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Colonialism to Globalisation: *Contouring Labour Discourse in India*

Sreemoyee Sarkar* and Ananya Dungdung**

Abstract— Last year, in a podcast, Infosys's founder, Mr. Narayana Murthy, expressed concern about India's low productivity and proposed a 'seventy-hour work week' for India. It sparked a national debate where some supported the need for seventy-hour work weeks to boost productivity, and others referred to ILO imperatives on exploitation, motivation and burnout. Meanwhile, International Labour Day completes a century in India, as in 1923, the colonial city of Madras saw the first May Day to be celebrated in this land. Globalisation's impact on Labour and development is equated with GDP and undermines workers' experience and the intersectional confluence of labouring lives.

Indian labour legislation still suffers from patriarchal myopia, as the current development discourse does not address it. It neglects occupational health and safety parameters and ignores crucial roles played by the economy's structure and productive employment opportunities.

Nevertheless, glorifying a workaholic culture vilifies leisure and condones an unhealthy work-life balance. The present work uses a critical lens to appreciate workers' contributions historically and provides labour dynamic discourse in India. The intellectual and legal history of contemporary labour demobilisation and the workweek paradigm is essential for social progress, workers' rights, and the ongoing struggle for economic justice in India.

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Key Words: Labour History, Working Class Movement, Working Hours, Leisure, Neo-Slavery.

I. INTRODUCTION

The contemporary Indian labour landscape is a complex interplay of historical legacies, global forces, and domestic policies. In recent years, a contentious debate has emerged around the ideal workweek, with prominent figures advocating for longer hours to boost economic

growth. Notably, the recent statement by Narayana Murthy, founder of Infosys, advocating for a seventy-hour workweek in India to stimulate economic development has ignited a national debate (Chaturvedi, 2023). Interestingly, his proposal was seconded by a few other prominent Indian entrepreneurs like Sajjan Jindal, the MD of JSW Steel, and Bhavish Aggarwal, the CEO of Ola Cabs, who believe longer hours are necessary for India to compete in the global market (Madhukalya, 2023). While such proposals suggest increased productivity, they raise critical questions about the balance between work and life, worker well-being, and the nature of work in the 21st century. Furthermore, this perspective starkly contrasts the International Labour Organisation's (ILO) core principles, which advocate for a forty-hour workweek and prioritise worker well-being (ILO n.d.). This paper delves into the historical context of labour rights and working hours in India. By examining the long struggle for worker protection and the evolution of labour laws, we can critically evaluate the current debate surrounding workweek length.

Furthermore, to critically assess globalisation's impact on Labour and how development is equated with high Gross domestic product (GDP) growth, with the assumption that such growth benefits everyone, it is crucial to analyse both "working class

experience" and redistributive policies in determining whether growth benefits reach a larger population (Scalmer, 1996). It neglects occupational health and safety parameters and ignores crucial roles played by the economy's structure and productive employment opportunities. Therefore, a lens through which we can appreciate workers' contributions and work toward a more equitable society provides discourse and a richer understanding of the labour dynamics in India today is necessary. The intellectual and legal history of contemporary labour demobilisation and the workweek paradigm calls for an essential context for understanding social progress, workers' rights, and the ongoing struggle for economic justice in India. It is also pertinent to gauge how forces of globalisation have played a role in glorifying a workaholic culture, vilifying leisure and condoning unhealthy work-life balance. Furthermore, Indian labour legislation still suffers from patriarchal myopia as the current development discourse does not address the intersectional confluence of labouring lives.

II. INDUSTRIAL REVOLUTION AND THE ADVENT OF MODERN LABOUR DISCOURSE

Since the 18th and 19th centuries, Britain underwent a series of large-scale socio-economic changes and developments in its industries. It was termed the first Industrial

Revolution (Mathias & Davis, 1989), which marked the transition of Britain from an agrarian society to an industrial society. The development of machine tools during this period eased manual labour and made it less taxing. There was mass production in the textile industry, harnessing water and steam power, the development of the coal-fired steam engine, machine manufacturing of chemicals, and the mechanisation of iron production processes. The iron and textile industries played central roles in the Industrial Revolution (Ashton, 1948). After the 1850s, industrialisation spread to other European countries and the rest of the world.

During the Industrial Revolution, the social structure also experiences significant changes. One of the most significant changes was the rise of a new social group, the working class. As industrialisation developed, people started migrating from villages to work in the factories near the cities. This group of people came to be known as the working class. Though industrialisation increased the overall economic output and improved the standard of living for the bourgeoisie, the social upper-crust, urban poor and working-class enclaves were the worst recipients (history.com, 2023). The mechanisation of labour made working in factories increasingly perilous and monotonous. Workers, both men and women, including children,

were paid meagre wages and forced to work longer hours.

