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## UNORGANISED SECTOR AND THE ISSUE OF EMPLOYMENT IN INDIA-AN OVERVIEW

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### **Abstract**

*The predominance of informal employment has been one of the central features of the labour market scenario in India. While the sector contributes around half of the GDP of the country, its dominance in the employment front is such that more than 90 percent of the total workforce has been engaged in the informal economy. The unorganised sector in India includes workers employed in various informal activities such as agriculture, construction, domestic work, small and micro-enterprises, and street vending, among others. These workers do not have access to formal employment benefits, social security, or legal protections, making them vulnerable to exploitation and poverty. Among the unorganized sector workers, a considerable proportion (about 65 per cent) is engaged in the agricultural sector, which in turn indicates the prominence of the rural segment in the informal economy. This paper attempts to analyse the status of the unorganised sector and its employment in India. The growth of formal employment in the country has always been less than that of total employment, indicating a faster employment growth in the informal sector. Available data suggest that within the formal sector also the proportion of informal/unorganized workers is on the increase. However, since 2017 onwards, the labour market of India has been witnessing a mild decreasing trend in the informalisation process which may be due to the introduction of GST, digitization of payments, direct benefit transfer of subsidies/scholarships, wages and salaries to bank accounts, opening of Jan Dhan accounts and extending social security coverage to more workers.*

**Keywords:** *Informal sector, Informal employment, social security, informational, Agricultural sector, self-employed.*

### **Introduction**

In India, a large share of the labour force has been engaging in informal employment and they are either inadequately covered or not at all covered under the existing labour legislations, social protection schemes, and other employment benefits. In the year 2018-19, the nature of employment for around 90 percent of workers in India's labour market was informal. Due to a lack of governmental oversight, a large proportion of these workers work in exploitative and precarious conditions. Most of the world's poorest and most vulnerable people live and work in the informal economy and more than half the workforce in developing countries is employed in

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it. Of course, not all informal workers are poor and not all working poor are engaged in the informal economy. But a significant overlap exists between working in the informal economy and being poor. According to the International Trade Union Confederation, India is amongst the 10 worst countries in the world in terms of worker rights (ITUC, 2020). The role of the informal or unorganised sector began to receive worldwide attention in the early 1970s when the International Labour Organisation (ILO) initiated a series of efforts to identify and study the area through its World Employment Programme Missions in Africa. Since then, the informal sector has been the subject of several studies covering various aspects like its size, employment potential, its relationship with the formal sector, technological levels, etc. In 1972, the term informal sector was first used by the ILO to denote a wide range of small and unregistered economic activities. The informal sector may be broadly characterized as consisting of units engaged in the production of goods or services with the primary objective of generating employment and income for the persons concerned (ILO, 1993). These units typically operate at a low level of organization, with little or no division between labour and capital as factors of production and on a small scale. Labour relations - where they exist - are based mostly on casual employment, kinship or personal and social relations rather than contractual arrangements with formal guarantees. In India, however, the term informal sector is of recent origin and has been in use only during the last three decades. The first National Commission on Labour under the chairmanship of Gajendra Gadkar defined unorganised workers as those workers who have not been able to recognise themselves in pursuit of their common interest due to certain constraints like casual nature of employment, ignorance and illiteracy and small and scattered size of establishments. The term 'unorganized sector' has been defined by the National Commission for Enterprises in the Unorganized Sector (NCEUS), Government of India (2008:1774) as the sector which "consists of all unincorporated private enterprises owned by individuals or households engaged in the sale or production of goods and services operated on a proprietary or partnership basis and with less than ten total workers". Easy entrance, local operations, ambiguous legal standing, the ready requirement of labor, education and skill deficit, no fixed regulations of working hours or payment, poor rate of reparation and lack of possible government intervention characterize this sector. Domestic help, construction labourers (migrant or otherwise), drivers, masons, carpenters, street vendors, incense sticks as well as beedi makers and several others are a part of this informal sector. Workers in the unorganized sector have lower job security and a poor chance of growth and no leaves and paid holidays; they have lower protection against employers indulging in unfair or illegal practices (Kulwant Rai Gupta, 2009). The unorganised sector is known by different names such as the informal sector, unregulated sector, etc. A large number of statutes and schemes addressed to different categories of workers are found neither feasible nor practicable. This is because labour relations in the unorganised sector are chaotic and there is no formal employer-employee relationship (Pradeep, Ravindra and Ramjani Sab, 2017).

