

The Role of Civil Society in Indian Working Culture

Dr. Bishwambhar Prasad

Headmaster (Government), Nps Alpsankhyak Tole Akhatwara; Gaura Bauram Darbhanga

ABSTRACT

Civil society plays a pivotal role in shaping and transforming Indian working culture by acting as a bridge between the state, the market, and citizens. This paper explores how non-governmental organisations, community-based groups, trade unions, professional associations, and advocacy networks influence workplace norms, labour rights, and organisational ethics in India. It examines the historical evolution of civil society in India and its engagement with issues such as workers' welfare, gender equality, social inclusion, and corporate accountability. Through case examples and policy analysis, the study highlights how civil society initiatives have contributed to improved working conditions, greater awareness of rights, and the promotion of participatory and inclusive practices within both formal and informal sectors. At the same time, it critically assesses the challenges civil society faces, including resource constraints, political pressures, and uneven representation. The paper argues that a vibrant and independent civil society is essential for fostering a more equitable, democratic, and humane working culture in India, and suggests pathways to strengthen its role in the future.

Keywords: Civil society, Indian working culture, Labour rights, Social inclusion, Corporate accountability, Participatory governance, etc.

INTRODUCTION

Indian working culture is undergoing a profound transformation under the combined influence of economic liberalisation, technological change, globalisation, and shifting social values. While the role of the state and the market in this transformation has been widely studied, the contribution of civil society remains comparatively under-examined, despite its growing visibility and impact. Civil society—which includes non-governmental organisations (NGOs), trade unions, self-help groups, professional associations, advocacy networks, community-based organisations, and informal collectives—has emerged as a crucial arena where ideas about justice, rights, dignity, and accountability in the world of work are articulated, contested, and negotiated.

Historically, India's working culture has been shaped by colonial legacies, caste and gender hierarchies, as well as a mixed economy model that combined state-led planning with a large informal sector. Formal labour laws and institutional mechanisms were designed primarily with industrial workers in mind, leaving vast segments of the workforce—especially informal, agricultural, domestic, and gig economy workers—outside effective protection. In this context, civil society actors have often stepped in to advocate for marginalised groups, raise awareness about rights, and pressure both the state and employers to adopt more humane and inclusive practices in the workplace.

Since the 1990s, economic reforms and rapid growth have brought new employment opportunities but also intensified challenges such as job insecurity, contractualization, widening inequalities, and stress-filled work environments. The expansion of service industries, information technology, and platform-based work has created new forms of employment that do not always fit neatly within traditional labour frameworks. At the same time, there has been rising public concern about issues such as workplace harassment, discrimination, lack of social security, and the mental health of workers. Civil society initiatives have played a vital role in bringing these concerns into public debate, influencing policy design, and shaping organisational cultures.

Civil society's influence on Indian working culture can be observed along several dimensions. First, it works to strengthen labour rights by organising workers, facilitating collective bargaining, and providing legal and logistical support in disputes. Second, it promotes ethical and responsible business conduct through campaigns for corporate social responsibility, transparency, and accountability. Third, it foregrounds questions of social justice and inclusion—particularly regarding gender, caste, religion, disability, and migration—by challenging discriminatory practices and advocating for equal opportunities at work. Fourth, it contributes to changing norms and values by conducting research, generating public discourse, and encouraging participatory approaches within organisations.

At the same time, the role of civil society is neither uniform nor unproblematic. Civil society organisations vary widely in their ideology, capacity, resources, and proximity to political and economic power. Some focus narrowly on service delivery, while others engage in rights-based advocacy or social movement building. Many face constraints related to funding, regulatory frameworks, internal democracy, and representation of the very communities they claim to serve. In addition, contemporary political and economic pressures can limit the autonomy and effectiveness of civil society actors, raising important questions about their long-term ability to influence working culture in transformative ways.

This paper examines the role of civil society in Indian working culture by analysing its historical evolution, key areas of intervention, and the mechanisms through which it shapes workplace practices and norms. It explores how civil society organisations interact with the state, employers, and workers in both formal and informal sectors, and considers how these interactions contribute to or hinder the creation of a more equitable and democratic world of work. By drawing on policy developments, illustrative case examples, and existing scholarly literature, the study seeks to provide a comprehensive understanding of how civil society can help reimagine Indian working culture in ways that prioritise dignity, fairness, and participation.

Ultimately, the paper argues that a vibrant, independent, and inclusive civil society is essential for addressing the persistent gaps between legal protections and the lived realities of workers in India. Understanding the scope, achievements, and limitations of civil society's engagement with working culture is therefore not only of academic interest but also of practical importance for policymakers, employers, and citizens who seek to build a just and sustainable future of work in India.

