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# **THE IMPACT OF THE INDUSTRIAL RELATIONS CODE, 2020 ON WORKER RIGHTS IN INDIA: A LEGAL AND ETHICAL ANALYSIS**

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## ***Abstract***

*This research paper examines the legal and ethical implications of the Industrial Relations Code, 2020 (IRC) on worker rights in India. The IRC, a significant piece of labor legislation, aims to consolidate and streamline existing labor laws. However, its impact on worker rights remains a subject of debate.*

*The paper deals into key provisions of the IRC, analyzing their potential benefits and drawbacks for workers. It focuses on areas such as minimum wages, working hours, social security benefits, trade union rights, dispute resolution mechanisms, and the protection of vulnerable workers.*

*Furthermore, the research explores the ethical dimensions of the IRC labor standards and its potential to promote or hinder social justice. It discusses the ethical dilemmas faced by employers, workers, and policymakers in interpreting and implementing the Code.*

*This research paper aims to provide a comprehensive assessment of the IRC's impact on worker rights in India, shedding light on its strengths, weaknesses, and potential areas for improvement.*

**Key words :** *IRC Code, key provisions, minimum wages, working hours, social security benefits, trade union rights, dispute resolution mechanisms, ethical dimensions, IRC's impact,*

## INTRODUCTION

The Industrial Relations Code, 2020, represents a significant overhaul of India's labor laws, aiming to consolidate and streamline existing regulations. While the Code promises to modernize the workplace and foster industrial harmony, it has also raised concerns about its potential impact on worker rights.

It amalgamates three existing labor codes: the Industrial Disputes Act, 1947, the Trade Unions Act, 1926, and the Industrial Employment (Standing Orders) Act, 1946 the IRC seeks to create a more unified and efficient legal framework for industrial relations.

This research explores the Industrial Relations Code, 2020, and its impact on Indian workers. We will analyze whether this new law helps or harms workers, especially those who are vulnerable like women, migrants, and people from marginalized communities.

We will discuss if the Code addresses the specific problems these groups face and if it promotes fairness and equality in the workplace. Our goal is to provide a clear and balanced understanding of the Code's effects on worker rights in India.

## RESEARCH QUESTIONS

To effectively analyze the impact of the Industrial Relations Code, 2020 on worker rights in India, consider the following research questions:

1. What are the key changes introduced by the Industrial Relations Code, 2020 compared to the previous labor laws?
2. How do these changes affect the rights of workers, particularly in terms of employment security, wages, and working conditions?
3. What are the potential ethical implications of these changes for workers and employers?
4. How does the Code address the concerns raised by labor unions and civil society organizations?
5. What are the potential challenges in implementing the Code and ensuring its effective enforcement?

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY ADOPTED

This research will employ a doctrinal legal research methodology. Doctrinal research involves a comprehensive analysis of primary legal sources, including relevant statutes, case law, and legal commentaries. The research will also incorporate scholarly articles and reports that explore the intersection of The Industrial Relations Code, 2020, and its accompanying rules and regulations, Previous labor laws (e.g., Trade Unions Act, Industrial Disputes Act, Industrial Employment (Standing Orders) Act) and Comparative analysis of the provisions of the Code with previous laws to identify changes in worker rights, including Employment contracts and conditions, Trade union rights, Industrial dispute resolution mechanisms, Social security benefits etc.

## HYPOTHESIS

The Industrial Relations Code, 2020 (IRC) will have a predominantly negative impact on worker rights in India, leading to a decline in job security, wages, and working conditions.

## PROVISIONS OF IRC, 2020 AND THEIR IMPLICATIONS

The IRC's consolidation of social security benefits into a single code has several advantages. It simplifies compliance for employers and provides greater clarity for employees. However, there are also concerns about the adequacy of the benefits provided under the IRC. Critics argue that the minimum wages and contribution rates specified in the IRC may not be sufficient to provide adequate social security protection for workers, especially in low-wage sectors.

Additionally, the IRC's provisions on contract labor and fixed-term employment raise concerns about the extent of social security coverage for these categories of workers. While the IRC mandates certain social security benefits for contract workers, there is a risk that these benefits may be inadequate or difficult to enforce.

