Moving away from the 'take-make-dispose' model

Resource efficiency and circular economy are powerful strategies that can effectively minimise dependence on natural resources, curtail waste and encourage sustainable design practices. In the collective global endeavour to ensure sustainable development and realise the Sustainable Development Goals, decoupling resource utilisation from economic growth is going to be the key. Recognising the need to switch from the 'take-make-dispose' to 'reduce-reuse-recycle' model, India has prioritised 'Resource Efficiency and Circular Economy' as one of the three core themes for deliberations in the G-20 forum.

India has embraced four priority areas for the circular economy during its G-20 presidency: circularity in the steel sector; Extended Producer Responsibility (EPR); circular bioeconomy and establishing an industry-led resource efficiency and circular economy industry coalition. There is now heightened recognition of resource efficiency and circular economy strategies within the G-20 community.

Moving to a circular steel sector

Most G-20 member countries have committed to net zero ambitions and are working to mitigate greenhouse gas emissions. In order to ensure growing resource consumption in an environmentally responsible manner, there is also a need to raise the current recycling rates of 15%-25%. Given the crucial role of steel in infrastructure development, its efficient utilisation is important. The demand for steel is poised to grow especially in growing economies such as India. Globally, about 7% of energy sector emission is attributed to iron and steel production. Transitioning towards a circular steel sector is a key strategy to tackle steel sector emissions. The key lies in ensuring collaboration among the G-20 member countries for knowledge sharing, technology co-development and technology transfer. The presidency document

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With growing need for a 'reduce-reuse-recycle' model, India's G-20 presidency has focused on adopting resource efficiency and moving to a circular economy

for knowledge exchange on the 'Circular Economy in [the] Steel Sector' is a potential blueprint for a net zero pathway for the steel industry, reducing resource utilisation and minimising wastage. Under India's G-20 presidency, there is an emphasis on the significance of the EPR framework in integrating circularity throughout the value chain. As different countries have implemented different EPR models, it is necessary that G-20 member-countries share best practices to accelerate the transition to a circular economy.

Recycling, a bioeconomy and biofuels

Effective implementation of EPR plays a pivotal role in promoting the growth of the recycling infrastructure and establishing a streamlined waste collection system. With over 20,000 registered Producers, Importers, and Brand Owners (PIBOs) and over 1,900 plastic waste processors on the centralised EPR portal, India boasts one of the largest framework for EPR. The combined EPR obligation of registered PIBOs crosses 3.07 million tons. India has also notified comprehensive rules for e-waste and battery waste management.

Since 1970, the consumption of biological resources in G-20 member countries has risen 2.5 times. Biowaste such as municipal and industrial waste and agricultural residue has become a global issue as much of it is burned, causing pollution, biodiversity loss and global warming. Combined with crops well-suited for degraded lands, biowaste can serve as valuable primary raw materials and viable substitutes for mineral resources. Adopting a circular bioeconomy approach will reduce the need for extracting virgin resources and provide an effective waste disposal solution.

The Government of India has been working towards the adoption of biofuels. The Pradhan Mantri JI-VAN Yojana provides financial support to integrated bio-ethanol projects to set up

second generation (2G) ethanol projects. 2G bioethanol technology produces bioethanol from waste feedstock such as crop residues and municipal solid waste that would otherwise have no value. Additionally, India has also made it mandatory for coal-burning thermal power plants to use a 5% blend of biomass pellets along with coal. The Galvanizing Organic Bio-Agro Resources (GOBAR) Dhan scheme was launched by the Government of India to convert cattle dung and other organic waste into compost, biogas, and biofuels to promote sustainable agriculture and reduce pollution. With over 500 functional biogas plants, the scheme has also helped create rural livelihoods and ensured improved sanitation. The Sustainable Alternative Towards Affordable Transportation (SATAT) Scheme, launched in 2018 to promote the use of Compressed BioGas (CBG) as an alternative green transportation fuel, has aided the bioenergy sector by accelerating the development of infrastructure for the production, storage and distribution of CBG.

On industry coalition

As industries are crucial in advancing resource efficiency and circular economy practices, India has envisioned an industry coalition in these areas. The coalition will also aim to achieve enhanced technological collaboration, build advanced capabilities across sectors, mobilise de-risked finance, and facilitate a proactive private sector engagement.

Global platforms such as the G-20 play an important role in addressing key issues and presenting solutions by adopting a collaborative approach. Resource efficiency and circular economy have emerged as key solutions in collective efforts in tackling triple planetary challenges. India's G-20 presidency has focused extensively on these approaches which offer promising pathways towards a more sustainable and resilient future.

Drawn from gig workers' struggles, hewn in Rajasthan

The Rajasthan Platform Based Gig Workers (Registration and Welfare) Act 2023, passed in the Rajasthan Assembly on July 24, is a powerful example of how labour law draws its strength from workers' struggles and victories of the past, even as "the workers of the world" respond to new relationships of employers, employees, and workers rights in the evolving future.

The term "gig" draws its etymological origin from jazz musicians doing short time-based performances called "gigs" for a predetermined fee. The capitalist economy applied this definition to current working arrangements, to escape from employer-employee relationships of any kind. The "gig economy" is in fact nothing more than the minute contractualisation of work, where the employer escapes from all responsibility except for determining the immediate task at hand, and arranging the pecuniary payment for it.