The predominance of informal employment has been one of the central features of the labour market scenario in India. While the sector contributes around half of the GDP of the country, its dominance in the employment front is such that more than 90 percent of the total workforce has been engaged in the informal economy. As per the latest estimation of a Sub-committee of the National Commission for Enterprises in the Unorganized Sector (NCEUS), the contribution of the unorganized sector to GDP was about 50 percent (NCEUS 2008). This national-level pattern of informal workers occupying around 90 percent of the workforce is more or less similar in the case of most of the prominent states in the country. Among the unorganized sector workers, a considerable proportion (about 65percent) is engaged in the agricultural sector, which in turn indicates the prominence of the rural segment in the informal economy. It is widely acknowledged that the informal sector in India suffers from low productivity syndrome compared to the formal sector. The prominent features of the sector are lower real wages and poor working and their living conditions. Further, the sector is characterized by excessive seasonality of employment (especially in the farm sector), preponderance of casual and contractual employment, atypical production organizations and work relations, absence of social security measures and welfare legislations, negation of social standards and worker rights, denial of minimum wages and so on. Poor human capital base (in terms of education, skill and training) as well as lower mobilization status of the workforce further add to the vulnerability and weaken the bargaining strength of workers in the informal sector. Thus, the sector has become a competitive and low-cost device to absorb labour, which cannot be absorbed elsewhere whereas any attempt to regulate and bring it into the more effective legal and institutional framework is perceived to be impairing the labour absorbing capacity of the sector.

### **OBJECTIVES**

- to examine the status of the unorganised cum informal sector and employment in India
- to examine the composition of the workers in the unorganised sector.

### **STATUS OF UNORGANISED SECTOR EMPLOYMENT IN INDIA**

The labour market of India has been undergoing tremendous transformations such as the growth of informal sector activities, deterioration in the quality of employment (in terms of job security, terms and conditions at work), weakening of worker organizations and collective bargaining institutions and marked decline in social security. To a greater extent, the transformation could be related to the ongoing globalization process and the resultant efforts on the part of employers to minimize the cost of production to the lowest levels. It is also evident that most of these outcomes are highly correlated and mutually reinforcing. In fact, the growing in-formalisation of labour market has been central to most of these transformations. Growth is slow, inflation is structural and the structure of employment is not enough to cater to the growing labour force

(Ministry of Labour and Employment, 2010). The advent of globalization and the resultant reorganization of production chains led to a situation where production systems were becoming increasingly atypical and non-standard, involving a flexible workforce engaged in temporary and part-time employment, which is seen largely as a measure adopted by employers to reduce labour cost in the face of stiff competition. No doubt, it obviously indicates that these flexible workers in the new informal economy are highly vulnerable in terms of job security and social protection, as they are not deriving any of the social protection measures stipulated in the existing labour legislation. The insecurities and vulnerabilities of these modern informal sector labour are on the rise, as there is a visible absence of worker mobilization and organized collective bargaining in these segments owing to a multitude of reasons. The alarming expansion of the informal sector, in recent times, has adversely affected employment and income security for the larger majority of the workforce, along with a marked reduction in the scale of social welfare/security programme. In our “global” cities such as Bangalore, which are being showcased as the new faces of an affluent and vibrant India, there are lakhs of people who rely on manual labour for their own livelihood. The housemaids, security guards, construction workers, garment workers, cobblers, beedi workers, *agarbati* workers, drivers and many others have a very different story to tell. Their incomes have not grown at the staggering rate of their employers; indeed, adjusted for inflation their incomes have often fallen over the last two and half decades, driving them into deeper poverty.

The International Labour Organization (2019) is more pronounced in the current labour market scenario in India which remarks that the progress in reducing unemployment globally is not being matched by improvements in the quality of work. Data reveal that the majority of the 3.3 billion people employed globally in 2018 had inadequate economic security, material well-being and equality of opportunity. ILO report cites the persistence of a number of major deficits in decent work, warning that at the current rate of progress, attaining the goal of decent work for all, as set out in the [Sustainable Development Goals](#) (SDGs), seems unrealistic for many countries. India's present growth trend can be described as a 'jobless growth' because there is a diverging trend between the structure of output and employment in the last decade, with non-agricultural employment growth slowing down post-2012, even though GDP growth remained high (though slowing since 2018).

