behind was gang-raped," Savita said, while her teenage daughter added, "The body was thrown into a canal". Women in the informal labour sector endure exploitative working conditions, harassment, and a constant struggle to balance their familial responsibilities with their economic pursuits. They bear the weight of multiple burdens, yet their voices often go unheard.

I interviewed Kiran, an unmarried 40-year-old from Jharkhand, working as a cook in a house in Delhi. "I fled from home at the age of 11. They refused to pay for my education so my brothers could attend school. I ran away from home and came to Delhi. They would get me married soon, but I wanted to study."

Kiran's response was as follows when asked why she started working so early. "When my parents found out, they forced me to send home money. I had to find a way, but no one would employ an 11-year-old. So I learnt to cook and moved to a house where I started working."

As tears trickled down her eyes, she explained how she would cry in the bathroom every day because she felt inferior. She had different plates and bowls, no bed to sleep on, and was forced to eat leftovers as meals.

Everyone in her family slowly passed away as she grew up in Delhi, feeling lonesome and hopeless.

"Do you want to get married?" She smiled and said, "I can't. If I get married, I'll have kids, and I still don't make enough to fend for another life other than mine. I feel trapped in my job. There's a way to get in but no way out."

Besides her mental turmoil, Kiran struggles as a patient of Elephantiasis. "My doctor is different than theirs. It makes me feel my disease isn't worthy of proper care."

Kiran is one of at least 85,20,00,000 stories that go through similar turmoil, sometimes even worse. As I witnessed her struggles and heard her voice, I realised transformation begins with acknowledging the various risks these individuals face and committing ourselves to dismantling the barriers that hinder their progress.

Keywords: inferior, rights, lonesome, harassment



LABOUR LAWS IN INDIA

Before delving into the scenario in India, one must discern how the world looks at informal labour. In 1993, the 15th International Conference of Labour Statisticians at the ILO (15th ICLS) defined the **informal sector** as a set of production units comprised of unincorporated firms owned by families, including informal own-account businesses and corporations of informal employers (typically small and non-registered enterprises). This definition limited the definition of informality to enterprises.

In 2003, the 17th International Conference of Labour Statisticians at the ILO (17th ICLS) guidelines examined informality from a different perspective: jobs. By doing so, they defined the concept of **informal employment** as "all remunerative work (i.e. both self-employment and wage employment) that is not registered, regulated or protected by existing legal or regulatory frameworks, as well as non-remunerative work undertaken in an income-producing enterprise." Informal employment and the informal sector, thus, are, for obvious reasons, complimentary.

It is heart-breaking to see the situation in India. According to Oxfam's latest global report, The Inequality Virus, out of the total 122 million who lost their jobs in 2020, 75 per cent, which translates to 92 million jobs, were lost in the informal sector. The report further highlights that over 300 informal workers died due to the lockdown, ranging from starvation, suicide, exhaustion, road and rail accidents, police brutality and denial of timely medical care. The National Human Rights Commission recorded over 2,582 cases of human rights violations as early as April 2020. India's estimated 450 million informal workers comprise 90 per cent of its workforce, with 5-10 million workers added annually. It hurts to see India fall short of international labour standards, with nearly every wealthy household having domestic labour at home and roughly half of them treating them poorly. The government, with good intentions, has tried to meet most of the workers' needs over the years by designing and outlining numerous labour laws. Still, their minimal implementation remains a source of concern on the ground.

The Wage Code, which was passed in 2019, replaced four laws. The following laws were repealed: the Minimum Wage Act of 1948, the Equal Remuneration Act of 1976, the Payment of Wages Act of 1936, and the Payment of Bonus Act of 1965. This Act was enacted to amend and consolidate the laws governing wages, bonuses, and related matters. A Gazetted Officer will hear and decide any disputes that arise, according to Section 45 of the code. It is concerning that the officers will listen to complicated legal questions without legal knowledge. Section 52 of the Code adds a new provision stating that the power to impose a penalty will be with an officer not lower than the rank of a secretary rather than a judicial magistrate. This section violates Article 50 of the Constitution, which requires the separation of the judiciary and the executive.

The Social Security Code Of 2020 excludes many workers from the scheme because it only covers enterprises with a minimum number of employees (10 or 20 employees) and gives advantages such as pension and medical insurance benefits to such establishments. It goes without saying that there are unplugged gaps that the government fails to take heed to.

With inadequate labour laws, workers are left vulnerable to the whims of unscrupulous employers. Long hours of toil offer little respite, while meagre wages keep them in a cycle of poverty. Unsafe working conditions threaten their physical and mental well-being, with no safety net to catch them when they fall.

