

Understanding media's coverage of labour laws in the times of Globalization

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Abstract: Globalisation has existed for a long time, but it gained tremendous momentum in recent years with improvements in transport and communication. This process has seen the rise of mega corporations and entities whose identities are bigger than that of the governments. Liberalization of the economy and privatisation are redefining the labour laws. Social security has gone for a toss for the workers as the new system works on the policy of Hire and Fire. Workers are hired on contract and jobs are getting outsourced to cheaper locations. Trade unions which were supposed to be the voice of workers are on the verge of extinction in this new work culture. Media which is supposed to be unbiased, free, fair and objective is mostly silent when it comes to the issues being faced by the working class. It stays silent because most of the media houses today are controlled by business tycoons. In a way it is they who control the flow of news. Media can obviously not take risks to hurt their interests and this is a very complicated situation we are witnessing today. The issues and problems of the labour community can least hope to find a resonance in the highly corporatised media. Their interests are clearly in conflict with the interest of owners. Media instead of standing for truth and objectivity is busy promoting and serving the corporate interests. Heavy amount of money is being spent on advertising for this. This article is an attempt to try and understand how globalisation is influencing labour laws as well as what has been the role of the media in it.

Key Words: Globalisation, Labour laws, Media, Advertising, Social security.

1. INTRODUCTION:

It is the workers of a nation employed in a variety of sectors which with their hard work take the country forward. As per the survey carried out by the National Sample Survey Organization in the year 2009-10, the total employment, in both organized and unorganized sectors in India was of the order of 46.5 crore comprising around 2.8 crore in the organized sector and the balance 43.7 crore workers in the unorganized sector. Out of 43.7 crore workers in the unorganized sector, there are 24.6 crore workers employed in the agricultural sector, about 4.4 crore in construction work and remaining in manufacturing and service (Ministry of Labour & Employment, Government of India). With such a large population involved in labour activities we need some laws and regulations to manage their affairs. The condition of workers was no better during the Industrial Revolution. In fact it was at this time the demand for the rights of workers took birth. The need for reforms continued to grow in the subsequent times. The roots of labour laws trace back to Colonial times when workers were willingly or unwillingly taken from one place to another to work on sites. The website www.striking-women.org which measures the South Asian migration flows says that from 1834 to the end of the WWI, Britain had transported about 2 million Indian indentured workers to 19 colonies including Fiji, Mauritius, Ceylon, Trinidad, Guyana, Malaysia, Uganda, Kenya and South Africa. Workers were made to work on cotton, tea & sugar plantations, railroad projects etc. The work conditions often were very harsh, with long working hours and low wages. Workers demanded for better working conditions but employers denied it.

Mahatma Gandhi, when he saw this plight of Asian indentured labourers in South Africa started a campaign against it. Finally, the system of indentured labour was officially abolished by the British government in 1917. The International Labour Organization was established in 1919 with a similar aim to set labour standards, develop policies and devise programmes promoting decent work for all women and men. More than a century has passed since then. From colonial times to the idea of Make In India how much change has been observed in labour laws is the thing to ponder upon. If imperialism and colonization were the defining forces in previous centuries then neo capitalism, neoliberalism and globalization are the forces shaping the global order today. Privatisation, deregulation and free trade are becoming the new norms. Multinational Companies have become immensely powerful in terms of ownership of natural resources, providing jobs, controlling the socio-economic structure of nations. This has also meant changing working conditions for the labour involved in it. Thus labour laws need to be redefined in this new system.

2. IMPACT OF GLOBALISATION ON LABOUR LAWS:

The process of globalisation has resulted in the closer integration of nations and their economy as transportation and communication costs have reduced drastically. It has opened new avenues for business. There are more opportunities for trade as the barriers are constantly being reduced. Every country wants to rank high in the ease of doing business

index so that more investors are attracted. For this they are not just establishing Free Trade Zones (exemption from taxes) but also easing the existing labour laws. For the Multinational Companies which work on the principle of Hire and Fire, labour laws seem as obstructions in their way. They press the governments to loosen these restrictions as much as possible. Companies do not want the trade unions to come in their way and that is why today they are on their path to decline.

Production of goods and commodities is no longer a localised affair rather it takes place in various countries. Raw material can be obtained from one place and the final product may be assembled and manufactured thousands of kilometers away. In order to sell more you need to have better quality at a cheaper price and to do this often work is outsourced to locations where the production process will be cheapest for these companies. Companies prefer contract labour so that they don't have much liabilities. There is no job security in these cases. A person working on daily wages is not sure about tomorrow. They might get work in some seasons while they may have to stay jobless many times. How would they feed their families in such cases is the big question. These corporates, as they grow bigger and bigger, need more labour and workforce for their expansion. One key trend which has been observed is that these companies have opened up their production centres in developing nations where the cost of production is very less due to the abundance of cheap labour. The finished, high-end goods are sold in the markets of developed nations, which have high purchasing power. Profits soar, because of cheap production, but the profits are never shared with workers to improve their living and working conditions. Their rights keep getting violated.

