

WORKERS IN A GLOBALISING WORLD: SOME PERSPECTIVES FROM INDIA^{*}

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I. Concerns and Issues at Global Level

The question as to what would be the impact of globalisation on employment and conditions of workers has been a subject of intense debate for over a decade. There have been widespread apprehensions that labour would be among the “losers”, at least in the initial phases of on-going globalisation. Such fears are seen by workers and their organisations both in developed and developing countries. In developed countries, concerns have been expressed about relocation of jobs in developing countries through outsourcing and shifts of capital. Besides the consequent increase in unemployment, which is already high in most of these countries, fears are raised about the possibility of what is often described as “social dumping” in exports of goods produced under the sub-standard labour conditions from developing to the developed countries and the danger of a “race to the bottom” resulting from the competition between producers from developed and developing countries to lower labour standards. In developing countries like India, on the other hand, globalisation is often seen to endanger jobs in existing enterprises in so far as the competition from imported goods would lead to technological changes resulting in redundancies or even closure of the relatively less efficient enterprises. Also, the need to adjust to changing market conditions and also to attract large investments, particularly, foreign direct investments, would lead to pressures for greater flexibility in the employment and utilisation of labour, resulting in reduction in employment security and social protection and an overall deterioration in quality of employment.

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On the other hand, there are reasons to believe that globalisation would, in the long run, lead not only to expansion in employment opportunities, but also to an overall improvement in quality of jobs in terms of better earnings, greater regularity and improved conditions of work, particularly in a country like India, for the following reasons: One, with liberalisation, expansion of trade would have to be based on comparative advantage and with India's advantage in labour based exports, such an expansion would lead to increase in employment. Second, the increase in employment will be significantly larger with faster economic growth expected to result from economic reforms and liberalisation which constitute essential elements of globalisation. Third, larger inflow of foreign investment will further strengthen employment growth both directly and indirectly through its contribution to economic growth. Fourth, expansion of employment and consequent tightening of the labour market should result in improvement in the quality of employment in terms of earnings as well as conditions of work and employment. And, fifth, the globalised production system with supply chains and technological linkages is expected to provide greater possibility and pressure for observance of minimum labour standards.

Experience and evidence in respect of impact of globalisation on labour in India and internationally is yet rather limited. And whatever evidence is available provides mixed signals. Concluding on the basis of a number of studies, particularly those by ILO, the World Commission on Social Dimension of Globalisation observed that the impact of trade on employment and wages has been sharply contrasting among countries (WCSDG, 2004 pp. 38-44). In some Asian countries, trade growth had a favourable impact on employment and wages, but Latin American countries like Brazil and Mexico showed a reverse trend. Open unemployment has increased in the world as a whole over the past decade: it has increased in developing countries in Latin America, South East Asia and East Asia while the experience in the developed countries has been mixed with Japan showing an increase, the United Kingdom a sharp decline and the United States some decline in unemployment rate over the past decade. In many countries, some groups of workers have been adversely affected by trade liberalisation. Mostly, the skilled workers have gained while those without skills have lost out. On foreign investment, the evidence on the whole suggests a positive impact on growth. As a result, it also has a favourable impact on employment growth, but in some cases it is negated by strong crowding-

out effects on local enterprises unable to compete. Also, increased mobility of capital combined with high unemployment has reduced the bargaining power of labour while increasing competition for foreign investment has generated pressures to increase labour market flexibility and erode labour protection.

Globalisation involves changes in the structure of national economies, consumption patterns and product and factor price relativities. Accordingly, it impacts upon different groups of people differently. As observed by the WCSDG, those associated with successful multinational enterprises and with internationally competitive national enterprises, and those endowed with capital and other assets, entrepreneurial abilities and education and skills have benefited most from globalisation while the poor, asset-less and unskilled have lost out. Accessibility to internationally traded goods and services has improved and in several cases their prices have also become more competitive. But not everybody has been able to enjoy the benefits arising out of the liberalised trade; in fact, some have been adversely affected by the same processes as have benefited others.