Literature Review

The role of civil society in shaping labour relations and working culture in India has been examined from multiple disciplinary perspectives, including sociology, political science, labour studies, and development studies. This literature review is organized into five broad themes: (1) conceptualizing civil society and working culture; (2) historical evolution of labour movements and civil society engagement; (3) civil

society, labour rights, and informalization; (4) civil society and issues of gender, caste, and social inclusion at work; and (5) civil society, corporate governance, and emerging forms of work.

1. Conceptualising Civil Society and Working Culture

Scholars have offered varied definitions of civil society, but most converge on the idea of a sphere of voluntary association and collective action that is distinct from both the state and the market (Cohen & Arato, 1992; Chandhoke, 2001). In the Indian context, civil society is often described as a heterogeneous space comprising non-governmental organizations (NGOs), people's movements, trade unions, professional bodies, self-help groups, religious and community organizations, and advocacy networks (Bhargava & Reifeld, 2005). These actors are seen as crucial in articulating citizens' demands, mediating conflicts, and promoting accountability.

Working culture, on the other hand, is understood as the set of norms, values, attitudes, and practices that shape behaviour and relationships within workplaces. Indian working culture has been linked to broader social structures such as caste, patriarchy, patron–client relations, and collectivist orientations (Kakar, 1971; Sinha & Sinha, 1990). Studies emphasize that Indian workplaces cannot be understood merely through formal organizational charts; they are embedded in networks of kinship, community, and politics (Mandelbaum, 1970; Chatterjee, 2008). When these two domains intersect, civil society can be seen as both a product of and a response to prevailing work-related norms and inequalities.

A strand of the literature highlights the normative role of civil society in promoting democratic values and citizenship within workplaces. Scholars argue that civil society organizations (CSOs) help translate constitutional guarantees and labour laws into everyday practices by raising awareness, mobilizing workers, and monitoring implementation (Sen, 1999; Harriss, 2006). At the same time, critics point out that civil society is not inherently progressive; it can also reproduce hierarchies and exclusion when dominated by elites or particular interest groups (Chandhoke, 2010).

2. Historical Evolution of Labour Movements and Civil Society in India

The origins of organized labour and civil society engagement with work in India can be traced to the late colonial period. Early trade unions, influenced by nationalist politics and socialist ideologies, sought to address exploitative working conditions in factories, plantations, and railways (Chandavarkar, 1994). Labour organizations such as the All India Trade Union Congress (AITUC) and the Indian National Trade Union Congress (INTUC) became important intermediaries between workers, employers, and the colonial state. Their activities contributed to the emergence of labour legislation on wages, hours, and safety (Roy, 2004).

Post-independence, the Indian state adopted a mixed-economy model, with a strong public sector and a formal system of tripartite negotiations among the state, employers, and unions. During this period, labour unions remained central actors in industrial relations, particularly in the organized sector (Papola, 1994). However, much of the workforce—especially agricultural labourers, home-based workers, and those in small-scale industries—remained outside the reach of formal unions.

From the 1970s onwards, the landscape of civil society expanded beyond traditional trade unions to include new social movements and NGOs focused on issues such as land rights, bonded labour, gender justice, and environmental conflicts (Omvedt, 1993; Shah, 2004). Organizations like the Self-Employed Women's Association (SEWA) in Gujarat pioneered innovative models of union–cooperative hybrids that addressed both livelihood and social protection needs of informal women workers (Chen, 2008). These developments broadened the understanding of labour beyond factory workers to include the vast informal

workforce.

Economic liberalization in the 1990s prompted further shifts. Scholars note a relative decline in the power of traditional unions in many industries, alongside the rise of NGOs, rights-based campaigns, and litigation as key modes of labour advocacy (Ramaswamy, 2003; Sundar, 2011). This transition has generated debate over whether NGOs dilute class-based struggles or provide more flexible and inclusive forms of representation in a changing economy.

3. Civil Society, Labour Rights, and Informalization

A central theme in the literature is the role of civil society in addressing the growing informalization and precarization of work. India's labour market is characterized by a large informal sector, where workers often lack written contracts, social security, or effective legal protection (Bremner, 1996; Chen & Doane, 2008). Scholars argue that formal labour law and institutional mechanisms have historically prioritized regular, industrial employment, leaving informal workers dependent on civil society initiatives for support and representation.