Management these days adopts various strategies to bypass the labour laws. Firstly, they do not hire permanent employees instead they hire contract workers on a monthly or annual basis. Companies try to cut down on the number of employees and the existing employees are given pressure to perform more or they too would lose their jobs. Work is outsourced many times. Workers are not allowed to engage themselves in trade unionism. This increasing workload has given birth to mental and health issues amongst the workers. If we look at the Indian economy we find that fewer jobs are being in the organised sector on the other hand the informal (unorganised) sector has expanded.

3. MEDIA'S COVERAGE OF THE LABOUR LAWS:

How many times have we seen the media covering the issues of workers? Why does the media not talk about the problems and adversities being faced by the working class. The answer lies clearly in the ownership pattern of the media. Media houses today have transformed themselves into giant conglomerates whose vast empires spread across continents. Media houses in themselves have become multinational corporations today. They have become money-spinning machines. The interests of various companies go hand in hand where they depend on each other for their overall growth. There are hidden interests, so how can such news be trustworthy?

The aim of the media is to disseminate news and information in a free and fair manner. It should fear and favour none and not engage in any kind of propaganda. Chomsky & Herman (1988) described the term "Manufacturing Consent". How the media is being used by corporations to control the public opinion is the basic idea behind this concept. Rather than being the voice of the voiceless and marginalised media seems to speak the language of power. It never wants to probe and question those whose stakes are clearly involved in it. Thus the issues like exploitation of workers, forcing them to work for long hours, low wages, child labour, women workers being paid less than male workers are never at its forefront. Rather, the media has worked as an active instrument to promote these corporations. Coca-Cola, McDonalds, KFC which were once limited to the US can be now found almost in any corner of the planet. There is a big role media has played in creating, promoting and sustaining the 'larger-than-life' image of these products. Images generated by the media are powerful enough to create a sense of brand recall. Media creates an artificial need, desire and demand for the products. Celebrities are paid hefty sums to promote these brands which help them become even bigger in size and thus capture the entire market. Popular faces are hired to endorse the brands to boost sales to the next level. These corporate houses have humongous advertising budgets to promote their brands. The rules made by institutions such as the World Bank and IMF too have been more favourable to the developed nations. They want developing nations to reduce trade barriers and open their markets. Post 1991, India has witnessed a surge in terms of foreign companies coming here and trying to monopolise the market.

4. SITUATION IN INDIA:

Recently, India has climbed 14 rungs in the World Bank's Ease of Doing Business 2020 survey to stand at 63, among 190 countries, making it one of the world's top 10 most improved countries for the third consecutive time (livemint.com, 24 Oct 2019). Government wants to make things more and more business friendly so that Foreign Direct Investments (FDI) can increase. States want to establish Special Economic Zones with least taxation and regulations. If needed, labour laws are diluted to suit the interests of investors. For Indian media labour issues is something which is not newsworthy as it is not spicy and sensational. It might not sell, it might not bring them advertisements and revenue. In the country the majority of media houses are either owned by politicians or the business houses. There is a growing nexus between media, business and politics.

In India the situation is not any different too. Although the Government of India has enacted several regulations for the working class such as The Minimum Wages Act, The Contract Labour Act, The Bonded Labour System Act, Child Labour Amendment Act, Maternity Benefit Amendment Act, Payment of Wages Act etc. but they continue to get violated. India today has emerged as a big investment destination in the world. With its middle class expanding it is a big market for multinational companies and this is the reason why we see the presence of almost all big companies in India. The long working hours, high work pressure, low salaries, no job security, no job growth deteriorating physical and mental health are very common. There is hardly any concept of paid leave, holidays or insurance. The family, relationships and social life of people is ruined. Media is sensitive to labour issues only if some big mishaps take place. For example, the media gave wide coverage to the Bhopal gas tragedy (1984) which killed more than 15000 people and affected over 600000 workers. In recent times the media sprang into action when a gas leak incident took place at the LG Polymers chemical plant at Visakhapatnam in May 2020. Indian media gave wide coverage to the issues of labour when migrants lost their jobs due to coronavirus induced lockdown and started travelling miles to reach their villages. Numerous stories were published in the media. But these are the extraordinary situations when the media has done a commendable job but what about the ordinary times?

In his story published on the website <https://thewire.in/> Rao observes, over the last two decades there has been a steady decline in media reportage of labour issues. It further says “labour reporting is a rarity today, labour reporters an extinct species”.(Rao, 25 November 2017). Mainstream media hardly cares to cover the protests by the working classes. The voice of workers can not be heard anymore in the public sphere.

5. CONCLUSION:

In India, labour lies in the concurrent list and hence both states and centre can enact laws on it. The present central government wants “to consolidate the central laws into four codes - relating to wages, industrial relations, social security and welfare and occupational safety, health and working conditions - and bring about reforms to ensure ease of business.”(Business Today, July 11, 2019). The main aim of the government of the day is to improve the business environment in the country so that more investors are attracted. In six years of the Narendra Modi government, India’s ranking improved 79 places from 142nd in 2014 to 63th in 2019, a record for a major economy. (livemint.com, 24 Oct 2019). In the name of “Ease of Doing Business” the companies want labour laws to be relaxed and made more flexible. They want maximum concessions from the government but they seem to have scant respect for the rights of the workers. Life and disability cover, health and maternity benefits, old age protection, pension should be extended to workers. These are not just the rights of workers but human rights. Special attention needs to be given to the workers engaged in the unorganized sector. There is little hope from the media unless its ownership patterns do not change.

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