This situation is very aptly described in a statement by a participant in the dialogue organised by WCSDG in the Philippines: "There is no point to a globalisation that reduces the prices of a child's shoes, but costs the father his job" (Report, p. 13). Also the overall good performance of the economy not only in terms of higher growth rates and expansion of jobs in some sectors and decline in poverty ratio, may involve "fallacy of aggregates" in so far as some segments of population lose jobs and incomes at the same time. For, "it is cold comfort to those who have lost jobs or fallen into poverty that others experiencing opposite fortunes have prevented a fall in the unemployment and poverty rates" (*ibid* p. 44).

Even where workers displaced from jobs have found alternative employment, it has been mostly in the informal sector. Most new workers have also to resort to this sector for earning their livelihoods either as self-employed or wage earners. As a result, the informal economy, which in any case, constituted the major part of the economies of the developing countries, has increased with globalisation. Taking self-employment as proxy to the informal economy it is observed that, its share in non-agricultural employment has increased in developing countries in all regions in the 1990's over 1980's; in Africa from 44 to 48 per cent, in Latin America from 29 to 44 per cent and in Asia from 26 to 32 per cent (ILO, 2002). As is well known, informal

sector is characterised by low productivity and low earnings and workers in this sector have hardly any social protection. An increase in the share of informal sector, therefore, implies a deterioration in the quality of employment in aggregate.

Indian experience of the past period of a over a decade during which the country has initiated steps towards integrating with the global economy broadly suggests emergence of trends in line with above propositions resulting in varying impact on different segments of workers. An attempt has been made in the following pages to elaborate on and examine these trends and also assess the prospects of the quantitative and qualitative changes in the Indian labour scene in a medium term perspective. Attention has been specially focussed on a few aspects, namely, growth of employment, labour flexibility and quality of employment.

II. Employment Growth: Trends and Prospects

What has happened to the growth of employment during the recent past? How far the trends could be attributed to the policies and processes relating to globalisation? Are the trends indicative of the medium and long term prospects or a result of the “churning” the labour market had to undergo in the initial phases of globalisation? These are some of the questions which have been frequently asked over the recent years and have been differently answered depending not only on the access to and availability of data and information, but also on one's understanding, perception and predilections regarding globalisation.

Estimates based on the data available from the most comprehensive official source, namely, National Sample Survey Organisation (NSSO), indicated that there occurred a significant deceleration in the growth of employment over the period following the initiation of major economic reforms towards globalisation in the early 1990's. Using the Current Daily Status (CDS) criterion, employment grew at 2.89 per cent per annum during 1983-84/1987-88 and 2.50 per cent during 1987-88/1993-94, but only at 1.07 per cent during 1993-94/1999-2000. Corresponding growth rates of GDP for these three periods were 4.2, 5.8 and 6.7 per cent. It appears that a higher growth rate could not result in faster growth of employment; on the contrary, a faster growth led to a lower employment growth, particularly during the period 1993-94/1999-2000. A decline in employment content of growth obviously took place; this trend was observable in earlier periods also, when employment elasticity declined from 0.68

during 1983/1987-88 to 0.41 during 1987-88/1993-94, but decline was particularly sharp during 1993-94/1999-2000 to 0.16 (Planning Commission, 2002a).

Thus about a decade of experience of globalisation has been disappointing so far as creation of jobs is concerned, even though the growth rate of the economy has shown improvement. A poor employment performance of the growth during the 1990's can primarily be attributed to a virtual stagnation of employment in agriculture which accounted for 60 per cent of total workers and a significant decline in employment in community, social and personal services, which constituted the third largest employer (among the 9 activity sectors) accounting for 11 per cent of workers, in 1993-94. Neither of these two sectors has much to do directly with economic reforms; it, therefore, becomes difficult to attribute slow down in employment growth during 1994-2000 to the processes of globalisation. In fact, the sectors which were subjects of reforms and which were directly affected by liberalisation of trade and investment and loosening of regulatory controls, experienced a reasonably high employment growth. For example, manufacturing, the second largest sector after agriculture, accounting for over 11 per cent workers in 1993-94, experienced an employment growth of 2.5 per cent per annum during 1994-2000. Other sectors, namely construction, trade, transport and finance also registered employment growth of between 5 and 6 per cent per annum. Relatively high employment growth in these sectors was a result both of high GDP growth rates and employment elasticities. All of them, except construction, registered a growth rate of over 8 per cent and yielded an employment elasticity of around 0.6 (against the aggregate elasticity of 0.16). Construction despite a relatively low GDP growth, registered reasonably high (over 5 per cent) growth rate of employment due to high (above 0.8) employment elasticity.