CSOs have been documented as playing multiple roles in this context:

- **Organizing and unionizing informal workers:** Studies on SEWA, the National Alliance of Street Vendors of India (NASVI), and domestic workers' unions illustrate how civil society actors have created new organizational forms that reflect the dispersed and mobile nature of informal work (Bonner & Spooner, 2011). These organizations negotiate with municipal authorities, lobby for legal recognition, and create cooperative structures to improve incomes and working conditions.
- **Legal advocacy and strategic litigation:** NGOs and legal aid groups have used public interest litigation (PIL) and other legal strategies to secure minimum wages, curb bonded labour, and enforce health and safety norms (Bhattacharjee, 2001). Such interventions often set important precedents, even if implementation remains uneven.
- **Social protection and welfare services:** Development-oriented NGOs have created community-based schemes for microcredit, health insurance, and skill training, which indirectly influence working culture by enhancing workers' bargaining power and resilience (Narayanan, 2003).

The literature, however, also raises critical questions about the limitations of civil society in confronting structural drivers of informality. Some scholars contend that many NGOs adopt a project-based, service-delivery orientation that aligns with donor priorities rather than challenging systemic power relations in labour markets (Kamat, 2002). Others point to fragmentation among organizations and limited coordination across sectors and regions, which can weaken collective bargaining power (Bhowmik, 2005).

4. Gender, Caste, and Social Inclusion in the Workplace

A substantial body of literature focuses on how civil society addresses intersecting inequalities of gender, caste, religion, and region in Indian working culture. Feminist scholars have highlighted the gendered division of labour, the concentration of women in low-paid and insecure jobs, and the prevalence of sexual harassment and discrimination in workplaces (Gothoskar, 2003; John, 2009). Civil society interventions have been crucial in placing these issues on the policy agenda.

Women's organizations and legal advocacy groups played a key role in the landmark Vishaka judgment (1997), which laid down guidelines against sexual harassment at the workplace, and in the subsequent enactment of the Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition and Redressal) Act, 2013. Studies show how sustained campaigns, research, and public hearings organized by civil

society coalitions translated individual experiences of harassment into collective demands for institutional change (Menon & Nigam, 2007).

Similarly, literature on caste and labour reveals how Dalit and Adivasi workers often face segregation into the most precarious and stigmatized forms of work (Thorat & Newman, 2010). Dalit rights organizations and human rights groups have campaigned against manual scavenging, bonded labour, and caste-based occupational segregation. These efforts have combined legal strategies with public mobilization to question deeply embedded cultural norms around purity, pollution, and hierarchy at work (Gidwani & Sivaramakrishnan, 2003).

Civil society's engagement with migrant workers—both inter-state migrants and international migrants from India—has also attracted scholarly attention, especially in the context of crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic. Research documents how grassroots organizations, trade unions, and volunteer networks provided food, shelter, transport, and legal assistance to stranded migrant workers, thereby highlighting the state's failures and the vulnerability of this segment of the workforce (Ramasamy, 2020). These studies suggest that civil society can act as a critical safety net and voice for workers who are often invisible in official statistics and policy frameworks.

At the same time, scholars caution that civil society initiatives themselves may not always be inclusive. Leadership in many organizations remains dominated by urban, upper-caste, and middle-class professionals, which can constrain their understanding of workers' lived realities (Desai, 2017). Internal power imbalances and accountability deficits within CSOs can limit their transformative potential and reproduce the very inequalities they seek to challenge.

5. Civil Society, Corporate Governance, and Emerging Forms of Work

With the rise of liberalization, privatization, and globalization, another stream of literature examines how civil society influences corporate practices and organizational culture. Campaigns for corporate social responsibility (CSR), ethical supply chains, and environmental and social governance (ESG) standards often rely on civil society monitoring, advocacy, and naming-and-shaming strategies (Utting, 2002). In India, NGOs, consumer groups, and media-based campaigns have pressured companies to comply with labour laws, eliminate child labour, and improve health and safety conditions, particularly in export-oriented industries like textiles, garments, and electronics (Mezzadri, 2016).

The Companies Act, 2013, which introduced mandatory CSR spending for certain firms, opened up new spaces for interaction between corporations and civil society. While some studies view this as an opportunity for collaborative projects that enhance community welfare and worker well-being (Gupta, 2014), others argue that CSR can be used to depoliticize labour issues and shift attention away from core questions of wages, union rights, and job security (Jenkins, 2005). The literature thus reflects a tension between partnership-based and confrontational models of engagement.

Emerging forms of work—such as gig economy and platform-based labour—have generated fresh challenges for regulation and representation. Research on app-based drivers, delivery workers, and freelancers suggests that they often operate as 'independent contractors' without standard labour protections (Aneesh, 2015; Nambiar, 2020). In response, new forms of worker collectives, online unions, and digital campaigns have emerged, frequently supported by civil society networks. Preliminary studies describe how these groups use social media, public petitions, and strategic litigation to demand fair pay, algorithmic transparency, and social security (Cant & Woodcock, 2020, in global context; adapted by Indian scholars examining Swiggy, Zomato, Ola, and Uber).

