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THE TRANSFORMATIVE POWER OF UNIVERSALIZED WAGES

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Abstract:

The universalization of wages is a critical issue in India, where income inequality and wage disparities persist. This abstract highlights the need for universalization of wages in India and its potential impact on various aspects of society. It emphasizes the importance of fair and adequate compensation for all workers, regardless of their occupation or industry. The abstract discusses how universalization of wages can contribute to reducing income inequality, combating working poverty, ensuring social justice, protecting vulnerable workers, boosting consumer demand and economic growth, encouraging formalization of the economy, enhancing productivity and competitiveness, meeting international labor standards, and strengthening social cohesion. It concludes by emphasizing the significance of implementing comprehensive measures to achieve universalization of wages and create a more equitable and inclusive society in India.

1. Introduction

The universalization of wages refers to the idea of establishing a standard minimum wage that applies to all workers, regardless of their occupation or industry. The Code on Wages, 2019 is a law in India that aims to achieve this by removing the distinction between scheduled and non-scheduled employment under the Minimum Wages Act, 1948. However, there are concerns regarding the effectiveness of the Code in achieving universalization. The Code has explicit exclusions, definitional limitations, and ambiguities that may prevent many wage workers from receiving minimum wage protection. It may also jeopardize the coverage of domestic workers, who were previously included under the Minimum Wages Act. Furthermore, the Code excludes employment guarantee programs from the provisions on minimum wages, which goes against the constitutional prohibition of forced labor. Additionally, (Neumark, D. and W. Wascher (2008)) states that the Code fails to address structural barriers in the labor economy that have hindered the

implementation of minimum wages in the past. This paper argues that the Code's failure to recognize the entitlement of every wage worker to minimum wages and address systemic hurdles in wage payment undermines the goal of universalization and violates the constitutional mandate on minimum wage payment.

2. Global laws on Universal Minimum Wage

Universalization of wages refers to the concept of establishing a standardized minimum wage that applies to all workers within a particular jurisdiction, regardless of their occupation, industry, or skill level. This approach aims to ensure fair compensation for all workers and reduce income inequality. In this article, we will explore different countries that have implemented laws or policies with the goal of universalizing wages. One country that has successfully implemented a universal minimum wage is Australia. The country has a national minimum wage that applies to all workers, regardless of their occupation or industry. The Fair Work Commission, an independent statutory authority, regularly reviews and adjusts the minimum wage to ensure it remains fair and adequate. This ensures that all workers, including those in low-paid industries, receive a decent wage.

France is another country that has implemented a national minimum wage, known as the "SMIC" (Salaire Minimum Interprofessionnel de Croissance). The SMIC applies to all workers, including those in part-time or temporary positions. The government regularly reviews and adjusts the SMIC to keep up with inflation and changes in the cost of living. This approach helps to ensure that all workers in France receive a fair wage.

New Zealand has also implemented a national minimum wage that applies to all workers, regardless of their age or experience. The minimum wage is reviewed annually and adjusted based on changes in the cost of living and economic conditions. This ensures that all workers in New Zealand are paid a fair wage that reflects the current economic situation.

In Germany, there is a national minimum wage known as the "Mindestlohn." This minimum wage applies to all workers, including those in part-time or temporary positions. The amount of the minimum wage is determined by an independent commission and is regularly reviewed and adjusted to ensure fair compensation for workers. This approach helps to reduce income inequality and ensure that all workers are paid a decent wage.

South Africa is another country that has implemented a national minimum wage. The minimum wage applies to all workers, regardless of their occupation or industry. The minimum wage is set by the National Minimum Wage Commission and is adjusted annually. This approach helps to ensure fair compensation for all workers in South Africa.

These are just a few examples of countries that have implemented laws or policies aimed at achieving the universalization of wages. The specific details and implementation may vary, but the objective is to ensure that all workers receive a fair and decent wage. Universalizing wages can help reduce income inequality, improve living standards, and promote social justice within a society. It ensures that workers can afford their basic needs, reduces the prevalence of working poverty, and fosters a fair and competitive labor market. However, there can be challenges associated with the universalization of wages. One concern is the potential impact on small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), which may struggle to absorb the additional labor costs. This could lead to job losses, reduced hiring, or even business closures. Therefore, policymakers need to carefully consider the potential effects on SMEs and provide support mechanisms to mitigate any negative impacts. Additionally, the effectiveness of a universal minimum wage may vary across different regions and industries. A one-size-fits-all approach may not adequately account for variations in cost of living, economic conditions, or labor market dynamics. Therefore, policymakers need to consider regional and sectoral disparities to ensure that the minimum wage remains relevant and effective.