It can be argued that policies of liberalisation led to higher growth which in turn resulted in higher employment growth in these sectors and, therefore, processes towards globalisation made a positive impact on employment. It is, however, not possible to empirically establish these linkages due to the lack of data that can causally relate policies with investment, output and employment. Some attempts have, however, been made to study linkages between growth in trade particularly the quantum and character of exports and employment intensity and, therefore, contribution of trade reforms to employment in the case manufacturing sector, the results of which are briefly noted in the following paragraphs.

Increase in trade volume that may follow liberalisation is expected to boost employment in a labour abundant economy like India in two ways: One, by accelerating the growth rate of the economy and two, by increasing exports of comparative advantage (labour) based products. As mentioned earlier, there has been an acceleration in the rate of growth of the economy, to which increase in trade, particularly exports has also made a contribution. Trade (exports plus imports) has increased from around 15 per cent of GDP in 1980 to about 27 per cent in 2000. Exports as a percentage of GDP have increase from 6 to 12 per cent during this period. Composition of exports has also changed in favour of manufactured goods: by late 1990's manufactured exports accounted for about 75 per cent of all exports, as compared to 58 per cent in 1980 (GOI, MOF, 2003).

Employment growth, as noted earlier, has been just over one per cent during the 1990's as compared to around 2 per cent in the earlier decade. Manufacturing employment has, however, grown at the rate of 2.5 per cent per annum during the 1990's. Between the export-oriented and other industries, the former do not seem to have performed consistently better if the period between mid-1980's and late 1990's as whole is considered: employment in export-oriented industries grew at a rate of 2.25 per cent per annum, as against 2.72 per cent in import competing industries and 2.63 per cent in all industries during 1985-97. But if period since 1990 is considered, export oriented industries have shown a much better employment growth than others: employment in them grew at 3.36 per cent per annum, as against 2.67 per cent in import-competing and 3.09 per cent in all industries (Goldar, 2002, Ghose, 2003). It appears that trade liberalisation had a positive impact on employment growth by inducing a greater specialisation in the exports of low-skill labour intensive products. Export-oriented industries are also found to have significantly higher employment elasticity (0.48) than the manufacturing sector as a whole (0.33). Therefore, a continuation of the trend that has emerged in the post-reform period, in favour of faster growth of comparative labour advantage based products, is expected to result in faster growth in employment in this segment and, as a result, in the manufacturing industry in aggregate.

Recent data available from the preliminary results of the 58th round of the NSSO suggest that employment growth has picked up over the post-2000 period not only in the manufacturing sector but in the aggregate. Employment is estimated to have grown at a rate of over 2.7 per cent per annum during the period 2000-2004.

Doubts are expressed about the veracity of these data for the technical reasons of smallness of the sample size and limited-half-year-period of survey. Also it does not seem easy to explain as to what factors led to such a sharp turn around in employment growth, rising from around one per cent in the preceding quinquennium to two per cent during this period. Even if these data do indicate the real trend, and are validated by the data from the full round of NSSO survey yet to be available in a few months, the central question that is asked and needs investigation is where these new employment opportunities are getting generated.