The absence of social security measures deepens their plight. Illness, accidents, or the toll of old age push them further into the abyss of destitution, as they bear the burden alone, without healthcare or pensions to ease their suffering. The cycle of poverty and vulnerability becomes an inescapable reality.

Discrimination adds salt to their wounds. Women face a double-edged sword, enduring gender-based biases and unequal pay. Marginalised communities, cast aside by a system built on privilege, face discrimination that perpetuates their marginalisation, limiting their access to dignified work and fair treatment.

The power imbalance between employers and workers grows as weak labour laws inhibit collective bargaining and leave workers voiceless. Their cries for justice and fair treatment go unheard, as they are denied the right to advocate for better wages, improved conditions, and respect for their dignity.

This web of inadequate laws casts a dark shadow on the nation's development. Economic growth loses its lustre when it is built on the broken backs of exploited workers. Inequality widens, stifling progress and perpetuating social divisions.

"I'm not aware of the chemicals we work with, so I don't know how dangerous they are, but I don't get paid enough for the living conditions I'm stuck with. I sleep in the construction site, on the gravel; we all do", says Kanha, a 30-year-old construction worker in Delhi. He sleeps on gravel every day, breathes in lead dust and fume, unaware of the severe damage it can cause to him.

This is just a single story. Nearly 45 workers lived parallel lives, if not worse, just on that single construction site.

But within the despair, a glimmer of hope remains. Workers unite, their resilience a testament to the indomitable human spirit. The struggle for labour rights reverberates nationwide, demanding change and justice. To truly address the consequences of inadequate laws, India must embrace reform. Stronger labour laws must be forged, rooted in compassion, equity, and justice. Protection must be extended to all workers, regardless of gender, caste, or social status. Social security nets must be woven to catch those who stumble, offering support in times of need.

From Informality to Empowerment

Even though informal jobs are majorly considered a stepping-stone to formal careers by developing workers' skills, it proves to be a dead-end as workers with no access to education are stuck in low-paying jobs in the informal sector instead of achieving upward economic mobility. This is why the informal economy is a structural issue.

Informality blooms only when there is a lack of alternatives. The interviews showed that, given the choice, labourers would never pick the life they have today. Then why did they? Why not transition from informality to empowerment? The thing is, the road to formality is paved with uncertainty. Informal workers endure exploitative conditions, paltry wages, and a lack of legal protections. They yearn to escape from the clutches of vulnerability and have a chance to secure a better future for themselves and their families.

However, obstacles persist. Navigating the regulatory framework of the formal economy can be daunting, particularly for individuals with limited knowledge or resources. Complex bureaucratic procedures, licensing requirements, and compliance with labour laws pose significant barriers, making the transition process arduous. Informal workers often rely on informal networks and relationships for their livelihoods, and their desire for a better life is often overpowered by their resistance to change.



"It's too late, and it's too scary", says Sunita, a home worker from UP. "I migrated thinking I'll do something big, but I never thought I'll be cleaning for someone else all my life. I want to leave, but who'll employ me in the formal sector now?"

The transition remains an uphill battle, even today. Government policies like Start-Up India, Deendayal Antyodaya Yojana, remain nearly inconsequential as issues like limited reach, insufficient implementation and inadequate social protection plague society. Addressing these issues requires continuous evaluation and improvement of existing policies and performance-targeted measures. Ensuring broader outreach, simplifying regulations, enhancing skill development initiatives, and expanding social protection schemes are essential steps in creating a more conducive environment for transitioning from the informal to the formal economy in India.

Policy Recommendations

The Indian government is vital in empowering informal labour through policy interventions, resource allocation, and advocacy. It understands that casual workers are the backbone of the economy, toiling tirelessly in the shadows, often without legal protections or social security. With this understanding, the government has implemented various schemes and initiatives to address their needs.

Moreover, the government's role in advocacy and representation cannot be understated. It amplifies the voices of informal workers, advocating for their rights, fair treatment, and improved working conditions. The government acts as a bridge, connecting casual workers with opportunities, resources, and platforms to voice their concerns and aspirations.

The emotional significance of the government's role lies in the hope it brings to millions of informal workers. It acknowledges their struggles, listens to their stories, and works towards a more inclusive and equitable society. The government's efforts instil a sense of belonging, dignity, and empowerment among informal workers as they realise their contributions are recognised and valued by the nation.

It was alarming to see that every interviewee wanted a single thing, an education. In their hearts, informal workers yearn to see a world beyond their current reality. Like a beacon of hope, education promises to unlock doors that have long remained closed. It offers a glimmer of opportunity, a chance to break free from poverty and vulnerability.