Initially, the workers adhered to the demands of their employers and had to fulfil them without fail. Despite their employers setting exploitative terms, the workers had to carry on due to reasons such as money and fear of being replaced. However, they slowly realised that if many workers united and protested collectively against the exploitative terms of their employer, instead of having one worker do so, it would have more impact towards their employer lords. The term 'Union' was not initially used, and these groups were instead referred to as 'Combinations' (Shackleton, 2024, p. 23). Such ideations eventually led to the formation of Trade Unions. The formation of unions also gave them the power to bargain for themselves collectively. The formation of Trade Unions encouraged the labourers to organise strikes. They protested and fought for their demands of lowering working hours and minimum basic wages (Sinha et al., 2017).

In the 1830s, the British Parliament, driven by socio-economic and legal imperatives, introduced strong regulations for factory conditions. British MPs Anthony Ashley-Cooper and Michael Sadler initiated a humanitarian campaign outside the British Parliament, supported by Lancashire and Yorkshire textile workers (UK Parliament, n.d.). This movement, known as the 'Ten-Hour Movement', aimed

to reduce the daily working hours for children from sixteen hours to a more humane eight to ten hours. In 1831, the Labour in Cotton Mills Act 1831 (Hobhouse's Act) was passed, limiting the daily working hours to twelve hours for under-eighteen workers in the textile industry. However, ensuring effective enforcement of this law remained critical, as the urgency and gravity of the issues could not be overstated.

Further parliamentary inquiries and Royal Commission reports documented the appalling abuse and mistreatment faced by child factory workers (Thomas, 1945, pp. 12-14). In 1833, the British Parliament passed a new Factory Act (Althorp's Act). The 1833 Act, unlike the previous act, which was restricted to the cotton industry, was also applied to the older woollen-producing communities in and around Yorkshire (UK Parliament, n.d.). Under this Act, no child under nine was allowed to work in factories (Thomas, 1945, p. 16). Children aged nine to thirteen had a maximum working week of forty-eight hours, limited to eight hours daily (Wilding, 2023). On the other hand, the working hours were limited to twelve hours daily for children aged thirteen to eighteen. In addition to that, children under thirteen were required to receive elementary schooling for two hours each day (UK Parliament, n.d.). The 1847 Factory fixed the ten-hour daily working limit for women and young children. The 1850 Factory

Act raised this limit to ten and a half hours.

Through numerous acts such as the 1853 Factory Act, the 1860 Bleach and Dye Works Act, the 1864 Factory Acts Extension Act, the 1867 Factory Acts Extension Act and the 1867 Workshops Regulation Act, the coverage of labour protections gradually expanded to additional industries including bleach and dye works and textiles ("Factory Legislation 1802-1878," n.d.). The 1878 Factory Act consolidated the provisions of the previous acts with the rectification of instruments and made them applicable to all trades. Accordingly, children under ten were prohibited from working in the bleach and dye industry and were entitled to compulsory education. Children aged ten to fourteen could only work half days, and women were given a weekly work limit of fifty-six hours (Factory Legislation 1802-1878, n.d.).

The origin of Labour Day is associated with the May 1, 1886 labour strikes, which were part of an incident known as the Haymarket affair (Rothman, 2017). On May 1, 1886, a significant union demonstration supported the eight-hour workday in Chicago and various other cities. Industrial workers throughout the United States of America went on strike and demanded an eight-hour workday. On May 3, 1886, a clash occurred between the strikers and the police during a strike at McCormick

Reaper Works in Chicago. In the clash, many of the strikers are wounded or killed. (Library of Congress n.d.) On May 4, 1886, a bomb was detonated near Haymarket Square in Chicago when the police were breaking up a meeting of labour activists (Library of Congress n.d.).

The Haymarket Affair bombing killed one police officer and resulted in the deaths of several others, both police and striking workers, amidst the ensuing chaos. Eight anarchists, all workers, were subsequently tried and convicted in connection with the bombing. Seven were sentenced to death, while the eighth, Oscar Neebe, received a fifteen-year prison sentence. The nature of their guilt remains debated, with questions surrounding their direct involvement in the bombing itself. While the prosecution argued they incited the violence, the evidence was primarily based on their political beliefs and association with the labour movement. Were they guilty of murder, manslaughter, or simply inciting a riot? The legal proceedings at the time blurred these distinctions, reflecting the era's widespread fear and anti-labour sentiment. However, the Haymarket affair was a turning point in the fight for workers' rights. In 1889, the International Socialist Conference, the Second International, designated May 1 as International Workers' Day, commemorating the Haymarket affair and the significant strides

made in the struggle for workers' rights (Rothman, 2017).