### *(1) Minimum Wages*

The IRC reinforces the statutory obligation of employers to pay minimum wages to workers. However, concerns remain about the adequacy of these minimum wages, especially in low-wage sectors. The Code empowers both the Central and State Governments to fix minimum wages for workers in different industries and regions. These wages are determined based on factors such as the nature of the work, skill required, living standards, and other relevant factors. The Code allows for periodic revisions of minimum wages to keep pace with changes



in the cost of living and other economic conditions.<sup>1</sup>

## **(2) Bonus**

The Code provides for the payment of bonus to eligible employees, which includes those who have worked for the employer for at least 30 days in a year. The bonus is calculated as a percentage of the employee's basic wages and dearness allowance. The Code sets minimum and maximum limits for the bonus payable to employees.<sup>2</sup>

## **(3) Wage Payment**

The Code mandates timely payment of wages to workers, specifying the frequency and deadlines for such payments. It also regulates deductions from wages, ensuring that they are made only for authorized purposes and do not exceed a specified percentage of the wages.<sup>3</sup>

## **(4) Working Hours, Rest Periods and Overtime**

The IRC limits the maximum daily and weekly working hours, ensuring adequate rest for workers. However, challenges arise in enforcing these limits, particularly in sectors with demanding work schedules. The Code mandates weekly off days and other rest periods, promoting worker well-being. However, the effectiveness of these provisions depends on strict enforcement and compliance.

The Code provides for the calculation and payment of overtime wages to workers who work beyond their normal working hours. It also sets limits on the maximum number of overtime hours that an employee can work in a week or month.<sup>4</sup>

## **(5) Social Security Benefits**

The IRC consolidates various social security benefits previously provided under different laws into a single code. Some of the key social security benefits included in the IRC are:

### **(i) Employees' State Insurance (ESI):**

The ESI scheme provides medical care, sickness benefits, maternity benefits, and other benefits to employees and their dependents. The IRC mandates ESI coverage for establishments with

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<sup>1</sup>MA Srijja, Implementation of the Minimum Wages Act, 1948, Also available on <https://www.niti.gov.in/sites/default/files/2019-01/Publication-in-Global-Journal.pdf>

<sup>2</sup>THE PAYMENT OF BONUS ACT, 1965, Available on <https://clc.gov.in/clc/acts-rules/payment-bonus-act-0>

<sup>3</sup> The Payment of Wages Act, 1936,

Available on [https://www.indiacode.nic.in/bitstream/123456789/8324/1/payment\\_of\\_wages\\_act\\_1936.pdf](https://www.indiacode.nic.in/bitstream/123456789/8324/1/payment_of_wages_act_1936.pdf)

<sup>4</sup> The Code on Wages, 2019,

Available on [https://labour.gov.in/sites/default/files/the\\_code\\_on\\_wages\\_as\\_introduced.pdf](https://labour.gov.in/sites/default/files/the_code_on_wages_as_introduced.pdf)

10 or more employees.<sup>5</sup>

**(ii) Provident Fund:**

The Employees' Provident Fund (EPF) scheme requires employers to contribute a portion of their employees' wages to a provident fund account. Employees also contribute a portion of their wages. The accumulated funds can be used for retirement or other purposes.<sup>6</sup>

**(iii) Gratuity:**

The IRC mandates the payment of gratuity to employees who have completed a minimum period of continuous service. The amount of gratuity is calculated based on the employee's last drawn salary and length of service.<sup>7</sup>

**(iv) Maternity Benefits:**

The IRC provides for maternity benefits to women employees, including paid maternity leave, prenatal and postnatal care, and childcare facilities.<sup>8</sup>

**(v) Pension:**

The IRC provides for a pension scheme for employees who have completed a minimum period of service. The pension is calculated based on the employee's last drawn salary and length of service.<sup>9</sup>

The Code may also address other social security benefits such as disability pensions, unemployment benefits, and accident compensation.