As per a survey carried out by the National Sample Survey Organization in the year 2011/12, the total employment in both organized and unorganized sectors in the country was of the order of 47 crores. Out of this, about 8 crores were in the organized sector and the balance of 39 crores in the unorganized sector. The workers in the unorganized sector constituted 83 percent of the total employment in the country and 85 percent of the non-agricultural workforce. Further, in

the unorganized sector, 82.6 percent are informal workers while the rest 0.4 percent are formal employees. It is interesting to find that among the 17 percent of workers in the organized sector, 9.8 percent are informal workers while the rest 7.2 percent were formal workers. In 2017/18, the percentage of unorganized sector informal workers increased to 85.5 percent and that of the organized sector declined to 5.2 percent (Table 3.1). Although India is one of the fastest growing large economies in the world, the informality incidence has remained stuck at this level for decades. The stickiness of this statistic remains a serious area of concern, given that the numbers joining the labour force will only go on increasing over the next decade until 2030 (from whence the growth in the labour force will decelerate). India has experienced a demographic dividend since the early 1980s, which will end by 2040. Clearly a policy imperative is that not only must the non-agricultural jobs grow at a rate at least commensurate with the growth in the labour force, but the quality of jobs will also have to improve (Santhosh Mehrothra, 2016)

**Table 1.1** Percentage Distribution of Total Employment in India, 201112- 2017/18

Workers	2011-12			2017-18		
	Unorganized	Organized	Total	Unorganized	Organized	Total
Informal	82.6	9.8	92.4	85.5	5.2	90.7
Formal	0.4	7.2	7.6	1.3	7.9	9.3
Total	83.0	17.0	100.0	86.8	13.2	100.0

**Source:** Computed from NSS 68th unit level data on employment unemployment

Classification of workers into their sectors of activity (Table 3.2) by gender and areas reveals that among the total rural workers in the informal sector, about 61 percent were engaged in agriculture, 12.4 percent in construction and the rest 27 percent in all other sectors during the year 2020/21. In the urban areas, nearly 25 percent was engaged in trade, hotels and restaurants; 25.5 percent in other services; 20 percent in manufacturing; the rest 29 percent in other sectors of urban areas. Further from the rural areas, nearly 54 percent of men and 75 percent of women are engaged in agriculture; then more men were engaged in construction and women in other services and manufacturing. In urban areas, 27.4 percent of men were doing jobs in trade, hotels and restaurants, 21 percent in other service and 19.5 percent in urban manufacturing; among women informal workers, 25.5 percent in other services, 23 percent in manufacturing and 16.2 percent in trade, hotel and restaurants.

**Table 1.2** Percentage distribution of workers of the Informal Sector in usual status (ps+ss) by broad industry division (2020-21)

Broad industry division as per NIC 2008	Rural			Urban			Rural + Urban		
	Male	Female	Person	Male	Female	Person	Male	Female	Person
Agriculture	53.8	75.4	60.8	5.3	10.4	6.5	39.8	62.2	46.5
Mining and Quarrying	0.4	0.1	0.3	0.5	0.1	0.4	0.4	0.1	0.3
Manufacturing	7.7	7.4	7.6	19.5	23.0	20.3	11.1	10.6	10.9
Electricity, Water, etc	0.5	0.1	0.4	1.4	0.6	1.2	0.8	0.2	0.6
Construction	15.6	5.9	12.4	13.1	4.4	11.1	14.9	5.6	12.1
Trade, Hotel, Restaurant	9.7	3.5	7.7	27.4	16.2	24.8	14.8	6.1	12.2
Transport, Storage & Communication	5.3	0.3	3.7	12.2	3.7	10.2	7.3	1.0	5.4
Other Services	7.1	7.5	7.2	20.7	41.6	25.5	11.0	14.4	12.0
All	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

**Source:** Annual Report, PLFS, 2020-21. **Source:** Annual Report, Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS), NSSO, 2020-21. Note: \*(ps+ss) = (principal activity status + subsidiary economic activity status). **Principal activity status-** The activity status on which a person spent relatively long time (major time criterion) during 365 days preceding the date of survey, was considered the usual principal activity status of the person. **Subsidiary economic activity status-** The activity status in which a person in addition to his/her usual principal status, performs some economic activity for 30 days or more for the reference period of 365 days preceding the date of survey, was considered the subsidiary economic status of the person.