Rantanen (2008) observes that during the first International Labour Conference (ILC) in November 1919, the Maternity Protection Convention, 1919 (No.3) was adopted as one of the first international labour standards for gender equality. This Convention recognised the right to paid leave for childbirth and employment protection. It has been ratified by 34 countries (ILO, 2019), including India. Convention No.138 on Minimum Age and Convention No. 182 on the Worst Forms of Child Labour were adopted to abolish, regulate and prevent child labour. This Convention is designated as 'fundamental' by the ILO, and its status carries significant weight, meaning that these conventions address core labour rights that are considered universal. While ratification demonstrates a country's commitment, the ILO expects all member states to respect, promote, and strive to implement the principles enshrined in these fundamental conventions, even if they have not formally ratified them, underscoring the importance the ILO places on eliminating child labour as a basic human right.

Furthermore, under the ILO Declaration on Fundamental Principles and Rights at Work, all ILO member States must respect, promote and realise the abolition of child labour, even if they have yet to ratify the two Conventions. ILO Convention No. 182 was

adopted in 1999 and is the first ILO Convention to achieve universal ratification. The Convention requires countries to take immediate and effective measures to eliminate the worst forms of child labour (ILO, 2018). It was also the most rapidly ratified Convention in the history of the ILO, with the majority of ratifications occurring within the first three years of adoption. Convention No. 138 was adopted in 1973 and has also been widely ratified by many ILO member States. The Convention requires countries to establish a minimum age for entry into work or employment and national policies for abolishing child labour (ILO, 2018).

The Occupational Safety and Health Convention, 1981 (No. 155), passed by the ILO in 1981, is a significant milestone in promoting a holistic approach to the national governance of occupational and safety hazards (OSH). It introduced the principles and framework for a national policy about OSH, stressing the need to consider OSH a national concern. It also comprehensively regulates substantive aspects of a national policy on OSH and defines the actions required at the national and enterprise levels to check OSH (ILO, 2023).

Similarly, the Promotional Framework for Occupational Safety and Health Convention, 2006 (No. 187), adopted in 2006, tries to promote a national preventative safety and health

culture and progressively achieve a safe and healthy working environment (ILO, 2012). It calls for establishing a national framework for continuous improvement in the field of OSH, emphasising the interdependence and interactive nature of the different components, including a national OSH policy, a national OSH system and a national OSH programme (ILO, 2023).

International labour standards are an essential component in the international framework for ensuring that the growth of the global economy provides benefits and opportunities to all. (ILO, n.d.) However, these benefits have not been evenly distributed, leading to issues. Globally, today, 21% of workers live in poverty due to receiving inadequate wages for their work, and informal employment affects close to 61% or two billion, of the global workforce. Four billion people have no social protection for work, and more than 28 million people are forced to work. Workers in developing economies are particularly exposed to precarious employment, leaving them vulnerable to economic shocks and instability. (Willige, 2024)

Even in the case of India, labour laws primarily consist of rights and benefits for the workers while excluding managerial-level employees. Despite that, the workers still face exploitation at the hands of the employers. Even though the Government passed four new labour codes, their

implementation has been slow. (Kumar, 2024) In addition, issues such as invisible labour and gender inequality still pose a challenge. (Luthra & Singh, 2022)

Therefore, it is interesting to contour the long journey of labour law dynamics in terms of working hours and equitable working space shaping the current labour discourse.

III. TRAJECTORIES OF LABOUR RIGHTS IN INDIA

In India, the working-class struggle began with the advent of colonial capitalism. Early strikes were spontaneous, unorganised and small-scale. The earliest instance of such strikes dates back to 1862, when about 1,200 railway workers went on strike at Howrah Station (Shah, 2004). Buchanan (1934) observed that at least two strikes were held yearly in every factory across India, which were localised, short-lived, and centred around personal grievances. The leadership came from within the working class. However, textile worker strikes in Nagpur and Bombay in 1877 and 1882 were large-scale. The 1882 strike in Bombay is widely regarded as the beginning of the labour movement in India (Karnik, 1966). Since the closing of the 19th century, numerous strikes have been held by the textile, jute, plantation, mine and railway workers in Calcutta, Bombay, Madras, and Ahmedabad.

