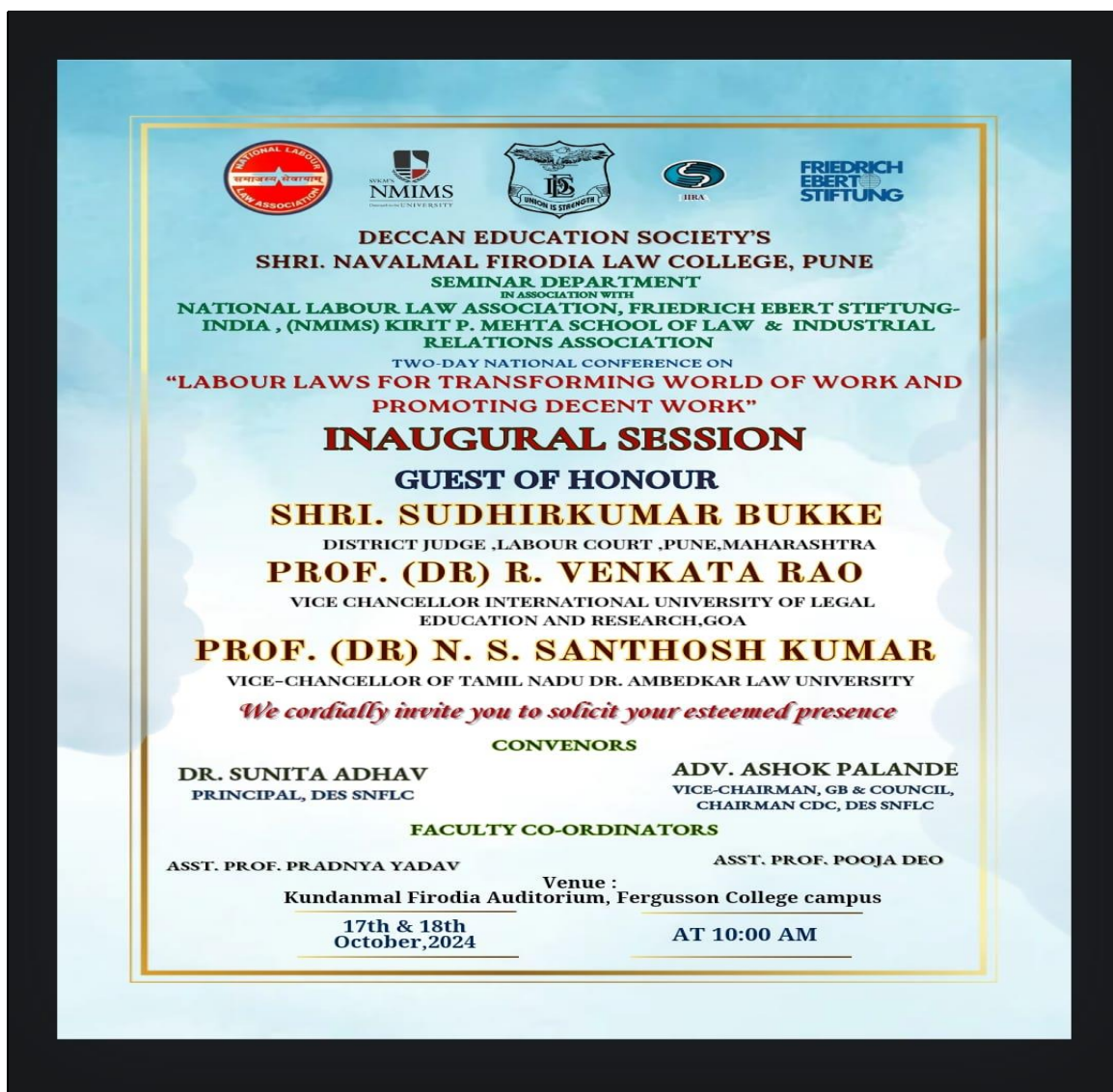




CONFERENCE REPORT

“Labor Laws for Transforming World of Work and Promoting Decent Work”