An employer cartel calls the shots
For example, in the case of a transport-based worker such as with Uber or Ola, or many others, the "aggregator" uses an app-based platform to connect the "customer" with the "driver", for which they take a healthy "commission". The app (operationalised with the help of algorithms) does the rest, including fixing the route, regulating the rides, paying taxes, and delivering profit to the company. If the worker does not comply with conditions decided by the company, their "ID" is blocked, resulting in a temporary digital punishment, or digital dismissal. Since the company claims not to "employ" the workers , but "partner" them, there are no employer responsibilities for wages, working conditions, or social security. Needless to say, there are no "shares" of profit or company value that should accompany true partnership.

Around the world, drawing inspiration and power from the architecture and legal regime of market fundamentalism, companies have resisted taking on the most basic responsibility for the dignity and "fair working conditions" of workers. The nature of unorganised work leaves all gig workers at the mercy of a cartel of employers that calls the shots. Even the few unions that have been formed are unequal to take on these employers for any kind of collective bargaining. There is a need for the state to support gig workers through law, but the neoliberal state has shown neither the appetite nor the creative responsibility to do so.

This is where and why the Rajasthan law is such an important breakthrough. The workers, their infant unions, and the civil society and citizen groups who support them, made a demand that even the aggregators could not refuse. They demanded social security rights through a board to be set up through a gig

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The Rajasthan Platform Based Gig Workers (Registration and Welfare) Act 2023 is a reminder that fair and creative work is intrinsic to human nature

workers welfare law. Even aggregators have acknowledged that the workers should have some social security. Some companies claim that they take out accident and death insurance "at company cost". The truth is that social security is supposed to be a part of the wage earned by the worker, kept for all basic human needs including moments of crisis when a worker is unable to work due to ill health, old age, or even a need for leave. Gig workers today are being forced to work incredibly long hours, all through the week. They bear the burden for any sort of domestic or social crisis including ill health or app failure, or Internet or other shutdowns, while companies take advantage of rising unemployment or faltering economies to offer unemployed workers partnerships (work) with no strings attached. How has the Rajasthan law drawn from workers' struggles of the past, to formulate a law that will protect workers into the future?

The hamal model
More than 60 years ago, people who carried sacks on their head or shoulders (called hamals) formed a union called the "Hamal Panchayat" in Maharashtra. They faced the same set of problems that most unorganised sector workers face, but in a more acute form. They had no single workplace, or "employer". The employers were merchants and the workers from poor and mostly Dalit or Other Backward Class families from the rural hinterland. After earning for a short period, when their bodies could no longer take the backbreaking work, they would go back home to fade away. They had nothing to fall back on during illness, accident, or old age. They had no minimum wages, no pension, no sick leave, no health or education benefits and no employer to collectively bargain with.

They came up with a brilliant formulation that they fought hard to implement, and emerged with a law that has served as the conceptual foundation for unorganised sector workers rights in the country. Led by Baba Adhav, now 94, they demanded and won a law that set up a "Mathadi board" which would register both workers and merchants who used the labour of hamals. Every shopkeeper was registered and required by law to deposit the workers' wage and a "levy on every sack carried" with the board, which was to be paid to the worker once a month. The levy, acknowledged to be a part of their "piece rate wage", was to be used for social security schemes and programmes launched and managed by the board. These included gratuity, health and education benefits, and other rights that were considered impossible to secure. So effective was this law that the Hamal panchayat has its own bank, housing scheme (flats for hamals), and school. It has even set up unions for others which include autorickshaw drivers and waste pickers. The board brought them together, the law gave

them collective legitimacy, and the capacity to secure their social security money, and true "partnership" in the union allowed them to create some of the most innovative social security benefits from their own legitimate wages. (For the record,no merchant (employer) suffered, let alone went out of business.) The tripartite board, with representation from unions, employers, and government, arrived at a settled and reasonably harmonious formal platform of collective deliberation, negotiation and bargaining. Today, the Pune union still sets the standard – 250 unions in the federation, with labour membership of more than 1,00,000 in the State.

Enabling fair work, security
The Rajasthan campaign for app-based gig workers borrowed this formulation, and began its campaign with a demand centered around social security. It convinced the ruling party, including Rahul Gandhi during the Bharat Jodo Yatra in the State, State Chief Minister Ashok Gehlot, and the bureaucratic establishment, that a board and social security fund funded through a fee on every transaction, was a powerful way forward in dealing with the social security rights of gig workers. The result is the breakthrough Act. It is certainly the first such law in the country, and perhaps the first gig worker-specific social security law in the world.

The app-based nature of platform-based gig work also allows the Mathadi Act principles to be applied in a far more accurate and efficient form. All aggregators operating in the State must be registered. All workers on boarded on their platforms must be registered with the board. A worker can view their own data and transactions. The board can serve as an independent grievance redress mechanism. This law is undoubtedly an important step forward in terms of fair work and social security. The boards and worker access to the data and transactions of app based work can result in a more equal scenario where workers can use digital data to protect their rights. The entire set of transactions and the algorithms used can be made far more transparent. This law can be the basis for more progressive laws for gig workers in India and other parts of the world. New unorganised sector welfare boards can be formed for specific rights and schemes for workers of that sector.

Like any breakthrough, this law has many implications for a new form of social security, and the human rights of workers. As we face the next level of threats to workers and work, including the use of Artificial Intelligence, this should serve as an inspiration that fair and creative work is intrinsic to human nature, and machines can not only be put to use "for people", but also "by people", as long as democratic principles of justice and equality are an integral part of decision making.