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An in-depth analysis of working conditions in the Indian textile industry: Challenges and opportunities

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Abstract

The Indian textile industry, a vital component of the country's economic landscape, has witnessed substantial growth in recent decades. However, this expansion has come with significant challenges, particularly in terms of the working conditions of labourers employed in the sector. This review paper aims to provide a comprehensive analysis of the working conditions in the Indian textile industry, shedding light on the challenges faced by workers and exploring potential avenues for improvement.

Against this backdrop, the review aims to critically examine the existing working conditions in the Indian textile industry. By exploring the interplay of economic imperatives, social dynamics, and ethical considerations, I hope to provide insights that can inform policy decisions, industry practices, and consumer choices. Ultimately, the goal is to strike a balance that ensures the sustained growth of the industry while upholding the rights and well-being of the individuals who contribute to its success.

Keywords: Indian textile industry, labourers, working conditions, economic imperatives, social dynamics

Introduction

The Indian textile industry plays a crucial role in the nation's economy, contributing significantly to employment generation and export earnings. However, concerns about the working conditions of labourers in this industry have raised ethical, social, and economic questions. The Indian textile industry stands as a cornerstone of the nation's economy, playing a pivotal role in both employment generation and export earnings. Its rich heritage, coupled with technological advancements, has positioned India as a global textile hub. However, behind the vibrant fabrics and intricate designs lies a complex tapestry of ethical, social, and economic concerns pertaining to the working conditions of labourers. When retrenched workers transition to the informal sector, they often face a range of challenges and uncertainties that can affect their conditions of employment (Howell, J., & Kambhampati, U., 1999) ^[6].

Scope of the Review

By delving into the multifaceted dimensions of this industry, we seek to shed light on the challenges faced by labourers, while also acknowledging the industry's undeniable contributions to the nation's economic growth.

Economic Significance

The Indian textile sector stands as one of the largest contributors to the country's GDP, providing employment to millions of people, especially in rural areas. The sector's economic impact extends beyond direct employment, fostering growth in related industries such as agriculture, retail, and transportation. However, the sheer magnitude of its economic contributions underscores the urgency of scrutinizing the labour practices to ensure they align with ethical standards. The Textile Industry indeed plays a significant role in the Indian economy, contributing substantially to foreign exchange earnings and providing employment to a large number of people, the Textile Industry is a major foreign exchange earner for the country. More than 35% of the total export revenue comes from this industry (Raichurkar, P., & Ramachandran, M., 2015) ^[13].

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Employment Generation

The textile industry serves as a major source of livelihood for a diverse workforce, encompassing skilled artisans, weavers, and factory workers. It acts as a catalyst for socio-economic development, particularly in regions where alternative employment opportunities may be limited. Despite this positive aspect, it is imperative to assess whether the current working conditions are conducive to the well-being of the labour force.

Export Earnings

India's textile exports have a global footprint, with the country being a significant player in the international market. The success of these exports contributes substantially to foreign exchange earnings, strengthening the nation's economic resilience. However, questions arise regarding whether the gains from this global success are being equitably distributed among all stakeholders, especially the labourers whose efforts form the backbone of this industry.

Ethical and Social Concerns

The exponential growth of the textile industry has brought ethical and social concerns to the forefront. Issues such as inadequate wages, poor working conditions, and limited access to social security have sparked debates about the industry's commitment to ethical labour practices. As consumers become increasingly conscious of the origins of the products they purchase, addressing these concerns becomes not only a moral imperative but also a strategic move for the sustainability of the industry.

The politics of ethical compliance plays a central role in the establishment of new hierarchies among values, moralities, people, and societies. The statement implies that ethical standards and the level of compliance or non-compliance with these standards have become crucial measures of modernity.

According to this perspective, global standards, particularly within the context of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) discourses, are instrumental in defining and imposing ethical and social values within global production networks. These global standards serve as benchmarks through which firms, individuals, and societies are categorized based on their capacity to adhere to ethical norms (De Neve, G., 2009; Dolan, 2008; Dunn, 2005) ^[2, 3, 4].