**(6) Trade Union Rights<sup>10</sup>**

Trade union rights, which play a crucial role in protecting worker interests and promoting collective bargaining. The Code protects a wide range of trade union rights as:-

**(i) Trade Union Recognition:**

The Code provides for a simplified process for the recognition of trade unions. It introduces a concept of "verification" to establish the representative character of a trade union. Once verified, the trade union can be recognized as the sole bargaining agent for a specific unit. This is intended to streamline the recognition process and prevent fragmentation of trade union representation.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Employees' State Insurance Act, 1948

<sup>6</sup> Employees' Provident Funds and Miscellaneous Provisions Act, 1952,

<sup>7</sup> Payment of Gratuity Act, 1972

<sup>8</sup> Maternity Benefit Act, 1961

<sup>9</sup> Employees' Pension Scheme, 1995

<sup>10</sup> The Industrial Relations Code, 2020 (India).

<sup>11</sup> **International Labour Organization (ILO)**, "Trade Union Rights and Freedoms," <https://www.ilo.org/ilo-declaration-fundamental-principles-and-rights-work>

***(ii) Collective Bargaining:***

The Code emphasizes collective bargaining as a fundamental right of workers. It requires employers to engage in good faith negotiations with recognized trade unions on matters such as wages, hours of work, and service conditions. The Code also provides for conciliation and arbitration procedures to resolve disputes arising from collective bargaining.<sup>12</sup>

***(iii) Right to organize:***

Workers have the right to form and join trade unions without interference from employers or the government.

***(iv) Right to function:***

Trade unions have the right to function freely and independently, subject to reasonable restrictions.

***(v) Right to strike:***

The Code recognizes the right to strike as a last resort after exhausting all other avenues of dispute resolution. However, it also imposes certain restrictions on strikes, such as requiring a notice period and prohibiting strikes in essential services.

***(vi) Right to picketing:***

Trade unions have the right to picket peacefully during strikes or lockouts.<sup>13</sup>

**(7) Dispute Resolution**

The IRC is the establishment of effective dispute resolution mechanisms introduced by the Code, analyzing their potential impact on worker rights in India.

***(i) Conciliation<sup>14</sup>******Conciliation Boards:***

The IRC establishes conciliation boards at the central and state levels to facilitate amicable settlements between employers and employees. These boards will be composed of representatives from both sides, along with a neutral chairperson.

***Role of Conciliation:***

Conciliation serves as the first step in the dispute resolution process, aiming to create a conducive environment for negotiation and compromise between the parties.

***Challenges and Limitations:***

While conciliation can be an efficient and cost-effective means of resolving disputes, it may be

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<sup>12</sup>Centre for Indian Trade Unions (CITU), "Analysis of the Industrial Relations Code, 2020," Available on <http://citucentre.org/>

<sup>13</sup> Centre for Indian Trade Unions (CITU), "Analysis of the Industrial Relations Code, 2020," <http://citucentre.org/>

<sup>14</sup> Industrial Relations Code, 2020, Section 45.

less effective in complex or contentious cases where parties have entrenched positions.

***(ii) Arbitration<sup>15</sup>***

***Arbitration Tribunals:***

The IRC provides for the establishment of arbitration tribunals to adjudicate labor disputes. These tribunals can be constituted voluntarily by the parties or appointed by the government.

***Binding Awards:***

Arbitration awards are generally binding on the parties, making them a more definitive means of resolving disputes compared to conciliation.

***Challenges and Limitations:***

Arbitration can be time-consuming and expensive, particularly if the parties engage in lengthy legal proceedings. Additionally, the quality of arbitration awards may vary depending on the expertise and impartiality of the arbitrators.

***(c) Adjudication<sup>16</sup>***

***Labor Courts and Industrial Tribunals:***

The IRC retains the existing system of labor courts and industrial tribunals to adjudicate labor disputes. These tribunals have the power to grant relief to workers, including reinstatement, back wages, and compensation.

***Hierarchy of Tribunals:***

There is a hierarchy of tribunals, with labor courts at the lower level and industrial tribunals at the higher level. This allows for appeals and reviews of decisions.

***Challenges and Limitations:***

Adjudication can be a lengthy and complex process, involving multiple stages of legal proceedings. Moreover, the workload on labor courts and industrial tribunals can be substantial, leading to delays in the resolution of disputes.

