
Indian Capitalist Development: An Exploration of Labour Relations in Special Economic Zones

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Résumé

The conceptualization of Special Economic Zones (SEZs) in India was based on a neo-liberal theorization of industrial growth and development. It was oriented to emulate the development of industry in the advanced capitalist economies, and was inspired by the experience of China, albeit in a removed time and space. India's specific historical experience of colonial de-industrialization and post-independence attempts at state protection as well as liberalized market forces essentially enervated its industrial base. The process of capitalist development was instigated with phased liberalization in increasing doses, particularly with the opening of the domestic economy from the 1980s onwards. There were Export Processing Zones (EPZs) from 1965, delicensing and deregulating in the 1980s, Liberalization-Privatization-Globalization (LPG) reforms in the 1990s, SEZs from 2000, and industrial corridors from the late 2000s; specifically, a continuation of the old forms of accumulation with the new forms, as EPZs were converted to SEZs. The capitalization of space, in the form of protected enclaves for export production such as SEZs, has become rhetorical of growth and development in India. SEZs, in India, have signified the concept of 'liberalized peripheries' in terms of their liberal economic incentives and their informal production relations. The accumulation from the establishment and operation of SEZs derives from the acquisition of land, in the first impulse, and the extraction of surplus from labour, in the production of goods and services. The former is in the form of absolute ground rent, and it is primarily effective in the stages of acquisition of land by the state and the sale of land to private developers; continuing as rent from the utilization of the property by the units. Land is, however, limited. The number of SEZs that were approved and notified, per annum, registered robust numbers and growth of upcoming establishments but soon tapered out to single digits by the early 2010s. After the dealings of land, the scope for exploitation and extraction must be extended to the surplus from labour power. Total employment by SEZs in India, according to the Ministry of Commerce & Industry (MoC&I), increased from 1.35 lakh people after the enactment of the SEZ Rules in 2006 to 19.77 lakh people in 2018. The entry and operations of unions are restricted, by invoking Clause 49 of the Industrial Disputes Act (IDA) but the workers and the unions have persisted with alternate methods of organization. Labour, thus, acquires its significance as the source of surplus value as well as the agents of production which effect any change in the working of the institution. This paper will attempt to explore the employment structures and labour relations in SEZs in India while contextualizing them in its capitalist industrial development. It will also attempt to analyse the informal labour in the formal sector activities of SEZs and the exploitation of the labour through the loopholes in the SEZ Act and labour laws.

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Mots-Clés: SEZs, labour relations, capitalist development.