Background and Historical Perspective

A historical overview of the evolution of the Indian textile industry provides context to the existing working conditions. Examining the transition from traditional handloom practices to modern, mechanized processes offers insights into the changes in labour dynamics and their impact on working conditions.

The Indian textile industry holds a rich history that spans centuries, reflecting the nation's cultural, economic, and technological evolution. This study delves into the transformative phases of the Indian textile sector, examining the transition from traditional handloom practices to modern, mechanized processes. Through this exploration, my aim to uncover insights into the changing dynamics of labour and their profound impact on working conditions.

Traditional Handloom Practices

The roots of the Indian textile industry can be traced back to

ancient times when skilled artisans engaged in handloom weaving. The intricate craftsmanship and artistic patterns of fabrics were emblematic of India's rich cultural diversity. However, this era was characterized by manual labour, limiting the scale of production and impeding the industry's growth.

Colonial Influence and Technological Advancements

With the advent of the British colonial era, the Indian textile landscape underwent significant changes. The introduction of mechanized looms and power-driven machinery marked a departure from traditional handloom practices. While these advancements aimed to enhance productivity, they also led to the displacement of skilled artisans, causing social and economic upheavals.

Impact on Labor Dynamics

The transition from handloom to mechanized processes had profound implications for labour dynamics in the Indian textile industry. The demand for skilled artisans dwindled as machines took over repetitive tasks, leading to a shift in the workforce composition. Factory settings emerged, giving rise to a new class of industrial labourers who were subject to different working conditions than their artisanal predecessors.

Labor Exploitation and Struggles

As the Indian textile industry embraced industrialization, issues of labour exploitation and poor working conditions surfaced. Long working hours, meager wages, and inadequate safety measures became prevalent, sparking labour movements and protests. The struggle for workers' rights gained momentum, eventually contributing to the establishment of labour laws and regulations aimed at safeguarding the welfare of the industrial workforce.

Globalization and Technological Upgradation

In the late 20th century, globalization further impacted the Indian textile industry. The integration of the Indian market into the global economy led to increased competition and a renewed focus on technological upgradation. Automation and computerization became integral to the production process, altering the skill set required of workers and necessitating adaptation to rapidly evolving technologies.

Contemporary Working Conditions

Today, the Indian textile industry stands at a crossroads, balancing tradition with modernity. While technological advancements have improved efficiency, concerns about working conditions persist. Issues such as worker safety, fair wages, and the impact of automation on employment opportunities continue to be central to the discourse surrounding the industry.

Discussion

The Indian textile industry, a cornerstone of the nation's economy, plays a pivotal role in shaping the country's industrial landscape. Amidst its economic significance, it is imperative to critically examine the present working conditions within this sector. This comprehensive analysis delves into key facets including wages, working hours, occupational health and safety, child labour, and gender issues.

Wages

One of the fundamental aspects influencing the working conditions in the Indian textile industry is the remuneration received by its workforce. This section assesses the adequacy of wages in relation to the cost of living, exploring whether labourers receive fair compensation for their contributions.

During the initial stages of industrial development in India, particularly in the early to mid-20th century, state intervention in labour matters was indeed limited, and wages were predominantly influenced by market forces. In this period, the labour market was not highly competitive or organized, and as a result, wage rates were often determined through individual bargaining between employers and workers. However, as time progressed, several factors such as Influx of Rural Labor, Growth of Urban Population, Excess Supply of Labor, contributed to a shift in the labour market dynamics (Papola, T. S., 1968)^[12].

As a consequence of these changes, the bargaining power of individual workers diminished. The labour market became more favourable to employers, leading to a situation where wages were not solely determined by negotiation but were influenced by the availability of a large and often interchangeable labour force.

According to a report on “Assessment of the Impact of the Textile Sector Initiatives on Generation of Employment & Income” Textiles Committee Govt. of India, Ministry of Textiles, Employment has experienced positive growth during 2014-18. Segments i.e. apparels have contributed substantially for growth of employment. But relative growth rate declined during the period.