***(iv) Alternative Dispute Resolution (ADR)***

***Mediation and Conciliation:***

The IRC encourages the use of ADR mechanisms, such as mediation and conciliation, to resolve labor disputes in a more informal and efficient manner.

***Benefits of ADR:***

ADR can be a more flexible and less adversarial process than traditional litigation. It can also help to maintain positive working relationships between employers and employees.

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid., Section 46.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid, Section 47.

## PROVISIONS AFFECTING WOMEN WORKERS

The IRC has the potential to significantly impact the lives of women workers in India. On the one hand, the Code provides important protections for women, such as maternity leave and protection from sexual harassment. On the other hand, there are concerns about the adequacy of these protections and the potential for employers to exploit women workers.

### *(i) Maternity Benefits:*<sup>17</sup>

The Code has retained the provisions of the Maternity Benefit Act, 1961, which mandates paid maternity leave for women employees. However, it has introduced some amendments, such as increasing the duration of paid maternity leave and providing for maternity benefits for adoptive mothers and surrogate mothers.

### *(ii) Sexual Harassment Prevention:*<sup>18</sup>

The Code reinforces the provisions of the Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace Act, 2013, requiring employers to establish internal complaints committees (ICCs) to address complaints of sexual harassment. It also mandates the constitution of a district-level committee to assist in the investigation and redressal of such complaints.

### *(iii) Equal Remuneration:*<sup>19</sup>

The Code reaffirms the principle of equal pay for equal work, irrespective of gender. It also provides for mechanisms to address wage discrimination and ensure that women workers receive equal pay for equivalent work.

### *(iv) Child Labor:*<sup>20</sup>

The Code reiterates the prohibition of child labor, as enshrined in the Child Labor (Prohibition and Regulation) Act, 1986. It also provides for strict penalties for employers who employ children below the prescribed age.

## PROVISIONS AFFECTING MIGRANT WORKERS

The IRC introduces several provisions specifically designed to address the unique challenges faced by migrant workers. Some of the key provisions include:

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<sup>17</sup> The Maternity Benefit Act, 1961, has been amended by the Code to increase the duration of paid maternity leave from 12 weeks to 26 weeks for two children and 26 weeks for subsequent children. It also provides for paid maternity leave for adoptive mothers and surrogate mothers.

<sup>18</sup> The Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace Act, 2013, has been further strengthened by the IRC, which requires employers to establish ICCs and mandates the constitution of district-level committees.

<sup>19</sup> The Equal Remuneration Act, 1976, has been incorporated into the IRC to ensure that women workers receive equal pay for equal work.

<sup>20</sup> The Child Labor (Prohibition and Regulation) Act, 1986, has been incorporated into the IRC to prohibit child labor and impose strict penalties on employers who violate the law.



***(i) Registration and Welfare:<sup>21</sup>***

The Code mandates the registration of migrant workers, requiring employers to maintain records of their employment details. It also imposes obligations on employers to provide basic amenities and welfare facilities to migrant workers, including accommodation, medical facilities, and canteen facilities.

***(ii) Wage Protection:***

The IRC ensures that migrant workers receive wages equal to those paid to local workers for similar work. It also prohibits wage discrimination based on place of origin.

***(iii) Social Security Benefits:***

The Code extends social security benefits, such as provident fund, gratuity, and maternity benefits, to migrant workers. This is aimed at providing a safety net and financial security to migrant workers.

***(iv) Dispute Resolution:***

The IRC establishes mechanisms for the resolution of disputes involving migrant workers, including conciliation, arbitration, and adjudication. This is intended to provide a fair and efficient process for resolving grievances and protecting the rights of migrant workers.

***(v) Anti-Discrimination:<sup>22</sup>***

The Code prohibits discrimination against migrant workers on the basis of their place of origin or any other characteristic. This is intended to prevent discrimination and ensure equal treatment of migrant workers.

## **COMPARISONS WITH PREVIOUS LAWS**

We will compare the key provisions of the 2020 Code with its predecessor laws, focusing on the impact on worker rights.

***(i) Trade Union Rights:***

**Previous Laws:** The Trade Unions Act, 1926, provided for the registration and regulation of trade unions.

**2020 Code:** The Code maintains the basic framework for trade union registration and activities but introduces some changes, such as allowing for the formation of ‘federations of federations’ and providing for the recognition of trade unions by employers.