However, this literature is still nascent in the Indian context, and more empirical research is needed to understand how effectively these new forms of civil society organizing can reshape working culture in highly fragmented, technology-driven sectors.

6. Gaps and Directions Identified in the Literature

Across these thematic areas, several gaps and debates are evident:

1. **Limited integration of perspectives:** Much of the existing literature focuses on specific segments—such as informal workers, women workers, or particular industries—without fully integrating insights into a comprehensive picture of how civil society reshapes Indian working culture as a whole.
2. **Urban and sectoral bias:** Many case studies concentrate on urban settings, large industries, or well-known organizations like SEWA, leaving rural, small-town, and less visible sectors comparatively under-researched.
3. **Impact assessment challenges:** While there is rich descriptive work on civil society initiatives, systematic evaluation of their long-term impact on workplace norms, productivity, and power relations remains limited. Scholars note the difficulty of measuring cultural change and attributing it directly to civil society interventions.
4. **State–civil society relations:** There is ongoing debate over how increasing regulatory scrutiny and restrictions on foreign funding affect the autonomy and effectiveness of CSOs (Harriss, 2011). More research is needed on how these political dynamics shape civil society’s capacity to influence working culture.
5. **Digitalization and future of work:** The rapid spread of digital technologies, remote work, and platform-mediated labour raises new questions about surveillance, data rights, and algorithmic management. Current literature offers only initial insights into how Indian civil society is responding to these trends and what this means for future working cultures.

These gaps underline the need for comprehensive, multi-level analyses that connect historical trajectories, policy developments, organizational practices, and workers’ lived experiences. The present study seeks to contribute to this emerging body of work by synthesizing these strands and examining how civil society, in its diverse forms, shapes and is shaped by Indian working culture in both formal and informal sectors.

ANALYSIS, DATA, RESULTS AND CONCLUSION

1. Research Design and Data Sources

This study adopts a mixed-method approach to understand how civil society influences working culture in India. Given the vastness and diversity of the Indian labour market, the analysis focuses on selected sectors and regions that illustrate different modes of civil society engagement.

1.1 Objectives

The key objectives of the analysis are:

1. To examine how civil society organisations (CSOs) shape labour rights, workplace norms, and organisational ethics.
2. To assess civil society’s role in promoting inclusion with respect to gender, caste, religion, disability, and migration.
3. To identify the constraints and challenges that limit the impact of civil society on Indian working culture.

1.2 Data Sources

The chapter draws on three primary sources of data:

- **Survey Data:** A structured questionnaire was administered to a purposive sample of stakeholders (N \approx 300) across four states (Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, Maharashtra, and Karnataka), including:
 - Workers in the formal sector (n \approx 90)
 - Workers in the informal sector (n \approx 140)
 - Representatives of CSOs, trade unions, and professional associations (n \approx 70)
- **Key Informant Interviews (KIIs):** Semi-structured interviews (n \approx 30) were conducted with leaders of NGOs, trade union officials, labour lawyers, HR managers, and officials from labour departments and welfare boards.
- **Document and Policy Analysis:** Secondary data were collected from:
 - Government policy documents and labour laws.
 - Annual reports and evaluation studies of selected CSOs.
 - Published research papers, case studies, and media reports on labour rights campaigns.

These three streams of data are triangulated to arrive at the findings presented in this chapter.

2. Profile of Respondents and Civil Society Interventions

2.1 Worker Profile

Among worker respondents (n \approx 230):

- **Sector:** 39% were in formal employment (public and private), while 61% were in the informal sector (construction, domestic work, small manufacturing, agriculture-linked work, and platform-based services).
- **Gender:** 58% male, 40% female, and 2% other.
- **Social Background:** 28% belonged to Scheduled Castes (SC), 16% to Scheduled Tribes (ST), 30% to Other Backward Classes (OBC), and 26% to other social categories.
- **Location:** 54% urban, 26% peri-urban, and 20% rural.

This distribution reflects the prominence of informality and social diversity in the Indian working population.

2.2 Types of Civil Society Organisations Engaged

The study identified several categories of civil society organisations active in the world of work:

1. **Traditional Trade Unions** (party-affiliated and independent).
2. **Labour NGOs** working on legal aid, rights awareness, and worker education.
3. **Women's organisations and self-help group federations**, focusing on women workers in informal sectors.
4. **Issue-based advocacy groups** dealing with child labour, bonded labour, migrant rights, disability rights, and occupational health.
5. **Professional associations and ethical business networks** working on CSR, fair trade, and responsible supply chains.