According to the Delhi-based Society for Labour and Development, garment workers in India get approximately Rs. 10,000 to 12,000 (U.S. \$133 to 160) per month. Meanwhile, the living wage in India in 2021 is Rs. 18,000 per month (U.S. \$234), based on global macro models by industry think tank Trading Economics. In Karnataka, the minimum wage in the garment sector is only around ₹8,000 a month. This is 25% below the urban poverty line of ₹10,800 a month, at current prices, based on the Rangarajan Committee of the Government of India.

Working Hours

The working hours in the textile industry have been a subject of scrutiny, with concerns raised about excessive overtime and its effects on the physical and mental well-being of workers. According to a report on “Insights into working conditions in India’s garment industry” by Governance and Tripartism Department, international labour organisation, one in five people work 7 days a week. Three-quarters usually work an 8-hour day, but a quarter work more than 10 hours on a regular basis. Overtime is very common, often involuntary, especially when orders have to be delivered quickly. Two-thirds say they cannot refuse to undertake this extra work. Unpaid overtime was also reported by some workers.

Occupational Health and Safety:

Ensuring a safe and healthy working environment is paramount for the well-being of employees. This section scrutinizes the existing occupational health and safety measures in the Indian textile industry, highlighting both strengths and weaknesses. According to Hiremath *et al.* (2014)^[5] most of workers have been impacted by the unhealthy and non-safety working conditions which resulted

in to 85% workers affected by respiratory problems, 70% have reported increase in muscle tone, 48% complained of eye problems and 73% have been found affected by musculoskeletal problem. Hence, there is an immediate need to adopt and implement measures in accordance with Indian Factories Act (OHSAS 18001/ILO-OSH 2001) which includes directions and procedures in respect of industrial installations, work environment and occupational health and safety guidelines.

Child Labor

Despite legislative efforts to eradicate child labour, concerns persist about its prevalence in the Indian textile industry. India, a nation with a burgeoning population and a vibrant cultural heritage, is also home to a staggering statistic that raises serious concerns – one-fifth of the world’s children reside within its borders. Unfortunately, this demographic reality is accompanied by a disquieting fact: India possesses the highest rates of child labour globally. Shockingly, an estimated 33 million children under the age of 18 are currently engaged in various forms of labour across the country, spanning domestic service, agriculture, textiles, and mining (Mukhopadhyay *et al.*, 2020)^[10].

Child labour in India manifests itself in diverse sectors, reflecting a complex interplay of socio-economic factors. In the rural landscape, children are often seen toiling in agricultural fields, contributing to family income but compromising their education and overall well-being. In urban areas, the challenges are equally daunting, with children being drawn into domestic service, textile factories, and even hazardous occupations like mining.

Gender Issues

The textile industry often grapples with gender-related challenges, ranging from unequal pay to discrimination and harassment. Monetary gains are very different between genders and between skilled and unskilled workers. On average, the gains of male workers are estimated to be about double of those of female workers. Especially for the unskilled female workers, which represent about 38% of the labour force in the textile and apparel sector, the monetary gains are small (Nicita, A., & Razzaz, S., 2003)^[11].

Lack of Job Security

Job security is a pervasive concern for labourers in the textile sector. Many workers, particularly those employed in temporary or contractual positions, face the constant fear of losing their jobs without notice or compensation. The absence of long-term job security not only contributes to heightened stress levels but also hinders workers' ability to plan for the future, hindering their overall well-being.

Unsafe Working Environments

Textile factories are often rife with hazardous conditions that pose a threat to the health and safety of workers. Exposure to harmful chemicals, inadequate safety measures, and poor ventilation are common issues that contribute to accidents and long-term health problems. The absence of proper safety regulations and enforcement exacerbates these challenges, putting the well-being of labourers at risk.

Prevalence of Informal Employment Practices

The textile industry frequently relies on informal employment practices, such as subcontracting and day

labour, leading to a lack of legal protection and benefits for workers. This informalization of labour often results in exploitation, as workers may not be entitled to social security, health benefits, or other labour rights. Addressing the prevalence of informal employment practices is crucial for establishing a fair and secure working environment within the textile industry.

