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Q7(a)

Explain how economic globalization has brought changes in the patterns of employment in the 21st century

UPSC Civil Services Mains 2023 · Sociology GS 1 · 20 marks · Sociology

Sociology - The Discipline: Modernity and social changes in Europe and emergence of sociology; Scope of the subject and comparison with other social sciences; Sociology and common sense.

Core demand of the question

- Explain how economic globalization has brought changes in the patterns of employment in the 21st century
- Keep the explanation within a 20-mark length

Revision summary

Globalization reorganised work through cross-border value chains and lean contracts.

Indian IT, garments, SEZs, and platforms show a split of secure core and flexible margin.

Informalisation, precarity, feminised export work, and migration are the main patterns.

Marx's reserve army and Standing's precariat read the discipline of wages.

Formalisation of the mass of Indian labour did not follow growth.

Introduction

Economic globalization is the tightening of trade, finance, and production across borders. In the twenty-first century it has changed where work is done, how contracts are written, and who bears risk. The pattern is not one story of more jobs everywhere. It is a split between a small secure core and a large flexible margin.

Body

What changed in the organisation of work

- Global value chains locate design in some countries and assembly in others, which Gary Gereffi and others mapped as buyer-driven and producer-driven chains.
- Export processing, special economic zones, and business-process outsourcing moved routine tasks to cheaper labour, including large Indian IT and call-centre employment after the 1990s reforms.
- Just-in-time production and lean staffing borrowed Taylorist control without Taylor's promise of a high industrial wage for the mass of workers.
- Finance and retail concentration press suppliers to cut labour cost, which informalises work at the bottom of the chain.

Patterns of employment

- **Informalisation:** a large share of Indian workers remain without written contracts, which the ILO and Indian labour statistics record as the normal form, not a residue.

- **Precarity:** Guy Standing named a class of workers with unstable hours, no career ladder, and thin social security.
- **Platform and gig work:** ride-hail and delivery apps classify workers as partners, which shifts social-security cost off the firm.
- Feminisation of some export and care chains, with women in garments and electronics on short contracts, while unpaid care at home is unchanged.
- **Skill polarisation:** high returns to a narrow professional layer, and deskilling or stagnant pay in routine services.
- **Migration:** internal and international labour moves to construction, care, and logistics, with remittances as household wage.

Theoretical reading

- Marx's reserve army is visible as a global pool that disciplines local wages.
- Weber's market class situation now includes cross-border competition for the same task.
- Frank's underdevelopment thesis is too simple as a total law, but the hierarchy of design versus assembly still organises employment chances.
- Castells described a network enterprise. The network is real. So is the exclusion of those off the node.

What did not happen

- Full formalisation of the Indian workforce did not follow growth.
- A global equalisation of wages did not occur. Gaps between cores and margins remain.
- Trade unions lost coverage in many tradable sectors even as new worker associations appear in platforms.

Explanation in sum

- Twenty-first century employment under globalization is more cross-border, more contractual at the top, and more informal and platform-based at the margin.

Flow diagram

Economic globalization -> Global value chains
 Global value chains -> Core secure professional
 Global value chains -> Margin informal gig
 Reserve army across borders -> Margin informal gig
 Finance and lean production -> Margin informal gig

Conclusion

Economic globalization changed employment by stretching production across chains, expanding informal and gig contracts, polarising skill, and using a global reserve of labour. Indian IT and garment work show the split. Marx, Standing, and chain analysis explain the pattern better than a story of uniform job creation.

Facts & figures

Global value chain

A production network that splits design, supply, and assembly across countries and firms.

ILO informal employment

Work without legal or social protection, the majority form in India.

Guy Standing

Named the precariat as workers with unstable labour and thin citizenship of work.

SEZ and BPO

Indian locations of export manufacturing and outsourced services in the post-reform period.

Platform classification

App firms treating labour as independent partners, shifting risk to the worker.

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