III. Structure and Quality of Employment: Emerging Trends

Past trends clearly suggest that most of the new employment is likely to have been or will be generated in the non-agricultural sector and, these too, primarily in its unorganised segments. Agriculture, understandably is not able to productively absorb a significant number of additional workers. Employment in this sector had stagnated during most of the nineties and nothing spectacular has happened since 2000 to make it suddenly demand more labour. This situation is likely to continue in the medium term and unless a major transformation in technological and market conditions takes place to make Indian agriculture highly commercial and grow at much higher rate than observed in recent years. In the non-agricultural sectors, employment has stagnated and, in some years, declined in their organised segments. Over the quinquennium 1994-2000, employment growth in the organised sector was only 0.56 per cent per annum, as against 1.12 per cent in the unorganised sector. But there seems to have been an absolute decline in the organised sector employment in the post-2000 period. According to the estimates provided by the Director General of Employment and Training (DGET), organised sector employment saw an absolute decline of one million during 2000-2003. One sub-sector of activities where employment is growing fast and a good part of it could be in the organised sector, is the information technology (IT). According to Nasscom (Nasscom, 2001) IT employed 770,000 workers in 2001 and is likely to employ two million directly and another two million indirectly in IT-enabled services by 2008. These figures have, however, to be seen against the overall size of the labour force of over 400 million!

Domination of the unorganised sector with irregular and insecure jobs, low productivity and earnings and no social protections, has been a well-known feature of the Indian employment scene. Recent evidence of the changes in the structure of

employment point towards a further increase in the share of this sector. Majority of people working in this sector are self-employed. And self-employment, for majority of workers in this category which include small and marginal farmers, those running tiny businesses in rural and urban areas and artisans and craft workers, is primarily a survival mechanism rather than productive work with decent and progressively rising income levels. The expectation that such self-employed people with limited asset base and with limited markets for their products would get into regular wage and salaried jobs, has been belied. Self-employed constituted 59 per cent of the total workers in 1977-78; their proportion has come down, but not substantially, to 53 per cent by 1999-2000. Decline is seen mostly in the rural areas, from around 63 to 56 per cent; in urban areas the share of the self-employed has, in fact, remained constant at 42 per cent. Regular wage and salary earners in 1999-2000 constituted 14 per cent, the same as in 1977-78, in fact, there has been a slight decline in their share over the 1990's. Casual workers, characterised by irregular and insecure employment and income has increased their share continuously over the period 1977-78 to 1999-2000, and stood at 33 per cent in the latter year as compared to 27 per cent in the former.

It appears that while the shift from self-employment to wage labour will continue, even though at a slow pace, particularly in the rural areas where workers from the small and marginal farmer households will find it increasingly difficult to get gainfully employed in agriculture, in the urban areas the trend of shift from the regular wage paid jobs to casual work has set in and is likely to continue with increasing pressure for greater labour flexibility to improve competitiveness of enterprises in the liberalised trade and globalising production systems. A study of about 1300 firms, spread over 10 states and nine major product groups (Deshpande, *et al* 2004) revealed that during 1991-1998, the share of permanent workers declined from 68 to 64 per cent. There was not only an increase in the share of non-permanent-temporary and casual-workers on the rolls of the enterprises from 32 to 36 per cent, there has also been a steady increase in the use of contract labour over the period. Contract labour constituted 8 per cent of workforce in 1998, up from around 5.5 per cent in 1991. An interesting feature of the use of non-permanent workers observed in the study was that their share was as high as 57 per cent in the case of larger enterprises (employing more than 1000 workers) against the average of 42 per cent for enterprises in all sizes. Casual workers made up 48 per cent in these enterprises against the average of 24 per cent. The very small enterprises (0-9

workers) also had most (84%) of their workers as non-regular, but most of them (77%) were contract worker. These findings have implications for debate on the reforms on labour flexibility. It can be surmised that the small enterprises employing upto nine workers, may be using contract labour to avoid application of Factories Act while the large ones do not employ more regular workers due to the restrictions on retrenchment imposed by provisions in Chapter V-B of Industrial Disputes Act.