Several recommendations come to mind to empower informal labour. The government could develop information campaigns highlighting education's benefits, dispel myths and misconceptions, and address casual workers' specific needs and challenges.

Forging partnerships with non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and civil society organisations could help work directly with informal worker labourers. By implementing these, the Indian government can make significant strides in empowering casual labour through education. Education will equip them with essential knowledge and skills and enable them to break free from the cycle of poverty, improve their livelihoods, and contribute meaningfully to the nation's socio-economic development.

CONCLUSION

Through interviews with workers in the informal sector, this paper offered exhaustive detail of the precarious conditions in the informal economy. It argued that these deplorable conditions prevent workers from transitioning to the formal sector, ensuring an unrestrained growth of the informal economy and exposing an even greater number of people to its perils.

In the labyrinthine maze of India's informal labour sector, the stories of struggle and resilience of millions of workers intertwine. They navigate through the shadows, battling adversity and defying the odds stacked against them. This project has shed light on the challenges these unsung heroes face, the hurdles they encounter, and the strength they embody.

The journey of informal labour workers is not merely a tale of economic survival but a testament to the human spirit. It is a narrative of resilience in the face of exploitation, determination in the face of uncertainty, and hope in the face of

despair. Often invisible and marginalised, these workers have taught me the true meaning of fortitude and perseverance.

Through this project, I have witnessed the indomitable spirit of informal labour workers, who face daily struggles with unwavering resolve. I have heard their stories of long hours, meagre wages, hazardous working conditions, and limited access to social protections. I have seen how they battle the harsh realities of life while shouldering responsibilities as breadwinners, caregivers, and pillars of their communities.

Yet, amidst these challenges, a flicker of hope remains. Informal labour workers embody a profound resilience, a strength from within. They are unwaveringly determined to create a better life for themselves and their loved ones. This resilience has propelled them forward, defying the limitations imposed by an unjust system.

As I conclude this project, I am reminded of the urgent need to address informal labour workers' challenges. As a society, we must recognise their contributions, protect their rights, and provide avenues for their empowerment. Their stories should not be confined to research papers or statistics; they should resonate within us, urging us to take action. Ultimately, the plight of informal labour workers in India is a call to action. It is a call for empathy, solidarity, and systemic change. It is a call to build a society that cherishes the contributions of all its members, regardless of their socio-economic status. Together, let us embark on a journey towards a future where every worker is seen, heard, and allowed to thrive.

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Biography of Author

Ria Devika Bhasin, is a multifaceted high school student at Modern School, Barakhamba Road, excelling in academics, leadership, music, and social initiatives. With a robust academic record, she is currently studying English, Math, Political Science, Economics, and Psychology. Her academic prowess is evident from her impressive scores in board exams in Grade 10, including perfect scores in Spanish and Social Science.

Ria's dedication to academic excellence is complemented by her passion for social causes. She founded Operation WHEN (Women's Holistic Empowerment Network) in March 2022, aiming to enhance employment and professional development prospects for underprivileged women and girls in India. The initiative provides educational resources, mentorship, and advocates for systemic changes to support women in informal labor sectors. Her efforts include the WHEN Program, a resource for middle school girls about career opportunities, and the Now and WHEN Podcast, featuring interviews with women leaders.

In addition to her social work, Ria is an active participant in research and writing. She authored a research paper on informal labor in India, placing third in the Sardar Bhagwant Singh competition at her school. Her commitment to writing is further showcased by her involvement in the Writer's Guild and as an editor for her school magazine, Sandesh. Ria has also won the Silver Award in The Queen's Commonwealth Essay Competition and participated in various other essay competitions.

Her research and academic interests extend to race and ethnicity, institutional inclusion, and a psychosocial perspective on women's roles in global peacekeeping bodies, on which she is authoring a paper with the US Department of State. Ria's leadership qualities are evident from her roles as Founder of the Spanish Club (El Mundo Moderno de Español), and her distinguished membership in school's MUN Society, earning accolades such as Best Delegate at multiple conferences.

Her musical talents shine through her training in Hindustani Classical Vocals and Piano. She has completed multiple levels of the Prayag Hindustani Classical Music program and regularly performs at school events and external shows. Ria also plays the guitar and participates in school and public performances.

With a strong academic foundation, a commitment to social causes, and a wide range of extracurricular achievements, Ria Devika Bhasin exemplifies a well-rounded and driven individual, poised to make significant contributions to her community and beyond.