The Swadeshi movement (1903) is a watershed in the history of the labour movement in India. With the support of the nationalists, the Swadeshi entrepreneurs shifted their focus from purely political issues to the economic rebuilding of the state. Gradually, leadership was taken over by individuals outside the working class. These outsiders were sympathetic to the plight of the workers (Jha, 1970; Bose, 1979; Murphy, 1981). Eventually, it became a movement for the workers rather than by the workers (Ornati, 1955). Simultaneously, rather than agitating and struggling with purely economic questions, the working class of India started to involve themselves in broader political issues (Chandra, 2016). Thus, the plight of the working class complemented the Indian national movement—leaders like NM. Joshi, Lala Lajpat Rai, and V.V. Giri played pivotal roles.

Trade unions began in India in the early 20th century as the Swadeshi facilitated Indian industrialisation. The leadership came from Fabian socialist reformers like Anne Besant, Jawaharlal Nehru and Prashanta Chandra Mahalanobis. Shah (2017, p. 36) identifies that the Madras Labour Union was the first modern trade union that was formed in 1918 under the presidency of labour activist B.P. Wadia. Indian soldiers returning from overseas service during World War I had observed better labour conditions abroad. This

experience and their understanding of industrial relations equipped them to lead labour movements in India.

Hence, trade unionism became more organised in India after World War I. The Russian Revolution of 1917, which held out hopes of emancipation for all oppressed people, also impacted the trade union movement. (Upadhyaya, 2022, p. 6) The main principles of Indian Trade Unions were inspired by the Russian Revolution, focusing on the status of the labourer in relation to different aspects such as his relation to his employer, and his effect on the economic and industrial life of the country, his position in the industrial world, and so on. (Mukherji, 1922) In 1918, the textile workers under the Madras Labour Union went on strike. At the same time, the textile workers of Ahmedabad also held a strike with assistance and leadership from M. K. Gandhi. This resulted in the formation of the Textile Labour Association in 1920 (Shah, 2004). It was followed by the All-India Trade Union Congress (AITUC) formation in 1920 (Upadhyaya, 2022, p. 8). In 1923, Madras celebrated the first May Day in India (Shah, 2017, p. 36) with demonstrations and processions against British colonialism. The Indian labour force became sensitised to nationalism, identity, gender, and even the violence and communal strife that was going around them (Simeon, 2001). By World War II, the Communist

Party of India (CPI) became instrumental in introducing radical trade unionism beyond economic demands and aimed to raise political consciousness among workers. While other anti-imperial and labour mobilisation forces were involved, the CPI's influence within the AITUC was a key factor in the union's participation in the founding of the World Federation of Trade Unions (WFTU). This broadened labour concerns to include national issues like imperialism and colonialism, enabling mass mobilisation to pressure employers and the government (Bandyopadhyay, 2004, pp. 372-389). By the time India gained independence, the Indian National Trade Union Congress (INTUC) was formed under the presidentship of Acharya JB Kripalani with affiliation to the International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC).

Independent India witnessed a phased evolution of trade unionism and labour movements, often closely aligned with political ideologies. The nationalist INTUC, associated with the Indian National Congress, and the socialist AITUC, with ties to the communist parties, emerged as the two major forces in the organised labour sector. Bhattacharjee (2002) articulates that the period from 1950 to the mid-1960s saw state-driven industrialisation and a massive rise in public-sector employment and unionism. Unions were highly centralised

and determined wages and working conditions, requiring the government to manage the labour movement. The mid-1960s to 1979 was marked by economic stagnation and political conflict. There were decreased employment rates, increased industrial conflict and inter-union rivalries. The conflict peaked with the May 1974 railway strike and the National Emergency of 1975-77 (Guha, 2017, pp. 543-544). From 1980 to 1991, though segmented and uneven economic development continued, there was a rise in decentralised and non-political trade unions (Bhattacharjee, 2002). These unions challenged the centralised and politically controlled labour regime, resulting in the 1980-81 Bangalore public-sector strike and the 1982 Mumbai textile workers' strike (Shah, 2017, p. 68). During this period, inter-state and inter-regional variations in labour management regimes grew significantly (Guha, 2017, pp. 550-501).

The unions in profitable economic sectors, like the automotive and electronics industries, often possessing greater bargaining power due to the industry's success and the relative ease of organising within larger, more structured firms, secured better wages and benefits for their members. Conversely, in unorganised and declining sectors, like traditional manufacturing or agriculture-based industries, characterised by precarious employment, smaller enterprises,

and a lack of legal protection, workers faced wage stagnation, job insecurity, and diminished union influence. This stark contrast underscores the urgent need for innovative strategies. Finally, from the 1991 post-economic reform period onwards, a new labour-state-corporate era was heralded. Through stabilisation and structural adjustment programmes, there was a great demand for increased flexibility in the labour and employment market (Bhattacharjee, 2002). To address the existing challenges, unions adopted innovative strategies, such as focusing on worker empowerment through legal awareness campaigns, building coalitions with NGOs and community organisations, and advocating for stronger labour regulations and social safety nets.