The universalization of wages is an important step towards achieving fair and decent compensation for all workers. Several countries have implemented laws or policies to ensure that all workers receive a minimum wage, regardless of their occupation or industry. These efforts help reduce income inequality, improve living standards, and promote social justice. However, policymakers need to carefully consider the potential challenges and provide support mechanisms to ensure the successful implementation and sustainability of a universal minimum wage.

3. India and Universalization Of Wages

India has also taken steps towards the universalization of wages with the implementation of the Code on Wages, 2019. This law aims to establish a standardized minimum wage for all workers in the country, removing the distinction between scheduled and non-scheduled employment that was present under the previous Minimum Wages Act, 1948. The Code on Wages seeks to extend

the protection of minimum wage laws to a larger number of workers in India. The Union Ministry of Labour and Employment claims that this elimination of the dichotomy between scheduled and non-scheduled employment will benefit more than an estimated fifty crore workers in the country. By ensuring that all workers, regardless of their occupation or industry, are covered under the minimum wage protection, the Code aims to reduce income inequality and improve the overall well-being of workers. However, there are concerns regarding the effectiveness of the Code in achieving the goal of universalization. Critics argue that the Code's exclusions, definitional limitations, and ambiguities may prevent many wage workers from receiving minimum wage protection as in Dube, A., S. Naidu and M. Reich (2007). There are explicit exclusions in the Code that may exclude certain categories of workers from the minimum wage provisions, such as those engaged in hazardous work or those covered under specific sectoral laws.

Additionally, the coverage of domestic workers, who were previously covered under the Minimum Wages Act, 1948, may also be imperiled under the Code. This exclusion raises concerns about the vulnerability and exploitation of domestic workers, who often face low wages and poor working conditions. Furthermore, the Code does not address some of the critical structural barriers in the labor economy that have hindered the implementation of minimum wage laws in the past as in Bureau of Labor Statistics (2009). Issues such as wage theft, non-compliance by employers, and lack of effective enforcement mechanisms continue to pose challenges to ensuring that all workers receive fair wages.

Another significant concern is the exclusion of employment guarantee programs from the provisions on minimum wages. This exclusion contravenes the constitutional prohibition against forced labor under Article 23. Critics argue that the Code should ensure that workers participating in employment guarantee programs, such as the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MGNREGS), are also entitled to receive at least the minimum wage. While the Code on Wages, 2019 is a step towards achieving universalization of wages in India, there are concerns regarding its effectiveness in ensuring fair and adequate compensation for all workers. The exclusions, definitional limitations, and ambiguities in the Code may hinder the goal of universalization and leave many workers without minimum wage protection. Addressing these concerns and implementing effective enforcement mechanisms are crucial to achieving the objective of universalization of wages in India. There is no specific enactment or legislation exclusively related to the universalization of wages in India (see, for example,

Stiglitz, 2009). However, there are several laws and regulations in place that govern wages and employment conditions, which indirectly contribute to the objective of fair and adequate compensation for workers. Some of the key legislations related to wages in India include:

Minimum Wages Act, 1948: This act mandates the fixation and enforcement of minimum wages in various industries and sectors to ensure that workers receive a minimum level of remuneration.

Payment of Wages Act, 1936: This act regulates the payment of wages to employees and sets rules regarding the time, manner, and frequency of wage payments.

Equal Remuneration Act, 1976: This act prohibits discrimination in wages on the grounds of gender and ensures equal pay for equal work for both men and women.

Code on Wages, 2019: The Code on Wages consolidates and simplifies existing labor laws related to wages and provides for the universalization of minimum wages and timely payment of wages to all workers, including those in the informal sector.

It is important to note that while these legislations address certain aspects of wages, the concept of universalization of wages goes beyond the existing legal framework. It calls for a comprehensive approach that ensures fair and adequate compensation for all workers, including those in the informal sector, and addresses the issue of wage disparity.

4. Effective ways to implement Universalization of wages in India

Implementing the universalization of wages in India is a complex task that requires careful planning, effective strategies, and the involvement of various stakeholders. Here are some effective ways to achieve the goal of universalization of wages in India:

Comprehensive legislation: The first step towards implementing universalization of wages in India is to have comprehensive legislation that clearly defines the minimum wage and covers all workers, regardless of their occupation or industry. Deaton, A. and J. Dreze (2002) states that The legislation should eliminate any exclusions or loopholes that prevent certain categories of workers from receiving minimum wage protection. The Code on Wages, 2019 is a step in this direction, but it needs to be strengthened to ensure that all workers are covered.