The textile industry plays a pivotal role in global manufacturing, providing employment opportunities for millions of workers worldwide. However, beneath the fabric of this essential industry, a multitude of challenges plague labourers, affecting their well-being and livelihoods (Jain, M., 2022) [8].

Government Policies and Regulations

Government policies and regulations are crucial in shaping the working conditions within this industry, ensuring the protection of workers' rights and well-being. In this study, I delve into existing labour laws, policies, and regulations related to the textile sector, evaluating the effectiveness of enforcement mechanisms and their impact on the overall governance of working conditions.

(a) Labor Laws and Policies in India

The constitution

- Article 38 of the Constitution states about the State to secure a social order for the promotion of welfare of the people
- Article 39 (A) talks about the Equal justice and free legal aid
- Article 42 lays down the provision for just and humane conditions of work and maternity relief
- Article 19 states protection of certain rights regarding freedom of speech, etc. All citizens shall have the right: (a) to freedom of speech and expression; (b) to assemble peaceably and without arms; (c) to form associations or unions; (d) to move freely throughout the territory of India; (e) to reside and settle in any part of the territory of India; and (f) to practice any profession, or to carry on any occupation, trade or business.
- Article 23 states prohibition of traffic in human beings and forced labour.

The five enactments in the area of Social Security for the industrial workers are

- Employees' Provident Fund and Miscellaneous Provisions Act, 1952.
- Employees' State Insurance Act, 1948.
- Workmen's Compensation Act, 1923.
- Maternity Benefit Act, 1961, and
- Payment of Gratuity Act, 1972.
- Factories Act, 1948 regulates health, safety, welfare and other working conditions of workers in factories. It is enforced by the State Governments through their factory inspectorates.
- Judge-made Law or Judicial Decisions Industrial tribunals, the Labour Appellate Tribunal, the High Courts and Supreme Court have all contributed in varying measure to the principle of industrial jurisprudence.

Classification

There are over 45 legislations on labour from the Central

Government and the number of legislations enacted by the State Governments is close to four times that of the Central Acts. Some of the important are as follows:

(a) Laws related to Working Conditions

1. The Factories Act, 1948
2. The Plantation Labour Act, 1951
3. The Mines Act, 1952
4. The Motor Transport Workers Act, 1961
5. The Contract Labour (Regulation & Abolition) Act, 1970
6. The Shops and Establishments Act. The Child Labour (Prohibition & Regulation) Act, 1986

(b) Laws related to Wages

1. The Payment of Wages Act, 1936
2. The Minimum Wages Act, 1948
3. The Payment of Bonus Act, 1965
4. The Equal Remuneration Act, 1976

(c) Laws related to Social Security

1. The Workmen's Compensation Act, 1923
2. The Employees' State Insurance Act, 1948
3. The Employees' Provident Fund & Miscellaneous Provisions Act, 1952
4. The Maternity Benefit Act, 1961
5. The Payment of Gratuity Act, 1972

(d) Laws on Employment and Training

1. The Employment Exchanges (Compulsory Notification of Vacancies) Act, 1959
2. The Apprentices Act, 1961

(e) Laws on Labour Welfare Funds

1. The Mica Mines Labour Welfare Fund Act, 1946
2. The Iron Ore Mines, Manganese Ore Mines & Chrome Ore Mines Labour Welfare Fund Act, 1976
3. The Limestone & Dolomite Mines Labour Welfare Fund Act, 1972
4. The Beedi Workers Welfare Fund Act, 1976

(f) Legislation on Industrial Relations

1. The Trade Unions Act, 1926
2. The Industrial Employment (Standing Orders) Act, 1946
3. The Industrial Employment (Standing Orders) Rules, 1946
4. The Industrial Disputes Act, 1947

B. International Standards and Agreements

India, as a founder member of the international labour organisation (ILO), is actively engaged in promoting the organization's tripartite character, involving government, employers, and workers in addressing labour-related issues. The Child Labour (Prohibition and Regulation) Act of 1986, along with the National Policy on Child Labour, serves as a framework in India to address these issues. The International Labour Organization (ILO) has indeed been advocating for a "decent work" approach as a central policy objective for the international community. The concept of decent work goes beyond the traditional focus on job creation and economic growth; it emphasizes the quality of employment and the well-being of workers. The Decent Work Agenda of the ILO comprises four pillars: Employment, Social Protection, Social Dialogue, Rights at

Work. In the case of India, the government's commitment to the Decent Work Country Programme with the ILO in 2010 signifies a recognition of the importance of promoting decent work in the country. This program likely involves specific initiatives and policies aimed at advancing the four pillars of the Decent Work Agenda (Lerche, J., 2012) [9].