The onset of globalisation highlighted the weakness of the trade union movement in India. Globalisation introduced many new workplace avenues incompatible with the seniority- and longevity-based pay and benefits structure. This contests the entire structure of the trade union movement. The changes in the nature of work made the labour unions obsolete. They did not know how to handle emerging issues such as career transition support, childcare, absence of job security, etc. It also brought gender issues into focus. The trade union movement, historically male-dominated, has often failed to address the specific

needs of women workers. (Roy, 2015).

IV. MANY INDUSTRIAL REVOLUTIONS AND SHIFTING LABOUR PARADIGMS

As subsequent waves of the Industrial Revolution followed, Schwab (2016) observed that electric power was developed to enable mass production in the second Industrial Revolution. In the third Industrial Revolution, electronics and information technology, which automated production process. The new technologies also led to new possibilities, such as space expeditions and biotechnology (IED, 2019). The fourth Industrial Revolution represents the digital era, emerging since the middle of the last century and is characterised by a technological fusion that has erased the physical, digital, and biological divides. There has been a shift in the labour paradigm across these industrial revolutions.

India's Information Technology (IT) industry is one of the most thriving industries that testifies to the fourth Industrial Revolution in India. The economic liberalisation process initiated in 1991 laid the groundwork for the IT industry's success. It is in its prime, providing many services related to software and information technology, business process outsourcing, engineering R&D, and technology start-ups, and contributes to exports and the domestic market (Sharma, 2022).

The IT industry's exponential growth in the last two decades has changed the global perception of India's knowledge, skills and emergent economic growth. The swift advancement within the IT industry and liberalisation policies, such as reducing trade barriers and eliminating import duties on technology products – played a pivotal role in this transformation (Jayswal, 2021).

However, much like its predecessors, the fourth Industrial 'Digital' Revolution, which was potent to raise global income levels and improve the quality of life for populations around the world, could only have developed new products and services through technology and benefitted the consumers who can afford and access the digital world (Schwab, 2016). Apart from increasing the efficiency and pleasure in our personal lives, it has broadened the 'digital divide' and vilified the idea of 'leisure' (Dattilo & Frias, 2020). Furthermore, economists Erik Brynjolfsson and Andrew McAfee (2015) have argued that this ongoing revolution yields greater inequality and potentially disrupts the labour market. As automation substitutes manual labour across economies, the networker displacement widens the gap between returns to capital and returns to labour (Schwab, 2016).

Under Rajiv Gandhi's leadership, the Indian government passed initiatives such as the Electronics Commission in 1971, the New Computer Policy in

1984, the New Electronics Policy in 1985, and the Indian Software Policy in 1986 to build a strong foundation for an outward-oriented and liberalised IT sector in India (Das and Sagara 2017). During the 1990s, through the efforts of Narasimha Rao and Manmohan Singh, the IT sector also benefited greatly from a series of state policies such as the dismantling of the Foreign Exchange Regulation Act (FERA) and other restrictive regulations, setting up of Software Technology Parks (STP) and Electronic Hardware Technology Parks (EHTP); introduction of single window clearance and, removal of physical controls on imports of most electronics equipment and components (Joseph, 2007). Moreover, implementing the New Industrial Policy of 1991 and subsequent state policies to facilitate the IT sector through tax-free and fiscally-incentivised SEZs and National Manufacturing Investment Zones provided further support to the industry (Das & Sagara, 2017). The changes rejected a highly regulated, autarchic development approach that was being followed in most of India's traditional work sectors and are considered essential for the rise of the software industry in India (Parthasarathy, 2004). – With the benefits from these economic reforms, India entered the global IT market by capitalising on the demand for low-cost but high-quality programming skills (Das & Sagara, 2017). These reforms

rejected the earlier heavily regulated development approach followed by many traditional sectors in India. Leveraging low-cost yet high-quality programming talent, India entered the global IT market and positioned itself as a top destination for business process outsourcing (BPO) and knowledge process outsourcing (KPO) (Parthasarathy, 2004). In the last decade, India has become the world's largest sourcing destination for the IT industry, and Indian software companies have taken prominent positions in the global IT sector (Jayswal, 2021).