***(ii) Industrial Disputes:***

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<sup>21</sup> Industrial Relations Code, 2020, Section 2(1)(b), 3, 22 & 42

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., Section 14, 55.

**Previous Laws:** The Industrial Disputes Act, 1947, dealt with industrial disputes and provided mechanisms for their resolution.

**2020 Code:** The Code simplifies the procedures for filing and resolving industrial disputes, introduces a new concept of "arbitration cum conciliation," and expands the scope of conciliation officers.

***(iii) Wage and Bonus:***

**Previous Laws:** The Minimum Wages Act, 1948, and the Payment of Bonus Act, 1965, regulated wages and bonus payments.

**2020 Code:** The Code consolidates the provisions related to wages and bonus, setting minimum wages and eligibility criteria for bonus payments.

***(iv) Social Security:***

**Previous Laws:** Various laws, such as the Employees' State Insurance Act, 1948, and the Employees' Provident Funds and Miscellaneous Provisions Act, 1952, provided social security benefits.

**2020 Code:** The Code maintains the core social security benefits but introduces some changes, such as expanding the coverage of the Employees' State Insurance scheme and providing for maternity benefits.

***(v) Working Hours and Conditions:***

**Previous Laws:** The Factories Act, 1948, and the Contract Labour (Regulation and Abolition) Act, 1970, regulated working hours and conditions.

**2020 Code:** The Code consolidates these provisions, setting maximum working hours, providing for weekly offs, and regulating contract labor.

## **BENEFITS AND DRAWBACKS**

**Benefits of the IRC, 2020:**

***(i) Consolidation of Labor Laws:***

The IRC streamlines the complex web of labor laws, reducing confusion and improving compliance.

***(ii) Enhanced Worker Protection:***

The Code strengthens certain worker rights, such as minimum wages, social security benefits, and trade union rights.

***(iii) Improved Dispute Resolution:***

The provisions for conciliation and arbitration can help resolve disputes peacefully and

efficiently.

### **Drawbacks of the IRC:**

#### **(i) Adequacy of Worker Rights:**

The Code's provisions may not be sufficient to address the challenges faced by workers in certain sectors, such as informal employment and gig economy.

#### **(ii) Enforcement Challenges:**

Effective enforcement of the Code's provisions remains a significant hurdle, particularly in rural areas and small-scale enterprises.

#### **(iii) Procedural Delays:**

The dispute resolution mechanisms can be time-consuming and costly, hindering workers' access to justice.

## **ETHICAL IMPLICATIONS OF THE IRC**

The ethical implications of the IRC are multifaceted:

### **() Promotion of Social Justice:**

The IRC's provisions on minimum wages, social security, and trade union rights can contribute to social justice by ensuring a basic standard of living for workers and protecting their rights.

### **() Potential for Exploitation:**

However, the Code's emphasis on contractual flexibility and the potential for weak enforcement could create opportunities for exploitation, undermining the principles of social justice.

### **() Alignment with International Standards:**

The IRC's alignment with international labor standards is a positive development, but it is essential to ensure that these standards are effectively implemented and enforced.

### **() Ethical Dilemmas:**

The IRC raises ethical dilemmas, such as balancing the interests of employers and workers, promoting economic growth while protecting worker rights, and addressing the challenges of informal employment.

## **CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES**

While the Industrial Relations Code, 2020, represents a significant step forward in protecting trade union rights, it also presents certain challenges and opportunities. Some of the issues include:

### **(i) Enforcement:**

Ensuring effective enforcement of the Code's provisions is crucial for protecting worker rights. The government will need to invest in robust enforcement mechanisms and address any potential obstacles.

***(ii) Balance between worker rights and economic growth:***

The Code must strike a balance between protecting worker rights and promoting economic growth. Excessive restrictions on employers could hinder investment and job creation.

***(iii) Role of technology:***

The increasing use of technology in the workplace raises new challenges and opportunities for trade unions. Trade unions will need to adapt their strategies to address these challenges and ensure that workers' rights are protected in the digital age.