DES' Shri Navalmal Firodia Law College, Pune
October: 17th - 18th, 2024

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INTRODUCTION

The two-day National Conference on "Labor Laws for Transforming the World of Work and Promoting Decent Work" aimed to address the evolving challenges in labor relations and employment structures. Organized by Shri Navalmal Firodia Law College, Pune, the event provided a platform for discussions on critical labor law issues, with a special focus on unorganized workers, gig economy workers, and the implications of digitalization and artificial intelligence.



THE PROGRAM

The conference was structured into multiple sessions, including keynote addresses, technical presentations, and interactive discussions. Topics covered included the social security needs of unorganized and gig economy workers, the impact of technological advancements on labor laws, and the future of employment in a digitalized world. The sessions also emphasized the need for policy reforms to ensure decent work for all and to adapt labor laws to contemporary challenges such as platform-based work and flexible employment arrangements.



PARTICIPATION

The conference witnessed active participation from legal experts, academicians, policymakers, and students. The diverse audience contributed to enriching the discussions with unique perspectives and experiences. The interactive format of the sessions encouraged meaningful dialogue, fostering a deeper understanding of the complexities surrounding labor law reforms and the promotion of workers' rights in India.

The conference concluded with actionable insights and a collective commitment to advancing labor rights and ensuring decent work in a transforming world of employment.

INAUGURAL SESSION



The two-day National Conference on “Labor Laws for Transforming the World of Work and Promoting Decent Work” was organized by DES’ Navalmal Firodia Law College, Pune, on 17th and 18th October 2024. The event focused on addressing the evolving dynamics of labor laws, emphasizing the impact of digitalization, the gig economy, and the need to safeguard workers' rights in a rapidly changing global environment. The conference began with the ceremonial lighting of the lamp and Ganesh Vandana, followed by the felicitation of the dignitaries by Adv. Ashok Palande, Vice Chancellor of Deccan Education Society, and Dr. Sunita Adhav, Principal, SNFLC. Dr. Adhav delivered the welcoming address, setting the tone for the conference.

The event was presided over by Dr. S.C. Srivastava, President of the National Labour Law Association, and the Guests of Honour included Shri Sudhir Kumar Bukke, District Judge of the Industrial and Labour Court, Pune, Prof. (Dr.) Venkata Rao, Vice Chancellor of India International University of Legal Education and Research, Goa, and Prof. (Dr.) Santosh Kumar, Vice Chancellor of Tamil Nadu Dr. Ambedkar Law University, Chennai. The conference featured extensive discussions and presentations on challenges in modern employment relationships, particularly concerning gig workers and the implications of technological advancements like artificial intelligence (AI).

Shri Sudhir Kumar Bukke highlighted the increasing complexity of labor disputes in courts and the rise in awareness among workers about their rights, emphasizing the need to revisit labor laws to ensure they remain relevant in today’s dynamic work environment. Prof. Dr. Santosh Kumar discussed the impact of liberalization, privatization, and globalization (LPG) on labor systems, advocating for educational institutions to play a proactive role in addressing workers' well-being and adapting to changing societal and work cultures. Prof. Dr. Venkat Rao spoke on industrial jurisprudence, the gig economy, and the global imperative of decent work, linking labor rights to constitutional provisions like Articles 38 and 39, which call for a social order promoting equality and justice. He also emphasized the attributes of decent work, such as fair income, decision-making freedom, and sustainable work environments.

Prof. Dr. S.C. Srivastava focused on the challenges posed by the gig economy and AI, highlighting the absence of a specific national policy for gig workers and the precarious conditions they face. He called for the development of inclusive frameworks to strengthen workers' rights and address the implications of AI on employment. Citing cases like *Ranjit Singh v. Union of India* (2020), he advocated for extending constitutional principles like Articles 21 and 14 to gig workers. Prof. Srivastava also emphasized the need for dialogue between the government, employers, and labor representatives to adapt labor laws to the digital age.