The collaboration with ILO in funding local and industry-specific projects, such as the Child Labour Action and Support Programmes (CLASP) and the International Programme on the Elimination of Child Labour (IPEC), demonstrates a commitment to tackling child labour at various levels.

Collaboration between India and the ILO is addressing labour issues, particularly those related to child labour, which aligns with the global efforts to promote fair and humane working conditions (Singh, J., 2007) [17].

Positive Initiatives in the Indian Textile Industry Ethical Labor Practicess

Some companies in the Indian textile sector are actively working to improve working conditions for their employees. Initiatives include ensuring fair wages, providing safe working environments, and offering skill development programs to enhance the well-being of workers.

Certification Programs

Certifications like Fair Trade and Global Organic Textile Standard (GOTS) are gaining traction in the industry. These certifications ensure that products meet specific social and environmental standards, assuring consumers of ethically produced textiles.

Multi-Stakeholder Collaboration

Successful initiatives globally involve collaboration among governments, industry players, and NGOs. This collective effort helps establish and enforce regulations, share best practices, and promote transparency across the supply chain.

Transparency and Traceability

Implementing systems that provide transparency and traceability throughout the supply chain is crucial. This enables consumers to make informed choices and encourages companies to uphold ethical standards.

Inclusive Policies

Governments worldwide are introducing policies to promote fair labor practices and sustainable production. Incentives for companies adopting ethical standards and penalties for non-compliance contribute to fostering positive change.

NGO Partnerships

NGOs play a crucial role in advocating for workers' rights and environmental sustainability. Partnerships between NGOs and industry stakeholders facilitate the implementation of ethical practices and provide support for affected communities.

Prioritizing Worker Welfare in Corporate Policies

1. **Employee Assistance Programs:** Implement comprehensive employee assistance programs that address the holistic well-being of workers. This may include access to healthcare, mental health support, and educational opportunities for personal and professional development.

2. **Fair Compensation Practices:** Advocate for fair wages and benefits for all workers in the textile industry. This ensures that employees are adequately compensated for their contributions, leading to increased job satisfaction and a more motivated workforce.
3. **Worker Representation:** Encourage the establishment of workers' councils or committees that represent the interests of employees in decision-making processes. This ensures that workers have a voice in shaping policies that directly impact their working conditions.

Conclusion

The findings of this study shed light on the pressing need to address the working conditions in the Indian textile industry. One of the key findings underscores the pervasive issue of prolonged working hours, which not only compromises the well-being of the labour force but also contributes to a cycle of poverty and diminished quality of life. The toll on physical and mental health cannot be overstated, emphasizing the need for immediate intervention to enforce reasonable working hours and ensure the welfare of the workforce. Furthermore, the inadequacies in safety measures within the industry present a significant risk to the health and lives of the workers. The absence of proper safety protocols and protective equipment exposes them to potential hazards, ranging from machinery accidents to harmful substances. Recognizing the intrinsic value of human life, it is imperative that steps be taken to implement and enforce stringent safety standards to mitigate these risks. Initiatives aimed at improving wages, job security, and working conditions, coupled with the formalization of employment practices, are essential steps toward creating a more equitable and sustainable future for the workers who contribute significantly to this vital sector.

In light of these findings, it is clear that a comprehensive and collaborative approach is essential. All stakeholders, including government bodies, industry leaders, workers' unions, and civil society, must join forces to institute meaningful reforms. This collective action should aim not only to rectify the immediate challenges faced by the workers but also to establish a framework for sustained improvement in the working conditions of the Indian textile industry.

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