Regular revision and adjustment: It is crucial to regularly revise and adjust the minimum wage to keep pace with inflation, changes in the cost of living, and economic conditions. Vaughan-Whitehead, D. (2010) states that the minimum wage remains fair and adequate over time. The revision should be based on reliable data and inputs from experts, labor unions, and relevant stakeholders. The revision process should be transparent and participatory to ensure that the concerns of workers are adequately addressed.

Robust enforcement mechanisms: Effective enforcement mechanisms are crucial to ensure compliance with minimum wage laws. This includes establishing labor inspection systems, increasing the number of labor inspectors, and providing them with adequate training and resources. Strict penalties should be imposed on employers who violate minimum wage laws to deter non-compliance. Workers should be encouraged and empowered to report violations without fear of retaliation. Additionally, the use of technology, such as digital platforms, can help in monitoring compliance and addressing non-compliance promptly.

Awareness and education: Conducting awareness campaigns and providing education to workers about their rights and entitlements under minimum wage laws is essential. Many workers, especially those in the informal sector, may not be aware of their rights or how to access them. Therefore, efforts should be made to educate workers about minimum wage laws, their entitlements, and the process for lodging complaints. This can be done through workshops, training programs, and the dissemination of informational materials in multiple languages.

Strengthening labor unions and worker organizations: Labor unions and worker organizations play a crucial role in advocating for fair wages and protecting workers' rights. Strengthening these organizations and ensuring their active participation in wage negotiations can help in achieving universalization of wages. Labor unions can negotiate with employers on behalf of workers, ensure that minimum wage laws are implemented, and provide support and assistance to workers in filing complaints or seeking redressal. Efforts should be made to increase unionization rates and provide training and capacity-building support to union leaders.

Sector-specific minimum wages: While universalization is the goal, it is essential to consider sector-specific variations in wages. Certain industries or regions may have higher costs of living or different economic conditions. Therefore, establishing sector-specific minimum wages that

consider these variations can ensure fair compensation for workers in different sectors. This can be done through a consultative process involving employers, labor unions, and experts in the relevant sectors. The sector-specific minimum wages should be regularly reviewed and adjusted to reflect changes in economic conditions.

Monitoring and evaluation: Regular monitoring and evaluation of the implementation of minimum wage laws are necessary to identify any gaps or areas that need improvement. This can be done through surveys, data collection, and analysis of wage trends. The findings should be used to refine policies and address any shortcomings in the implementation process. Independent bodies or agencies should be established to monitor and evaluate the implementation of minimum wage laws and provide recommendations for improvement.

Collaboration with stakeholders: Collaboration between the government, employers, trade unions, and other stakeholders is crucial for the successful implementation of universalization of wages. Dube, A., S. Naidu and M. Reich (2007) mentions regular dialogue and consultation with these stakeholders can help in addressing concerns, resolving disputes, and ensuring a smooth implementation process. Tripartite bodies, comprising representatives from the government, employers, and labor unions, can be established to facilitate dialogue, negotiate wages, and address issues related to the implementation of minimum wage laws.

Strengthening social protection measures: Universalization of wages should be accompanied by strengthening social protection measures to ensure that workers have access to other benefits and entitlements. This includes providing healthcare, social security, and pension schemes for workers. By ensuring comprehensive social protection, workers can have a decent standard of living and financial security beyond just the minimum wage.

Research and evidence-based policymaking: Policymaking on minimum wages should be based on research and evidence. Regular studies should be conducted to assess the impact of minimum wages on workers, employers, and the economy as a whole. This includes analyzing the effects on employment, productivity, and income distribution. The findings of such studies can inform policymaking and help in designing effective strategies for implementing universalization of wages.

Implementing the universalization of wages in India requires a multi-faceted approach that includes comprehensive legislation, regular revision and adjustment of the minimum wage, robust enforcement mechanisms, awareness campaigns, and collaboration with stakeholders. Strengthening labor unions, sector-specific minimum wages, monitoring and evaluation, and evidence-based policymaking are also crucial. By adopting these strategies, India can move towards achieving fair and adequate compensation for all workers, reducing income inequality, and promoting social justice. However, it is important to recognize that the implementation of universalization of wages is a long-term process that requires sustained efforts and the involvement of multiple stakeholders.

5. Need for universalization of wages in India

Income inequality and wage disparity have long been pressing issues in India, with a significant proportion of the population struggling to earn a decent living. The need for universalization of wages in India has gained prominence as a crucial step towards addressing these concerns and ensuring fairness and economic justice. This essay delves into the multifaceted need for universalization of wages in India, highlighting the importance of fair and adequate compensation for all workers.