The conference concluded with Asst. Prof. Pooja Deo expressing gratitude to the dignitaries. Overall, the event successfully brought together legal experts and labor law professionals to deliberate on critical issues shaping the future of work. It underscored the urgent need to adapt labor laws to modern employment challenges, ensuring the protection and rights of workers in an increasingly digital and globalized economy.

DAY - 1 (17th OCTOBER, 2024)

TECHNICAL SESSION - 1:

Recent Developments in Providing Social Security for Unorganized Workers



The first technical session of the conference, “Recent Developments in Providing Social Security for Unorganized Workers,” centered on the challenges and reforms needed to extend social security to vulnerable groups such as domestic workers, home-based workers, and care workers. Advocate Shrikant Malegaonkar delivered a compelling speech on the precarious conditions faced by gig workers, who now constitute over 90% of the workforce, including those employed by platforms like Zomato and Swiggy. Despite their significant contributions to the economy, these workers lack adequate access to healthcare, pensions, and insurance. He highlighted how the post-pandemic surge in gig employment has amplified these vulnerabilities and stressed the urgent need for reforms to extend social security benefits to gig workers in a rapidly digitalizing economy.

Prof. Dr. Atul More further elaborated on the need for labor law reforms to address the growing population of unorganized workers. He emphasized the government's role in bridging gaps in social security through policy reforms and called for the recognition of domestic, home-based, and care workers as an integral part of the economy. Dr. More underlined the importance of ensuring these workers receive the benefits of social security schemes, reinforcing their essential role in economic development. The session underscored the necessity of proactive measures to protect unorganized workers and promote equitable social security frameworks.

TECHNICAL SESSION 2:

Workers on Digital Labor Platform: Gig and Platform Workers - Issues and Challenges



The second technical session, “Workers on Digital Labour Platforms: Gig and Platform Workers – Issues and Challenges,” explored the pressing concerns faced by gig workers in India. Shri Anup Shrivastav, a senior adviser at Friedrich Ebert Stiftung Foundation, highlighted the significant challenges encountered by gig workers, including issues related to minimum wages, timely payments, and the lack of a legal framework to address their specific needs. He pointed out that gig workers operate in an unregulated environment, which, coupled with a lack of awareness about their rights, leaves them vulnerable to exploitation. Shrivastav called for urgent policy interventions to ensure basic labor rights and protections for gig workers, stressing the need for collective efforts to educate and safeguard these workers in India’s expanding digital economy.

Dr. Kingshuk Sarkar further elaborated on the challenges faced by gig workers, citing the NITI Aayog Report on Gig and Platform Work for 2029-30, which estimates that 2.35 crore individuals are engaged in gig work in India. He referenced the landmark UK Supreme Court verdict recognizing gig workers' rights, underlining its significance in influencing global and Indian policies. Dr. Sarkar discussed the Rajasthan Gig Workers Act and its inconsistencies with the Social Security Code, 2020, noting the need for harmonization between these legal frameworks. He also mentioned the Karnataka Bill on Gig Workers, which aims to adapt employment practices to the evolving nature of gig work.

Dr. Sarkar delved into the operations of platforms like Uber, explaining how gig work is characterized by short-term, project-based employment offering flexibility through digital platforms. However, he noted that the classification of gig workers as independent contractors often results in the absence of crucial benefits and protections. He emphasized the need for increased education and awareness among gig workers, enabling them to better navigate the complexities of the gig economy and advocate for their rights.

The session concluded with a vote of thanks to the speakers, recognizing their valuable insights on the critical challenges and necessary reforms for gig and platform workers in the digital labor market.

