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Q8(c)

Discuss the changing nature of industrial working class.

UPSC Civil Services Mains 2022 · Sociology GS 2 · 15 marks · Social Classes in India

Social Classes in India: Agrarian class structure; Industrial class structure; Middle classes in India.

Core demand of the question

- Discuss the changing nature of industrial working class

Revision summary

The old mill and public-sector core has thinned.

Contract, informal and home-based chains now hold most industrial labour.

Circular migration links factory and village.

Women entered some industries without equal union power.

Class remains; organisation is the changed variable.

Introduction

India's industrial working class has changed from a relatively concentrated mill and public-sector core toward a fragmented, informal, and contractor-mediated mass. It has not disappeared. It has been reorganised.

Body**Older nature**

- Textile, steel, and public-sector townships produced a visible unionised class with housing and a political voice, the kind of proletariat classical theory expected.
- Caste and region still split the shop floor, but the factory gate was a common address.

What changed

- Liberalisation, lockouts, and the informal sector's growth pushed work into small units, home-based chains, and construction.
- **Contract and trainee labour inside formal factories created a two-tier class:** a thin permanent core and a large insecure periphery.
- Circular migration and **COVID reverse migration** showed that many 'industrial' workers are worker-peasants with a village fallback.
- Women's garment and electronics work feminised parts of industry without matching union power, a material patriarchal pattern.

Continuities and new politics

- **Desai's class contradiction remains:** surplus is extracted, now through contractors more than through the old mill manager alone.

- Caste still assigns dirty and heavy tasks. Dalit movements and labour overlap in some belts, diverge in others.
- New unions among informal and app-mediated workers are attempts to name a class that the old INTUC-AITUC map does not cover.

Structure now

- The working class is larger in numbers and weaker in organisation. Industry is wider than the registered factory.
- Elite political structure rarely recruits from this mass, which is why pressure groups and sporadic strikes matter.

Flow diagram

Mill public sector core -> Contract informal chains
Contract informal chains -> Circular migrant worker peasant
Contract informal chains -> Feminised garment electronics
Contract informal chains -> Weaker old unions new organising

Conclusion

The industrial working class in India has changed from a compact mill core to a dispersed informal and contract mass, still tied to the village by circular migration. Its nature is fragmentation plus persistence of class, caste, and gender on the shop floor.

Facts & figures

Informalisation

Shift of industrial work outside stable registered employment.

Contract labour

Two-tier factory that splits permanent and insecure workers on the same site.

COVID reverse migration

Revealed how many industrial workers were one shock away from the village.

A. R. Desai

Class analysis that still reads the new chains as surplus extraction, not as the end of the working class.