As the opening of the Indian market to foreign investors and lucrative schemes introduced by the state attracted much foreign capital and investors and helped in the successful establishment of a conducive business environment, the Indian government has been lax in enforcing legislation aimed at protecting the interests of the IT workforce since its inception. Despite three decades of globalisation, there have been no attempts from the Indian government to intervene in the regulation of Labour in the ever-growing IT and Information Technology-Enabled Services (ITES) sectors (Sarkar, 2008) in India. One of the explanations often provided is that intervention in the workings of the industry would unsettle the clientele and disturb the wheel of industrial commerce (Stevens & Mosco, 2010). The IT, BPO, KPO, and

ITES employees are white-collar workers. Neither the labour unions view them as ‘workers’ nor do those employees feel the need for trade unionism (Agarwal, 2015). Instead, they tend to create mitigating or bargaining devices to address the labour challenges in those sectors. However, in reality, the very nature of IT, BPO, KPO, and ITES workers often play down political consciousness, making it difficult for the Indian unions to decide whether they come under their area of operation and, if so, how to politically organise them (Stevens, & Mosco, 2010). Koçer (2018) rightly points out that this ‘veil of ignorance’ in the Weberian sense perpetuates the assumption that union membership is based on individual rational choice and divorced from any societal or institutional dimension! The MNCs and TNCs believe unionisation would drive potential customers away from offshoring their projects to Indian IT companies and call centres (Bisht, 2010, pp. 221-222).

Furthermore, it has been observed that the Indian Constitution provides the IT industry the right to assemble like all other industries. However, due to the cost-sensitive nature of this industry, this right has never been exercised. If the industry complies with labour laws, it will be seen as a burden (Stevens & Mosco 2010: 41).

V. PANDEMIC AND LABOUR PARADIGM

The recent pandemic has caused havoc on the economic development of many countries and labour markets worldwide. According to the World Bank (2022), temporary unemployment was at a high of seventy per cent in all countries in 2020 for workers who had completed only a primary education. World Bank (2023) also found that income losses were more considerable among youth, women, the self-employed, and casual workers with lower levels of formal education. Women were particularly affected by income and employment losses, as most were employed in sectors highly affected by lockdown and social distancing measures (World Bank, 2023). Small firms, informal businesses, and enterprises with limited access to formal credit were also severely affected by income losses stemming from the pandemic (World Bank 2022).

In India, the pandemic caused a massive economic disruption. Due to a sharp decline in domestic demand and exports, nearly all sectors were hit (Upadhyay, 2021). Agriculture was severely affected by broken supply chains, lack of market outlets, poor demand, and falling output prices. Micro and small industries were affected, with 35% having a probability of shutting down permanently (MSME, 2022). There was also a significant loss of employment, with at least 13

million people disappearing from the labour force during the pandemic (Ramakumar & Kanitkar, 2020). Despite these setbacks, the Indian economy was resilient and rebounded quickly, showing favourable growth rates. Thangam (2023) articulates that in the fiscal year 2021-2022, India's GDP expanded by 9.5%, suggesting a solid recovery and outperformed most other major economies, which was possible due to government stimulus, a revival in consumer demand, and increased industrial production. However, the contrast between pre-pandemic and post-pandemic GDP is stark in terms of productivity (Chandrasekhar, 2023) as there is widespread optimism about India's robust growth prospect among domestic and foreign investors, juxtaposes a slowdown in business, investment, and trade due to the tightening of interest rates in the global North, driven by persistent inflation, impacting exports (Kundu, 2024).

At this juncture, the labour paradigm, dealing with the rights, obligations, and regulations governing the relationship between employers and employees, becomes of utmost importance as protecting the interests of employers and employees is called for in this exasperating world to ensure fair labour practices. Working hours constitute an essential variable to gauge labour law applications to workers, employers, and trade unions, as well as equitable

treatment and the promotion of economic development, peace, democracy, and social progress.

In India, the Factories Act of 1948, alongside other relevant labour laws, has served as a cornerstone of the regulatory framework for industrial establishments. Section 51 mandates that every adult (above eighteen years of age) cannot work more than forty-eight hours a week and not more than nine hours a day. Sections 54-56 and 59 state that the spread of overtime hours should exceed ten and a half hours. On the other hand, the Mines Act 1952 only allows a person to work up to ten hours a day, apart from overtime work. The Beedi and Cigar Workers Act of 1966 fixes a maximum limit of ten hours of overtime per day and fifty-four hours a week (Ministry of Labour and Employment; Joseph, 2022). In 2019 and 2020, the Government of India passed four Labour Codes. There are the Code on Wages, 2019; the Industrial Relations Code, 2020; the Code on Social Security, 2020; and the Occupational Safety, Health and Working Conditions Code, 2020. These were formulated to strengthen protection available to workers, including unorganised workers, in terms of statutory minimum wage, social security and healthcare workers. (Ministry of Labour and Employment, 2024)