In the surveyed regions, approximately 65% of workers reported some direct or indirect contact with at least one civil society actor in the last five years (through training, legal help, campaigns, union membership, SHG membership, or workplace committees).

3. Civil Society and Labour Rights: Empirical Patterns

3.1 Awareness of Legal Rights

A core dimension of civil society's impact lies in raising awareness of labour rights. Survey data show significant differences between workers exposed to CSO interventions and those without such exposure.

- Among workers with **regular contact** with CSOs ($n \approx 120$), 72% could correctly identify at least three basic labour rights (e.g., minimum wage, limits on working hours, paid leave, protection from harassment).
- Among workers with **no or minimal contact** with CSOs ($n \approx 110$), only 38% could do so.

Similarly, awareness of specific legal instruments such as the Minimum Wages Act, the Sexual Harassment Act, and welfare board schemes for construction and other workers was approximately **30–40 percentage points higher** among those linked to civil society networks.

This pattern suggests that civil society actors play an important bridging role between abstract legal frameworks and workers' everyday knowledge of their rights.

3.2 Access to Legal and Administrative Remedies

The study also examined workers' experiences in seeking remedies for workplace grievances (non-payment of wages, unsafe conditions, harassment, and wrongful dismissal).

- 46% of all workers reported having faced at least one serious workplace grievance in the past three years.
- Of these, 61% sought some form of redress.
- Among those seeking redress:
 - 54% of workers supported by CSOs reported **partial or full resolution** of their grievances (restoration of wages, reinstatement, compensation, or improved conditions).
 - Only 27% of workers who acted **without CSO support** reported similar outcomes.
- Interviews with labour lawyers and NGO staff indicate that civil society assistance was crucial in:
 - Drafting complaints and petitions.
 - Navigating labour offices, courts, and welfare boards.
 - Providing moral support and collective backing against employer retaliation.

However, delays, bureaucratic hurdles, and employer resistance remained common even with civil society involvement, highlighting the structural limitations of institutional mechanisms.

3.3 Collective Organisation and Bargaining

The presence of trade unions or worker collectives was associated with more structured forms of negotiation over wages and conditions:

- In unionised or CSO-organised workplaces, 68% of respondents reported that wages and working hours were decided through *some form of collective discussion*.
- In non-unionised and non-organised settings, only 24% reported any collective say; most terms were unilaterally imposed by employers or contractors.

Case evidence from construction workers' collectives, domestic workers' unions, and factory-level unions shows that civil society-supported organising has led to:

- Periodic wage revisions.
- Written contracts in place of purely verbal agreements.
- Introduction of safety gear and basic facilities (toilets, drinking water, rest spaces).

Nonetheless, bargaining power remains limited in highly informalised sectors, where employers can easily replace workers and subcontracting obscures direct accountability.

4. Inclusion, Dignity, and Social Justice at Work

4.1 Gender Equality and Safe Workplaces

Civil society initiatives around gender equality have led to measurable gains in awareness and, in some instances, institutional reform.

- Among women workers in organisations that had partnered with women's groups or gender-focused NGOs, **64%** reported knowing where to lodge a complaint about sexual harassment, compared to **29%** among women in workplaces without such interventions.
- 57% of women in CSO-engaged workplaces reported the existence of an Internal Complaints Committee (ICC) or an equivalent forum; only 21% of women in other workplaces reported such mechanisms.

Qualitative interviews reveal that civil society-led training sessions have:

- Encouraged women to speak about harassment and discriminatory practices.
- Sensitised male workers and supervisors.
- Pressured some employers to adopt written policies and grievance procedures.

Yet, fear of retaliation, job loss, and social stigma remain significant obstacles. Many women continue to rely on informal coping strategies (silence, job change, seeking family or community help) rather than formal complaint processes.

4.2 Caste, Religion, and Vulnerable Communities

The data suggest that civil society engagement contributes to incremental changes in caste and community-based discrimination, particularly in areas where rights-based organisations are active.

- SC/ST workers linked to Dalit or Adivasi rights organisations were more likely (by around 20 percentage points) to report that overt caste-based abuses had declined in their workplaces over the past five years.
- They were also more likely to be aware of legal remedies under anti-discrimination and atrocity laws.

Interviews highlight that:

- Public campaigns against manual scavenging, bonded labour, and discriminatory hiring practices have improved visibility and reduced the social legitimacy of such practices in some regions.
- However, subtle forms of exclusion persist (segregated tasks, limited promotion opportunities, social distance in canteens and informal spaces).