As per PLFS estimates, the share of regular wage/salaried employees has increased by 5 percentage points from 18 percent in 2011/12 to 23 percent in 2017/18 as per usual status. In absolute terms, there was a significant jump of around 2.62 crore new jobs in this category with 1.21 crore in rural areas and 1.39 crore in urban areas (Table 3.8). Remarkably, the proportion of women workers in the regular wage/salaried employees' category had increased by 8 percentage points (from 13 percent in 2011/12 to 21 percent in 2017/18) with the addition of 0.71 crore new jobs for female workers in this category.

More positively, the share of youth (15-29 years) in regular work rose from 22 percent to 33.4 percent over the same period (Mehrotra and Parida, 2019). Among the self-employed category (employers, own account workers and unpaid family labour), while the proportion of own-account workers and employers increased, the proportion of unpaid family labour (helper) declined, especially for females during 2011/12-2017/18. The proportion of total self-employed workers however remained unchanged at 52 percent during the period (Table 3.8). The distribution of workers in the casual labour category decreased by 5 percentage points from 30 percent in 2011-12 to 25 percent in 2017/18 with the decline being in rural areas.

**Table 1.3** Number of Workers (principal status plus subsidiary status, all ages) by Sector, Sex and Employment Status in India (in crore)

Employment Status	Male		Female		Rural		Urban		Total	
	2011-12	2017-18	2011-12	2017-18	2011-12	2017-18	2011-12	2017-18	2011-12	2017-18
Self Employed	17.33	18.68	7.20	5.54	18.81	18.26	5.73	5.95	24.54	24.21
<i>Own Account Workers</i>	12.94	14.90	2.55	2.15	11.26	12.45	4.21	4.60	15.47	17.05
<i>Employers</i>	0.64	0.9	0.06	0.06	0.39	0.49	0.31	0.47	0.7	0.96
<i>Unpaid Family Labour</i>	3.75	2.88	4.6	3.33	7.16	5.32	1.21	0.88	8.37	6.20
Regular Wage/ Salaried Employees	7.10	9.00	1.74	2.45	2.93	4.14	5.91	7.30	8.83	11.45
Casual labourer	9.95	8.61	3.97	2.86	11.91	9.18	2.02	2.28	13.92	11.46
<b>Total</b>	<b>34.38</b>	<b>36.29</b>	<b>12.91</b>	<b>10.85</b>	<b>33.64</b>	<b>31.59</b>	<b>13.65</b>	<b>15.53</b>	<b>47.29</b>	<b>47.12</b>

Source: Estimated from unit level data of NSO 68<sup>th</sup> Round EUS 2011-12 and NSO PLFS, 2017-18

By the Annual Survey of Industries (ASI), there has been an increase in employment in the organized manufacturing sector. Between 2014/15 and 2017/18, the total number of workers engaged in the sector increased by 14.69 lakh while the total persons engaged (inclusive of employees and employers) increased by 17.33 lakh (Figure 3.2). The estimates of the share of workers in the informal sector in non-agriculture and the agricultural sector excluding only growing of crops (AGEGC Sector), market gardening, horticulture and growing of crops combined with farming of animals), also show a decline from 77.5 percent in 2004/05 to 68.4 percent in 2017/18, with the decline being more pronounced among females (Table 3.9).

**Table 3.9** Employment in Informal Sector Enterprises among usual status Workers engaged in Non-agriculture and AGEGC Sectors (in percent)



Category of Workers	EUS 61 <sup>st</sup> Round 2004-05	EUS 66 <sup>th</sup> Round 2009-10	EUS 68 <sup>th</sup> Round 2011-12	PLFS 2017-18
Male	76.7	71.5	73.4	71.1
Female	79.7	69.8	69.2	54.8
Person	77.5	71.1	72.4	68.4

Source: NSO (EUS) various rounds and PLFS (2017-18)