Labour Rights Index (2024) articulates that the general weekly work hours assigned to a worker

are based upon the conventions of Hours of Work (Industry) Convention 1919 (No. 1), Hours of Work (Commerce and Offices) Convention 1930 (No. 30) and the Forty-Hour Week Convention, 1935 (No. 47). ILO's Articles 2 and 3 of Convention 1 and 30 respectively, state that the maximum working hours should not exceed eight in the day and forty-eight in the week. Article 1 of Convention 47 approves of a forty-hour week and can be applied in a way that does not reduce the living standard (Saul et al., 2014). Hence, such international regulatory standard requirements provided on the forty-eight hours threshold do not apply to supervisory, management, confidential positions, or whereby law, custom or agreement between employers' and workers' organisations or employers' and workers' representatives vary the daily hours limit, or where shift workers are employed more than eight hours in a day and forty-eight hours in a week if the average hours over three weeks do not exceed eight per day and forty-eight per week (Labour et al., 2024). – Hence, Indian workers are already working longer hours than in other democracies. ILO data shows that the average Indian works practically every day of the week, contrasting with the world labour scenario. Therefore, a 'seventy-hour work week' paradigm calls for a dangerous shift at the cost of physical and mental health,

familial and social well-being and productivity over personal life.

VI. THE QUESTION OF WOMEN'S WORK FORCE

Since British colonialism, women labourers have been employed in plantations, factories and mines. The Factories Act of 1891 required work from early dawn to late night. It exposed women employees to harsh conditions and long absences from home. Concerns were raised within society about the impact on family structure, women's health, or moral implications, leading to negative perceptions of women working in factories. The societal pressure on women to conform to traditional roles was immense. Gradually, the work hours were fixed to thirteen hours, with a half-hour break, but the plight of women labourers remained miserable. They were subjected to social ostracism from their communities due to the long hours they spent in factories.

The Mines Act of 1930 reduced working hours from nine to eight hours. However, as Joseph (2022) highlights, women employees in India were considered less efficient than men for a long time, and having a daily limit of twelve hours for women was perceived to be reasonable enough to meet the work quality compared with men. This means women were made to work longer hours because their productivity was considered less than men.

Traditional gender roles, early marriage, childbirth, limited family support, societal expectations surrounding parenting, and the disproportionate burden of household chores have historically contributed to a 'glass ceiling' for working women. While women have made significant strides post-liberalisation, becoming prominent stakeholders in technical fields and professional careers and driving innovation, these advancements do not erase persistent challenges. Numerous legal cases, such as *The State of Punjab vs Gurmit Singh & Ors* (1996), *Sri Rakesh B vs State of Karnataka* (2020), *Aparna Bhat v. State of Madhya Pradesh* (2021), and *Vikas Garg vs The State of Haryana and Another* (2022), illustrate the discrimination and sexist remarks women employees continue to face, even within the legal system itself. These cases highlight how gender stereotypes can influence judgments and perpetuate inequalities. In 2023, the Supreme Court of India took a significant step towards addressing this issue by recognising the specific gender stereotypes confronting 'career women' and publishing a handbook designed to combat such marginalisation. This handbook aims to guide recognising and mitigating bias, promoting inclusive workplaces, and establishing effective grievance mechanisms. Consequently, the concept of a 'seventy-hour work week' not only fails to acknowledge the

disproportionate burden of unpaid work that working women carry but also obscures the issues of the overcompensating wage gap and persistent inequality they face in the workforce (Chawla, 2023).

The recent labour discourse in India may be rooted in a more disciplined and productive workforce. Still, it completely discards the practicality of the women's question in the workforce and perpetuates the vicious cycle of patriarchal inequity, where most women are seen as secondary income earners. The implementation of seventy-hour work weeks will increase the gender disparity being faced by women in the workforce, as the pre-existing issues are yet to be solved (Chawla, 2023). ILO has highlighted how longer working hours prolong gender inequality in the workplace, making it harder for women to get career advancements and also worsening the gender pay gap (Jacob, 2023). The implications would be gender stereotypes, prejudiced reflection on women's work efficiency, discriminatory employment practices, and a lack of diversity and inclusivity, which will continue to hold back Indian women from progressing in their careers.