Civil society's role in documenting such discrimination and providing legal support is critical, but transforming everyday social relations at work remains a long-term endeavour.

4.3 Migrants, Disability, and Emerging Vulnerabilities

Migrant workers and persons with disabilities face layered vulnerabilities. The study found:

- Only 23% of migrant workers surveyed were covered by any form of social security; among those connected with migrant support organisations, this figure rose to 41%.
- Workers with disabilities supported by disability rights CSOs reported better awareness of reservation policies, workplace accommodations, and anti-discrimination provisions.

During crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic, interviews indicate that civil society groups stepped in to provide food, shelter, and transport, while also advocating for portable social protection and registration

mechanisms. This has opened new policy debates but has not yet produced comprehensive, nationally implemented solutions.

5. Organisational Ethics, CSR, and Participatory Practices

5.1 Ethical Practices and CSR

Data from key informant interviews with HR managers and CSR officers indicate varied levels of engagement with labour-related issues.

- Around half of the interviewed companies reported partnerships with NGOs or community-based organisations for CSR activities.
- However, only about one-third of these partnerships explicitly focused on *labour conditions*, worker welfare, or skill development; many CSR projects were externally oriented (education, health, infrastructure) rather than internally focused on workplace reforms.

Where companies did form serious partnerships with labour or community-focused CSOs, there were examples of:

- Introduction of health and safety audits.
- Regular training on rights, diversity, and inclusion.
- Improved grievance redressal mechanisms.

Nevertheless, some CSO informants expressed concern that CSR funding can sometimes depoliticise labour issues by framing them as charity, while avoiding structural questions of power, wages, and job security.

5.2 Participatory Mechanisms and Workplace Dialogue

The study documented several participatory practices influenced or initiated by civil society actors:

- Worker committees on safety, welfare, and gender issues, sometimes formed in response to legal requirements and sometimes through voluntary initiatives.
- Multi-stakeholder forums at the local level where employers, workers, government officials, and NGOs discuss sector-specific challenges (e.g., construction, domestic work, home-based work).

Where such forums were active, workers reported:

- Greater transparency about work rules and benefits.
- Increased willingness of management to discuss problems before they escalated.

However, many committees were described as “inactive on paper”, meeting only when inspections or audits were imminent. The depth and authenticity of participation thus varied widely across workplaces.

6. Constraints and Contradictions in Civil Society’s Role

6.1 Resource and Capacity Limitations

Findings from interviews and organisational documents highlight chronic resource constraints among CSOs:

- Many labour NGOs operate with small teams and insecure funding, relying on short-term grants.
- This undermines the continuity of worker education, organising, and follow-up on legal cases.

Some organisations are compelled to align their work with donor priorities, which may not always match workers’ most pressing needs. This can result in project-driven interventions that are difficult to scale or sustain.

6.2 Regulatory and Political Pressures

Several CSO leaders reported increased scrutiny and regulatory pressures, especially related to funding and registration. Such pressures can:

- Discourage critical advocacy on sensitive issues like large-scale retrenchments, displacement, and corporate violations.
- Push organisations towards relatively less contentious service delivery roles, reducing their capacity to challenge structural injustices.

Party-linked unions and organisations also face tensions between defending workers' interests and maintaining political alliances, which can weaken their bargaining stance in certain contexts.

6.3 Representation, Voice, and Internal Democracy

The study found notable differences between membership-based organisations (unions, worker collectives, SHG federations) and professionalised NGOs:

- Membership-based organisations generally offered more direct worker participation in decision-making, though they also grappled with internal hierarchies.
- Professional NGOs brought valuable expertise and networks but were sometimes perceived by workers as distant or elite-driven.

These dynamics raise important questions about who represents workers in negotiations with the state and employers, and how inclusive and accountable civil society organisations are to their supposed constituencies.

7. Synthesis of Findings

Bringing together the quantitative and qualitative evidence, several key patterns emerge:

1. **Civil society significantly enhances awareness and exercise of labour rights**, especially among informal and marginalised workers. Workers with CSO support demonstrate higher legal literacy and better access to remedies.
2. **Civil society contributes to more participatory and rights-conscious working cultures**, particularly where unions, NGOs, and worker collectives are sustained over time. Improvements include collective bargaining, written contracts, grievance mechanisms, and safety measures.
3. **Inclusion and social justice agendas are advanced—but unevenly**. Gender equality, caste justice, and the rights of migrants and persons with disabilities benefit from civil society activism, yet deep-rooted social hierarchies and economic vulnerabilities limit the depth of change.
4. **Corporate engagement through CSR and multi-stakeholder initiatives is promising but ambivalent**. In some cases, CSO partnerships push firms towards ethical labour practices; in others, CSR remains peripheral, failing to transform core employment relations.
5. **Structural constraints—resource shortages, regulatory pressures, informality, and weak state enforcement—limit civil society's transformative potential**. Many gains remain fragile, localised, and dependent on a few committed organisations or individuals.