## CONCLUSION

The Industrial Relations Code, 2020, represents a significant overhaul of India's labor laws. While the Code aims to streamline labor regulations and improve industrial relations, its impact on worker rights remains a subject of debate.

On the one hand, the Code introduces several positive measures such as enhanced social security benefits, improved dispute resolution mechanisms, and greater flexibility in employment contracts. These reforms have the potential to benefit workers and employers alike.

However, there are also concerns about the Code's potential negative consequences. Critics argue that the Code may weaken worker bargaining power, reduce job security, and undermine trade union rights. The Code's provisions on fixed-term employment and casual labor have been particularly contentious, as they could lead to increased precarious work.

Furthermore, the effective implementation and enforcement of the Code will be crucial in determining its ultimate impact on worker rights. The government will need to ensure that the Code is not merely a piece of legislation but a living document that is actively enforced and adapted to changing circumstances.

## SUGGESTIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR IRC CODE, 2020

**(1) Strengthen Worker Representation:**

***(a) Promote Independent Trade Unions:***

Ensure that workers have the freedom to form independent trade unions without government interference.

***(b) Facilitate Collective Bargaining:***

Provide a supportive environment for collective bargaining between workers and employers, including mechanisms to resolve disputes.

***(c) Protect Union Rights:***

Safeguard the rights of trade unions to organize, bargain, and represent workers without fear of retaliation.

**(2) Enhance Worker Protection:*****(a) Increase Minimum Wages:***

Regularly review and adjust minimum wages to ensure they are adequate to meet basic needs.

***(b) Strengthen Social Security Benefits:***

Expand and improve social security benefits, such as healthcare, pension, and unemployment insurance, to provide a safety net for workers.

***(c) Address Workplace Safety and Health:***

Implement strict safety and health standards, and ensure adequate enforcement to protect workers from hazardous conditions.

***(d) Combat Discrimination and Harassment:***

Prohibit discrimination based on gender, caste, religion, or other protected characteristics, and establish effective mechanisms to address complaints of harassment.

**(3) Promote Fair Employment Practices:*****(a) Regulate Fixed-Term Employment:***

Impose reasonable limits on the use of fixed-term employment contracts to prevent exploitation.

***(b) Protect Casual Workers:***

Ensure that casual workers have adequate rights and protections, including access to social security benefits and minimum wages.

***(c) Address Contractual Flexibility:***

Balance the need for flexibility with the protection of worker rights, by setting clear guidelines for the use of contract labor and outsourcing.



**(4) Improve Dispute Resolution Mechanisms:*****(a) Strengthen Conciliation:***

Promote the use of conciliation as a primary means of resolving labor disputes, and provide adequate resources and training for conciliators.

***(b) Enhance Arbitration:***

Ensure that arbitration procedures are fair, efficient, and impartial.

***(c) Streamline Adjudication:***

Improve the efficiency and effectiveness of labor courts and tribunals.

**(5) Promote Ethical Business Practices:*****(a) Mandate Corporate Social Responsibility:***

Require companies to adopt ethical business practices and respect worker rights in their supply chains.

***(b) Encourage Corporate Dialogue:***

Facilitate dialogue between workers, employers, and government representatives to address concerns and promote mutual understanding.

**(6) Enhance Enforcement and Compliance:*****(a) Strengthen Labor Inspectorates:***

Provide labor inspectorates with adequate resources and authority to effectively enforce labor laws.

***(b) Impose Penalties:***

Impose strict penalties for violations of labor laws to deter non-compliance.

***(c) Promote Transparency and Accountability:***

Increase transparency in the enforcement of labor laws and hold government officials accountable for their performance.

At last, the Industrial Relations Code, 2020, is a complex piece of legislation with both potential benefits and drawbacks. Its long-term impact on worker rights will depend on how it is implemented and enforced, as well as the broader economic and social context in which it operates. A careful and ongoing evaluation of the Code's effects will be necessary to assess whether it has achieved its stated objectives of improving industrial relations and protecting worker rights.

By implementing these recommendations, the Industrial Relations Code, 2020 can be further improved to better protect worker rights and address ethical concerns in the Indian workplace.