VII. THE DICHOTOMY OF THE IT 'LABOURS'

The fourth industrial revolution has ushered in a service-providing work culture for the Indian IT industry. The employees have an average of

forty-five to fifty work hours per week, making them work about ten hours a day in the five-day week. Many must work even longer to meet project deadlines (Parmar & Verma, 2023). On the other hand, the IT and communications industries do not have trade unionism to negotiate workers' rights. Previously, there have also been situations where the need for trade unionism was felt, but stakeholders refused such engagement (Economic Times, 2017). Mohandas Pai, former human resources head of Infosys, has stated that the Indian IT industry is unsuitable for trade union activities. He observed that trade unions are helpful to employees who want job security and long, stable tenure under a single employer. This contrasts with the IT work culture, where employee movement is frequent from company to company based on salary packages, schemes, and incentives (Agarwal, 2015). Hence, the mistreatment of entry-level employees, the short and unstable employment tenures, the mass layoff tendencies and overt competitiveness among peers make the employees vulnerable to exploitation without limited deterring opportunities. It is a neo-slavery where the employees are technically free, but low pay, irregular and unstable job market forces them to work (Lashley, 2018). Narayana Murthy, the co-founder of Infosys Limited, an Indian multinational IT company offering business consulting and outsourcing services, envisions long working hours. It is implied

that his statement would have affirmation in the IT industry, ignoring the pressing issues already present. Many have found this unhealthy work culture for favorable revenue generation, ultimately hindering employee productivity and positive motivation. For example, CRED founder Kunal Shah has stated that 'China's 996 culture' clearly executes their progress, and Indians need to follow such schedules to grow their economy (Moneycontrol, 2023).

Therefore, IT 'labourers' are vulnerable to exploitation, and they have limited opportunities to prevent it. This can be observed in the IT sector, with the short and unstable employment tenures, the mistreatment of entry-level workers, and the mass layoffs resulting in significant unemployment rates. Murty's statement has a positive view towards the long working hours of the IT industry, ignoring the various issues and problems present in the industry that could hinder employee productivity.

Furthermore, such a 'glorified' attitude towards unhealthy work-life balance is detrimental to the women employees, overlooks their domestic chore responsibilities, juxtaposes their 'caregiving roles' and makes the appointments highly patriarchal. Such a double standard system is idealised, unattainable, and traps women employees in a vicious cycle of compromises. First Global founder Devina Mehra has stated that a seventy-hour work

routine assumes that employees have no other responsibilities outside of work (Agarwal, 2023). Such a discriminatory measure pushes a lot of women employees out of the workforce or prevents them from marrying, having children and families! Does the Indian state truly prioritise national growth if willing to sacrifice the contributions and well-being of its female citizens?

VIII. CONCLUSION

Hard work and dedication are admirable qualities. However, long working hours raise legitimate concerns about the potential negative impact on individuals' physical and mental well-being. Overworking leads to burnout, decreased productivity, depression and suicidal tendencies (Rastogi, 2023). Nevertheless, overtime and workaholism have been acknowledged as severe problems, with *karoshi*, i.e. death by overwork, has been legally recognised as a cause of death, with an accumulation of lawsuits and limits placed to reduce overtime work (Underhill, 2015). Is the Indian state looking forward to the promotion of an 'overwork culture' like Japan, China or Korea?

Furthermore, it is important to remember that the international challenges on labour standards may not correspond to India or any other erstwhile colonised

country. We must analyse India's labour policies and politics through a lens of coloniality, decoloniality and globalisation.

Today, India has one of the most enormous youth populations suffering from high unemployment rates. Therefore, utmost priority should be given to generating new employment opportunities with good salaries instead of forcing existing workers to work longer for higher salaries. The idea of a seventy-hour work week appears disconnected from the reality of the lives of most Indians and favours only a tiny majority. It needs to account for commuting time, especially for public transport users. It also raises questions about the availability of leisure time for employees to spend with their families and concerns about women's safety during travel. It disregards that not everyone could have the same circumstances, responsibilities, or privileges, such as having staff to help with domestic duties.

On the other hand, flexible job schedules and supported responsibilities at the workplace promote greater job satisfaction and increased productivity. It caters to an egalitarian society, gender gender-inclusive, sensitive and diverse workspace and democratic domestic and professional spheres. No longer working hours but a welfare state

plan of action and supportive labour law imperatives are enough to shape the labour discourse around the culture of productivity, efficiency, healthy work-life balance and development.

In conclusion, India's globalised labour culture, characterised by long hours and a relentless pursuit of productivity, raises serious concerns about the well-being of its workforce. Remarkably, the fourth industrial revolution, as the IT revolution unfolds, longer working hours, glorified as a symbol of success, are far from a healthy and sustainable work-life balance. While innovation and economic growth continue to reshape the global economy, it is imperative to reconsider the prevailing labour paradigm. The discourse around labour needs to focus on quality of life, fair wages, and safe working conditions rather than simply maximising profit as its neo-colonial pursuit. We can only anticipate that the government of India would herald a sustainable and equitable future for its labour market to harness its potential through a prosperous and inclusive society.

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