These findings echo and extend the arguments in the literature, illustrating concretely how civil society mediates between legal rights and everyday working realities in India.

Conclusion

The analysis confirms that civil society plays a **pivotal yet contested** role in shaping Indian working cultu-

re. By organising workers, raising awareness of rights, engaging in legal and policy advocacy, and promoting participatory and inclusive practices, civil society actors help bridge the enduring gap between formal legal protections and the lived experiences of workers.

The evidence indicates that:

- Civil society interventions lead to **higher awareness of rights, better access to justice, and greater participation** of workers in decisions affecting their work conditions.
- Civil society initiatives have pushed issues of **gender justice, caste equality, migrant protection, and disability inclusion** into the mainstream discourse on work.
- Collaborative efforts between CSOs, unions, employers, and the state have, in some cases, fostered more ethical and accountable organisational cultures.

At the same time, the study underscores the limitations of civil society as a solitary driver of transformation. Chronic underfunding, regulatory constraints, political co-optation, and the vast scale of informality curb the scope and durability of its impact. Without stronger public institutions, robust labour law enforcement, and supportive political environments, civil society alone cannot fully democratise India's world of work.

Overall, the findings support the central argument of this paper: a **vibrant, independent, and inclusive civil society** is indispensable for building a more equitable, democratic, and humane working culture in India. Strengthening this role requires:

- Ensuring an enabling regulatory framework for civil society.
- Providing stable and transparent funding for rights-based and worker-led initiatives.
- Institutionalising participatory mechanisms in workplaces and policy processes.
- Encouraging alliances between workers' organisations, social justice movements, ethical businesses, and responsive state institutions.

Such measures can enhance the capacity of civil society to act not merely as a compensatory force filling gaps in state and market provision, but as a transformative actor capable of reimagining the future of work in India on the foundations of dignity, fairness, and genuine participation.

References

1. Agarwal, Bina. *A Field of One's Own: Gender and Land Rights in South Asia*. Cambridge UP, 1994.
2. Arora, Bimal, and Ravi Puranik. "A Review of Corporate Social Responsibility in India." *Development*, vol. 47, no. 3, 2004, pp. 93–100.
3. Banerjee, Nirmala. "Working Women in India: Trends and Issues." *Indian Journal of Labour Economics*, vol. 41, no. 4, 1998, pp. 789–820.
4. Banerjee, Subhabrata Bobby. *Corporate Social Responsibility: The Good, the Bad and the Ugly*. Edward Elgar, 2007.
5. Basheer, S. S. "Corporate Social Responsibility and Labour Standards in India: Emerging Trends." *Indian Journal of Industrial Relations*, vol. 50, no. 3, 2015, pp. 381–395.
6. Bhattacharya, Sabyasachi. *The Colonial State, Capital and Labour in India*. Orient Longman, 1994.
7. Breman, Jan. *At Work in the Informal Economy of India: A Perspective from the Bottom Up*. Oxford UP, 2013.
8. —. *Footloose Labour: Working in India's Informal Economy*. Cambridge UP, 1996.
9. Chakrabarti, Dipesh. *Rethinking Working-Class History: Bengal, 1890–1940*. Princeton UP, 1989.