Reducing Income Inequality: India ranks among the countries with the highest levels of income inequality. The concentration of wealth in the hands of a few exacerbates social divisions and hampers overall development. Universalization of wages is an essential tool in narrowing the income gap and fostering a more equitable distribution of wealth. By ensuring that all workers, regardless of their occupation or industry, receive fair and decent wages, universalization of wages can contribute to a more just society.

Combating Working Poverty: A significant proportion of workers in India, especially those in the informal sector, struggle to earn wages above the poverty line. Universalization of wages is crucial in lifting workers out of poverty by guaranteeing wages that are sufficient to meet their basic needs and improve their overall quality of life. This approach can effectively contribute to poverty reduction and foster inclusive economic growth.

Ensuring Social Justice: Universalization of wages is an essential component of promoting social justice in India. It ensures that workers are not subjected to exploitation or unfair labor practices,

providing them with the opportunity to earn a decent living and lead a dignified life. By extending fair wages to all workers, regardless of gender, caste, or location, universalization helps address discrimination and disparities in wages, fostering a more inclusive society.

Protecting Vulnerable Workers: The vulnerable segments of the workforce, such as informal sector workers, migrant laborers, and domestic workers, often endure precarious working conditions and receive meager wages. Universalization of wages provides legal protection and ensures that these workers receive fair compensation for their labor. This measure is crucial in shielding vulnerable workers from exploitation and improving their overall well-being.

Boosting Consumer Demand and Economic Growth: Universalization of wages contributes to an increase in consumer demand, thereby stimulating economic growth. As workers receive fair wages, their purchasing power rises, leading to heightened demand for goods and services. This, in turn, drives production, job creation, and overall economic development, benefiting both workers and businesses. Increased consumer demand also encourages investment and innovation, further fueling economic growth.

Encouraging Formalization of the Economy: The informal sector in India represents a significant portion of the workforce, often excluded from minimum wage protections and lacking social security. Universalization of wages can incentivize employers to formalize their operations, providing better working conditions and extending minimum wage protection to all workers. This measure fosters the formalization of the economy, leading to improved labor standards, increased productivity, and competitiveness.

Enhancing Productivity and Competitiveness: Fair wages contribute to higher levels of job satisfaction and motivation among workers. When workers are adequately compensated, they are more likely to be loyal, committed, and productive. This enhanced productivity and competitiveness of businesses and industries in India contribute to overall economic growth and development. By ensuring fair wages, universalization of wages incentivizes workers to perform their best and fosters a positive work environment.

Meeting International Labor Standards: Universalization of wages aligns with international labor standards that advocate for fair wages and decent work. By implementing this measure, India

demonstrates its commitment to upholding these standards and improving the working conditions of its workforce. This enhances India's reputation globally, attracting investment and business opportunities. It also strengthens India's position in the global labor market, promoting fairness and ethical labor practices.

Strengthening Social Cohesion: Wage disparities and income inequality can lead to social unrest and discord. Universalization of wages fosters social cohesion by addressing these disparities and promoting a sense of fairness and justice. When all workers receive fair compensation, it reduces feelings of marginalization and ensures that everyone has access to a decent standard of living. This contributes to a more harmonious and inclusive society.

Improving Health and Well-being: Fair wages have a positive impact on the health and well-being of workers and their families. As distinguished in El-Hamidi, F. and K. Terrell (2002). When workers receive adequate compensation, they can afford better healthcare, education, and improved living conditions. This, in turn, leads to healthier and more productive individuals, reducing the burden on healthcare and social welfare systems.

6. Conclusion

The universalization of wages in India is an urgent and necessary step towards achieving fairness, economic justice, and social cohesion. It addresses income inequality, combats working poverty, ensures social justice, protects vulnerable workers, boosts consumer demand and economic growth, encourages formalization of the economy, enhances productivity and competitiveness, meets international labor standards, and improves the overall health and well-being of workers and their families. By implementing universalization of wages, India can create a more equitable and inclusive society where all workers, regardless of their occupation or industry, receive fair and adequate compensation for their work. This will not only uplift individuals and families out of poverty but also stimulate economic growth, reduce social disparities, and foster social harmony. However, achieving universalization of wages requires comprehensive legislation, robust enforcement mechanisms, awareness campaigns, collaboration with stakeholders, and continuous monitoring and evaluation. It is a long-term process that requires the commitment and cooperation of the government, employers, trade unions, and other stakeholders.

By prioritizing the universalization of wages, India can take a significant stride towards achieving

social justice, reducing income inequality, and creating a more prosperous and equitable society for all its citizens. It is a crucial step in building a future where every worker is valued, respected, and receives fair compensation for their labor.

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