The evidence like the above has often been used to argue that since the legislative provisions regulating conditions of work and job security tend to make employers either reluctant to expand employment or then employ workers in a manner that leaves them out of legislative protection, it is advisable to remove those provisions. The argument, however, ignores two points, one relating to minimum labour standards and the other, to the factual situation as reflected in the past experience. Legislations regulating conditions of work, such as Factories Act, lay down certain minimum conditions of safety, sanitation, space, hours of work etc. to be observed by employers at the workplace. If these are being evaded by surreptitious means like not recognising workers as employees of the enterprise, there is a case for stricter enforcement of legislative provisions, not for their repeal. Restrictions on retrenchment, lay off and closures imposed in the Industrial Disputes Act, no-doubt appear irrational in so far as they do not allow enterprises to reduce workforce for efficient functioning and close down unprofitable and unviable businesses. But the argument that these provisions have, in fact, restricted scaling down of employment or discouraged increase in employment where found necessary, is not borne out by the factual experience. Employers have been able to reduce workforce when required, despite the restrictive legal provisions and have increased employment when needed, without fear of these provisions coming in the way of making adjustment of workforce in future. At the same time, it is doubtful if these provisions have served the interest of workers as expected in principle. In fact, long delays and prolonged disputes, particularly in the cases of permission for closures, have rendered the workers jobless without getting terminal benefits and blocked utilisation of assets of enterprises. The need to review them and evolve a more rational, efficient and equitable framework for labour flexibility is obvious, which may consist of an exit policy that makes exits easier but costlier to employer and effectively more beneficial to the worker (Papola, 1994).

Irrespective of whether it is 'forced' or 'facilitated' by legal provisions, flexibility in employment and use of labour is expected to increase with greater integration of the Indian economy into the global production and trade system. For workers, while it may bring in increased employment opportunities and options and for at least some of them improvement in earnings, it will also result in an increasingly larger workforce working under unregulated conditions of work without any social protection. Not only will the proportion of workers with legally backed job security decline, but also the coverage of existing social security provisions will become narrower. Already vast majority of workers in the unorganised sector work under unregulated conditions of work, and have no job and social security. Employment in the organised sector is stagnating, if not declining, and greater use of the non-permanent – temporary, casual and contract – modes of employment by this sector implies exclusion of even those working for enterprises in this sector not only from the job security but also the social protection net.

IV. 'Decent Work' and Social Protection

It has already been a matter of serious concern that a majority of Indian workers carry on employments which could hardly be termed as what ILO has in recent years propagated as 'decent work'. According to the conceptualisation advanced by ILO (ILO, 1999), Decent Work means not only access to income earning opportunities but also adequate earnings, social protection, basic human and workers' rights to organise and protest as well as participation in social dialogue on issues concerning labour. Applying these standards, one will easily find a large 'decent work deficit' in the Indian employment scene. Workers without access to income earning opportunities, that is, the unemployed, are seen to constitute a small proportion of workforce if the conventional concepts and measures are adopted. Unemployment rates vary between 3 to 7 per cent using different concepts such as usual status and current daily states. But if the employed without adequate earnings, namely the working poor are also included the proportion would be much larger. The poor are estimated to constitute over one-fourth of the total population. It can be assumed that a similar proportion of workers belong to the category of the poor. A small percentage (around 3 per cent) of them are poor because they are 'unemployed', another 5 per cent because they are 'under-employed', but the rest (18 per cent) are poor because they do not earn even the poverty line income from their

full-time work. Taking the non-poor unemployed (about 2%) also into account, about 28 per cent of the workers do not fulfill the criterion of Decent work for the reasons of lack of access to income earning opportunities (5%), inadequate availability of such opportunities (5%) and insufficient income from their work (18%) (Papola, 2004).

These, however, though the most important, are not the only aspects of quality of employment, or in other words, indicators of the decent work deficit. Social protection is another important characteristic of good quality jobs. Social protection includes security against such job related risks as occupational hazards and accidents, sickness, loss of job, disability and death during employment and income provision for old age. In other words, decent employment implies that workers are covered by such social security benefits as medical treatment, compensation against disability arising out of accidents, leave and treatment during maternity, adequate compensation on job loss and old age pension. There are legislative provisions granting all these benefits to the workers, but the coverage of these provisions is confined to the public sector and the relatively larger enterprises in the private organised sector. There are also special schemes and programmes like welfare funds but only for the selected occupational categories of workers and often only in some states. Including all these legislations and schemes it can safely be said that around two-thirds of the Indian workers, which also include the vast majority of the self-employed, are unprotected. So far as the other norms of decent work, namely rights and opportunity for dialogue are concerned, in principle, basic rights to organise, protest and negotiate are guaranteed under the constitution and various laws, but the labour market pressures, lack of organisation and often, poor compliance of legal provisions lead to non-realisation of these rights by workers.