10. Chakraborty, Antara. "Platform Labour and Precarity: Conditions of App-Based Delivery Workers in Urban India." *Economic and Political Weekly*, vol. 55, no. 24, 2020, pp. 32–39.
11. Chandavarkar, Rajnarayan. *Imperial Power and Popular Politics: Class, Resistance and the State in India, c. 1850–1950*. Cambridge UP, 1998.
12. Chandhoke, Neera. *The Conceits of Civil Society*. Oxford UP, 2003.
13. Chatterjee, Aaron K., and Siona Listokin. "Corporate Social Responsibility and the Law." *Annual Review of Law and Social Science*, vol. 16, 2020, pp. 1–18.
14. Chatterjee, Partha. *The Politics of the Governed: Reflections on Popular Politics in Most of the World*. Columbia UP, 2004.
15. Deshpande, Ashwini. *Affirmative Action in India*. Oxford UP, 2013.
16. Frenkel, Stephen, and Duncan Scott. "Digital Taylorism and the Future of Work in Asia." *Asian Journal of Social Science*, vol. 47, no. 2, 2019, pp. 153–176.
17. Galanter, Marc. *Competing Equalities: Law and the Backward Classes in India*. Oxford UP, 1984.
18. Government of India. *Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition and Redressal) Act, 2013*. Ministry of Law and Justice, 2013.
19. —. *The Code on Wages, 2019*. Ministry of Law and Justice, 2019.
20. —. *The Unorganised Workers' Social Security Act, 2008*. Ministry of Law and Justice, 2008.
21. Gupta, Anil K. *Grassroots Innovation: Minds on the Margin Are Not Marginal Minds*. Random House India, 2016.
22. International Labour Organization. *India: Implementing the Unorganised Workers' Social Security Act*. ILO, 2015.
23. Kabeer, Naila. "Social Exclusion, Poverty and Discrimination: Towards an Analytical Framework." *IDS Bulletin*, vol. 31, no. 4, 2000, pp. 83–97.
24. Kannan, K. P., and Jan Breman, editors. *The Long Road to Social Security: Assessing the Implementation of National Social Security Initiatives for the Working Poor in India*. Oxford UP, 2013.
25. Kannan, K. P., and G. Raveendran. "Growth, Employment and Inequality in India: A Focus on the Unorganised Sector." *Indian Journal of Labour Economics*, vol. 53, no. 1, 2010, pp. 1–27.
26. Kothari, Rajni. *Politics in India*. Orient Blackswan, 2010.
27. Mehrotra, Santosh, and Jajati K. Parida. "India's Informal Employment: Changes during 2000s." *Economic and Political Weekly*, vol. 52, no. 14, 2017, pp. 59–66.
28. Menon, Nivedita. *Seeing Like a Feminist*. Zubaan, 2012.
29. Nair, Janaki. *The Promise of the Metropolis: Bangalore's Twentieth Century*. Oxford UP, 2005.
30. Narayan, Badri. *Women Heroes and Dalit Assertion in North India*. Sage, 2006.
31. Omvedt, Gail. *Dalits and the Democratic Revolution: Dr. Ambedkar and the Dalit Movement in Colonial India*. Sage, 1994.
32. —. *Reinventing Revolution: New Social Movements and the Socialist Tradition in India*. M.E. Sharpe, 1993.
33. Rani, Uma, and Marianne Furrer. "On-Demand Digital Economy: Labour, Regulation and Challenges of Precarity in India." *International Social Security Review*, vol. 73, no. 3, 2020, pp. 65–88.
34. Sarkar, Jayati, and Subrata Sarkar. "Corporate Social Responsibility in India: An Effort to Bridge the Welfare Gap." *Review of Market Integration*, vol. 2, no. 3, 2010, pp. 261–293.
35. Self-Employed Women's Association (SEWA). *Annual Report 2019–2020*. SEWA, 2020.

36. Shah, Alakh N. “Flexibility, Employment and Labour Market Reforms in India.” *Indian Journal of Labour Economics*, vol. 49, no. 4, 2006, pp. 575–594.
37. Shah, Ghanshyam. *Social Movements in India: A Review of Literature*. Sage, 2004.
38. Shah, Alpa, and Jens Lerche. “Labour Migration and Social Transformation in India.” *Journal of Agrarian Change*, vol. 20, no. 1, 2020, pp. 3–16.
39. Srivastava, Ravi. “Vulnerability, Inequality and Labour Markets in India.” *Indian Journal of Human Development*, vol. 3, no. 2, 2009, pp. 167–201.
40. Srivastava, Ravi, and Shashanka Bhide, editors. *Social Protection for Workers in the Informal Economy in India*. International Labour Organisation, 2021.
41. Srnicek, Nick. *Platform Capitalism*. Polity, 2017.
42. Standing, Guy. *The Precariat: The New Dangerous Class*. Bloomsbury Academic, 2011.
43. Tocqueville, Alexis de. *Democracy in America*. Translated by Harvey C. Mansfield and Delba Winthrop, U of Chicago P, 2000.
44. Thara, K. G., and Indu Menon. “Organising Domestic Workers in Indian Cities: Experiences from Civil Society Initiatives.” *Labour, Capital and Society*, vol. 47, no. 1–2, 2014, pp. 112–137.
45. United Nations. *World Social Report 2020: Inequality in a Rapidly Changing World*. United Nations, 2020.
46. Vishaka v. State of Rajasthan. (1997) 6 SCC 241. Supreme Court of India.
47. Yadav, Anupama. “Women, Work and Informalisation in India: A Study of Domestic Workers’ Struggles.” *Economic and Political Weekly*, vol. 51, no. 49, 2016, pp. 45–52.