DAY - 2 (18th OCTOBER, 2024)

TECHNICAL SESSION 3:

Changing Forms of Employment and Workplace Relations



On 18th October 2024, the conference commenced with the felicitation of distinguished speakers, including Dr. Santosh Kumar, Shri Amit Vashisht, Dr. Kingshuk Sarkar, Dr. Manisha Mittal, Adv. Varun Joshi, Shri V. M. Sawant, and Prof. (Dr.) Durgambhini Patel, by the Principal, Dr. Sunita Adhav.

Dr. Santosh Kumar, Shri Amit Vashisht, and Dr. Kingshuk Sarkar. The session focused on the evolving landscape of employment and workplace relations, particularly the impact of automation, labor laws, and emerging employment trends.

Dr. Santosh Kumar addressed the rapid advancement of artificial intelligence (AI) and robotics in the industrial sector. He raised concerns about automation leading to widespread unemployment, as robots increasingly replace jobs traditionally held by humans. Dr. Kumar also pointed out that future generations may struggle to find employment in industries today, as automation continues to reshape the job market. However, he highlighted the potential growth of green jobs, which focus on environmental sustainability and aim to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. These jobs are expected to provide significant employment opportunities in the future.

Shri Amit Vashisht emphasized the interconnectedness of labor and the economy, stressing the need for labor laws to adapt to new forms of employment. He noted that labor has been a driving force behind India's economic growth since independence. Vashisht argued that labor laws function much like common law, evolving to address new societal and economic conditions. He called for the legal recognition of non-traditional workers, particularly gig workers, and stressed the need for labor laws to provide solutions to challenges posed by emerging employment types like gig and contractual work.

Dr. Kingshuk Sarkar focused on the increasing diversity in forms of employment, such as freelance work, part-time jobs, and contractual positions. He argued that for these new forms of employment to thrive, there must be a balance between the flexibility employers need and the security employees require. Dr. Sarkar emphasized the importance of ensuring workers' health, well-being, and representation in the face of these changing employment structures. He also discussed the necessity for businesses to maintain profitability while offering flexibility to employees, which is crucial for sustainable employment and job satisfaction.

The session highlighted both the challenges and opportunities posed by changing employment and workplace relations. While AI and robotics may lead to job displacement, the emergence of green jobs offers hope for the future. The session also underscored the need for labor laws to adapt to new forms of employment, ensuring workers' protection and representation. Flexibility, health, and well-being were identified as key priorities for developing sustainable employment practices in the future.

In conclusion, the session emphasized the importance of proactive policies and adaptable legal frameworks to address the evolving needs of workers and employers in an increasingly dynamic labor market.

TECHINICAL SESSION 4:

Emerging Issues and Current Developments in Labor Laws



Technical Session 4: Emerging Issues and Current Developments in Labor Laws focused on the evolving challenges in labor law, with a particular emphasis on the impact of artificial intelligence (AI) and the growing complexities of labor in a rapidly changing world. The session was chaired by Professor Santosh Kumar and featured insightful presentations by Dr. Manisha Mittal, Shri Varun Joshi, and Shri V. M. Sawant.

Dr. Manisha Mittal began the session with a detailed analysis of labor, focusing on the human aspect of laborers. She defined labor as the sum of bodily or mental efforts that, when rewarded, constitute labor. Dr. Mittal emphasized the importance of recognizing that laborers sell their labor but not themselves, stressing the need for humane treatment in the workforce. She discussed the historical evolution of labor laws, which were designed to address poor working conditions, unhealthy environments, low wages, and long hours—issues that still affect marginalized labor groups. Dr. Mittal also pointed out the growing divide between skilled and unskilled labor and the challenges posed by technological advancements on traditional labor roles. Her speech called for stronger labor protections and a focus on addressing the socio-economic conditions affecting laborers today.