However, since July 2017 onwards, we have been witnessing another trend in formalization with the introduction of Goods and Services Tax (GST). Because of GST, the labour market began to show signs of being transformative for formality. With GST, a large increase has occurred in the number of indirect taxpayers; many have voluntarily chosen to be part of GST, especially small enterprises that buy from large enterprises and want to avail themselves of input tax credits. An increase in the number of indirect taxpayers spells the growing formality of erstwhile informal firms. As a result of GST, India’s formal sector non-farm payroll is substantially greater than currently believed. Because of GST, formal sector payroll of 31 per cent of the non-agricultural workforce increases to a formal sector payroll of 53 percent having access to social security provisions (Ministry of Finance, 2018). To indicate the extent of the formalization of the workforce by extending coverage of organized social security, the Government since September 2017 publishes the monthly payroll data indicating the number of new subscribers who have availed benefits under three major social security schemes namely the Employees’ Provident Fund (EPF), Employees’ State Insurance Scheme (ESIC) and the National Pension Scheme (NPS). Of these, EPF has more than 6 crore active members (with at least one month contribution during the year). EPF manages social security funds of workers in the organized/semi-organized sector in India. The payroll data of EPF for 2019/20 as on 20th December 2019 shows a net increase of 55.6 lakhs in EPF subscribers compared to 61.12 lakhs in 2018/19 (Figure 3.1). These estimates are net of the members newly enrolled, exited and re-joined during the year as per records of the EPF.

**Figure 3.1** Net Employees’ Provident Fund Subscriber (in lakh)



Source: EPFO

In order to obtain a holistic picture of the extent of formal-informal employment in the economy, the NCEUS (2007a) definition was applied upon the workforce estimates of PLFS to identify the



total number of formal and informal workers employed in the organized and unorganized sectors. It was found that the proportion of workers in organized sector increased from 17.3 percent in 2011/12 to 19.2 percent in 2017/18 (Table 3.10). In actual terms, the number of workers in the organized sector increased to about 9.05 crore workers in 2017/18, an increase of 0.87 crore over 2011/12. This was mainly due to the increase in formal employment, the share of which in the organized sector increased from 45 percent in 2011/12 to 49 percent in 2017/18. Total formal employment increased from 8 percent to 9.98 percent during this period. In absolute terms, the number of workers with formal employment increased from 3.8 crore in 2011/12 to 4.7 crore in 2017/18. Thus, there is a growing trend in the formalisation process in the economy in recent years.

**Table 3.10** Formal-Informal Employment across Organized and Unorganized Sectors

Employment	Organized (in per cent)	Unorganized (in per cent)	Total (in per cent)	Organized (in crore)	Unorganized (in crore)	Total (in crore)
<b>2004-05</b>						
Formal	53.42	0.36	7.46	3.34	0.14	3.41
Informal	46.58	99.64	92.38	2.91	39.35	42.26
<b>Total</b>	<b>13.68</b>	<b>86.32</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>6.25</b>	<b>39.49</b>	<b>45.67</b>
<b>2011-12</b>						
Formal	45.4	0.40	8.1	3.71	0.16	3.83
Informal	54.6	99.6	91.9	4.47	38.95	43.46
<b>Total</b>	<b>17.3</b>	<b>82.7</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>8.18</b>	<b>39.11</b>	<b>47.29</b>
<b>2017-18</b>						
Formal	48.91	0.74	9.98	4.43	0.28	4.70
Informal	51.09	99.26	90.02	4.62	37.79	42.43
<b>Total</b>	<b>19.2</b>	<b>80.8</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>9.05</b>	<b>38.07</b>	<b>47.13</b>

Source: Estimated from unit level data of NSO (EUS) various rounds and PLFS (2017-18)

## Conclusion

Growing informality is a serious concern of a growing economy all over the world. Data shows that the informal economy dominates the majority of the economic activities of the economy. Though there is a decreasing trend in the growth of the informal sector which is not significant. This is due to the government's effort to formalize the economy through various measures like the introduction of GST, digitization of payments, direct benefit transfer of subsidies/scholarships, wages and salaries to bank accounts, the opening of Jan Dhan accounts and extending social security coverage to more workers.

The informal sector is an inevitable part of the economy and it complements and strengthens the formal sector. A major share of employment and income is contributed by the informal sector. Therefore, it is essential to bring the informal economy to enjoy the fruits of growth. In order to

bring the informal sector into the mainstream, the government, as well as the public sector and trade unions, have to play a great role to bring the workers in the informal sector also to their fold. Any system which is not conducive to their working and living conditions would not yield any results. Adequately designed community-based or occupation-based programmes have to be explored with the government as a facilitator. Training and skill development are required to increase productivity and income in the unorganized sector. There are ITIs set up in various parts of the country imparting training in about 67 trades. There are also a number of vocational, short-term and regular training programmes conducted by various Ministries/ Departments to impart training, focusing on self-employment. Workers have to be made aware of the existence of available facilities and be helped to avail of the same.

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