Recent trends in employment structure and new practices of labour use being adopted by the enterprises suggest that there is likely to be a deterioration rather than an improvement in the overall quality of employment . Stagnation in the employment in the organised sector and a decline in its share, on the one hand, and location of most new jobs in the unorganised sector, on the other, will obviously lead to a decline in the share of the protected and increase in that of the un-protected workers. This trend will be further strengthened by the adoption of more flexible methods of labour use by the organised sector, with increasing resort to casual and contract labour, as is indicated by some recent studies cited earlier. In any case,

the share of the regular wage and salaried workers has stagnated and, in some cases, declined, and that of casual workers has seen significant increase, and this trend is expected to be strengthened by the increasing flexibilisation of employment.

V. Conclusion

Role of the Market and the State in Employment Generation and Social Protection:

Some of the above disconcerting trends in the quality of employment could, however, be mitigated to a certain extent by an acceleration in the rate of employment growth and tightening of the labour market. It is reasonable to expect that a higher rate of economic growth, of around 8 per cent as envisaged in the Tenth Plan, would result in a reasonable rate of employment growth. Even if the employment elasticity does not rise significantly as envisaged in the Plan (from 0.16 to 0.34), an employment growth of around 2 per cent per annum could be reasonably expected which will take care not only of the additions to the labour force, but will also make a dent on the backlog of unemployment to some extent. A faster growth in the rural non-farm and urban small manufacturing and services sectors, as has been experienced in recent years, will tighten the labour market and lead to an increase in earnings. Such trends are already visible in recent years with a 3 per cent annual increase in real earnings of rural casual workers and 3.5 per cent in the case of their urban counterparts during the 1990's (Planning Commission, 2000, Ramaswamy, 2003). It may be noted that the special rural employment programmes also made a contribution to rise in real wages and their continuation and expansion will be needed to sustain this trend.

A faster expansion in employment opportunity is, however, a necessary, but not a sufficient condition to meet the standards implied in the concept of Decent Work. While it fulfills the criteria of access to income earning opportunities and is also likely to eventually ensure adequate income from work, special measures will be required to take care of social protection and rights of the workers. In this connection, there are two views prevailing at the moment. Some economists and policy makers argue that expansion of employment opportunities must be the priority for some time and once labour market is characterised by increasing demand and only small surplus, it would be easier to meet the other criteria of decent work.

In other words, concentration should first be on achieving its quantitative dimensions, qualitative aspects can wait for a while. Some of the qualitative dimensions such as higher wages and a degree of employment, if not job, security will be guaranteed by a labour market characterised by increasing demand for labour. Public action to provide others such as social protection will also become easier, at that stage, for example, through contributory social insurance schemes.

On the other hand, it is argued that unless measures are taken to provide a degree of social protection and ensure minimum standards now, there is a likelihood of 'race to the bottom' taking place from where it would become difficult to start an upward movement in labour standards. The pool of unprotected workers is very large and recent trends suggest an increase in it. Therefore, unless measures are taken to bring in more workers in the net of social protection now, it would become increasingly difficult to tackle the problem all at once at a later stage. In any case, it is not desirable to allow labour being employed under sub-human conditions and leave it completely unprotected against various risks at work and in life.

Policy and legislation on employment and labour will have to strike an appropriate balance between these two approaches. A faster growth of employment is necessary and also seems feasible with prospects of a high rate of economic growth and emerging changes in the structure of the economy, following the processes of globalisation. At the same time, the short and medium term implications for quality of employment are not necessarily positive. Measures are necessary to prevent further deterioration in the quality of work through labour market interventions both on policy and legislative fronts. While quantitative expansion of employment is important its qualitative dimensions cannot be left to be taken care of by the market in the long run. Market can at best ensure availability of and access to income earning opportunities, but social protection to workers will have to be provided by the state and society at large.

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