Shri Varun Joshi, an advocate, focused on the impact of artificial intelligence (AI) on the future of labor. He acknowledged AI's potential benefits but highlighted its threats to labor and society. In his presentation, he showed how AI is increasingly taking over various aspects of labor, which raises concerns regarding labor rights. He emphasized that AI could lead to unintended consequences, such as the dehumanization of work, loss of key skills, and negative impacts on human health and productivity. Shri Joshi brought up the Ashok Kumar vs. University of Delhi case, discussing how AI's influence could disrupt traditional labor laws. He stressed the necessity for updated legal frameworks to protect labor rights as AI continues to evolve.

Shri V. M. Sawant addressed the critical role of labor as the living part of capital, emphasizing its importance in driving economic growth. He reviewed India's involvement in the International Labour Organization (ILO) and discussed the contributions of historical labor commissions, including the Royal Commission on Labour and the National Commissions on Labour. Shri Sawant stressed the need for continuous updates to labor laws to adapt to changing conditions, pointing out that various commissions and committees have shaped India's labor laws to ensure workers' rights and improve working conditions.

The session concluded with a discussion on the pressing need to update labor laws to address modern challenges like AI and automation. It also underscored the importance of balancing technological advancements with labor protections, ensuring that workers' rights are safeguarded in an increasingly AI-driven world.

The final session of the event featured Professor Dr. Durgambini Patel, Dean of the Kirit P. Mehta School of Law, NMIMS, who delivered a speech on Women, Domestic Workers, and Law. Dr. Patel shed light on the challenges faced by domestic workers, particularly women, and discussed the legal and social frameworks affecting their working conditions. She emphasized that labor law spans multiple disciplines, such as labor economics and sociology, which are crucial for understanding labor markets, especially for marginalized groups like women and domestic workers.

Dr. Patel discussed how women, particularly those in domestic work, contribute significantly to the labor economy yet face severe challenges. These workers are often undervalued, underpaid, and exposed to poor working conditions. She highlighted the exploitation of household maids in urban areas like Pune, where they face low wages and lack of legal protections. Dr. Patel also acknowledged the efforts of NGOs in Pune that are working to improve the conditions of household maids by securing better wages, working conditions, and legal protections.

A major issue discussed was the cycle of debt many household maids face, which traps them in vulnerable economic positions and further exacerbates their exploitation. Dr. Patel's speech called for stronger legal frameworks to protect domestic workers, particularly women, and for societal changes to improve their working conditions. She also emphasized the importance of organizing domestic workers and addressing their unique challenges, ensuring they receive the respect and protections they deserve.

Overall, the session highlighted the need for updated labor laws to address modern challenges, such as AI and automation, and the importance of inclusive labor laws that protect vulnerable workers, especially women and domestic workers.

VALEDICTORY SESSION



The two-day conference concluded with a valedictory session where Prof. Dr. Santosh Kumar, Vice Chancellor of Tamil Nadu Dr. Ambedkar University, addressed the gathering. In his speech, Prof. Kumar expressed gratitude to several individuals who played key roles in the success of the event. He began by thanking Prof. Dr. S. C. Srivastava, Dr. Sunita Adhav, and all the dignitaries who participated. He acknowledged the collaborative efforts that made the conference successful, extending greetings on behalf of Tamil Nadu Dr. Ambedkar University.

Prof. Kumar specifically recognized the hard work of faculty members and volunteers, naming Asst. Prof. Pradnya Yadav, Asst. Prof. Pooja Deo, and the entire volunteer team for their dedication in organizing the event.

Prof. Dr. S. C. Srivastava also addressed the audience, reflecting on the insightful discussions and valuable contributions made during the conference. His speech highlighted the significance of the topics covered and the ongoing need for dialogue regarding labor laws and emerging issues.

The session concluded with Asst. Prof. Pooja Deo delivering the vote of thanks, expressing appreciation to all participants, speakers, and attendees for their involvement in making the event successful.

This final session marked the successful conclusion of the conference, with heartfelt thanks to all contributors. Prof. Kumar's address, alongside remarks from Prof. Srivastava and Pooja Deo, underscored the collaborative spirit and the shared commitment to advancing discussions on labor law and workplace relations.

