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AN ANALYTICAL STUDY ON THE SOCIO-ECONOMIC CONDITIONS AND NATIONAL IDENTITY OF UNORGANIZED SECTOR WORKERS IN DUM DUM, WEST BENGAL

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Abstract

This study explores the socio-economic conditions and evolving sense of national identity among unorganized sector workers in the Dum Dum area of North 24 Parganas, West Bengal. Drawing on qualitative interviews, the research highlights the precarious living conditions, exclusion from formal welfare structures, and the paradoxical experience of belonging to the nation-state. The findings reveal that while workers, despite their marginalization, take pride in their Indian identity, their aspirations of belonging are often thwarted by economic insecurity, poor access to social services, and inadequate documentation. National identity, in their view, is primarily symbolic—rooted in cultural pride and democratic values—rather than material inclusion. The study underscores the urgent need for targeted social work interventions to bridge the gap between state welfare mechanisms and these workers. It argues that national identity, when grounded in dignity and rights, can become meaningful, fostering a more inclusive and resilient society. The implications of this research are critical for developing policies that recognize the contributions of unorganized sector workers while addressing their systemic exclusion.

Keywords: Unorganized Sector, National Identity, Socio-Economic Condition, Social Welfare.

1. Introduction

India's unorganized sector constitutes a considerable amount of the nation's workforce, making it a vital component of the economy and society. Yet, these workers—comprising daily wage earners, street vendors, domestic helpers, and construction labourers—often live on the margins of legal protection, social security, and public visibility. Their vulnerabilities are further compounded by irregular incomes, poor housing conditions, inadequate healthcare access, and limited or no awareness of welfare entitlements. Recognizing these challenges, the Government of India has launched various schemes targeting informal labourers.¹ However, questions persist regarding the adequacy, accessibility, and effectiveness of such interventions.

This study centres on the lived realities of unorganized sector workers in Dum Dum, a semi-urban area in West Bengal, with a dual aim: (1) to examine their socio-economic conditions and evaluate the implementation of select welfare schemes, and (2) to explore how these experiences shape their perception of national identity and citizenship. While most policy analyses focus primarily on economic and administrative outcomes, this research introduces a parallel concern: whether welfare interventions foster a sense of inclusion, dignity, and recognition in the national polity.

The concept of **national identity** in this context goes beyond legal citizenship—it encompasses the worker's emotional, symbolic, and participatory relationship with the Indian state.² The study argues that social welfare, when effectively delivered, not only improves material well-being but also strengthens the sense of belonging and trust in the nation-state. Conversely, failure to address the needs of informal labourers' risks deepening their alienation from national structures, despite their continued contribution to the country's economy and resilience.

¹ Singh, B. (2024). "Unorganized sector workers in the country 1204. # Dr. Bhim Singh."

² Jaffrelot, C. (2016). Ambedkar against nationalism.



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Despite the presence of labour laws such as the Industrial Disputes Act, 1947, and welfare legislation like the Maternity Benefit Act, 1961, and Employees' Provident Funds and Miscellaneous Provisions Act, 1952, these protections seldom extend to unorganized workers. Governed largely by the Unorganized Workers' Social Security Act, 2008, this segment of the labour force remains excluded from many statutory safeguards. Their welfare depends heavily on the efficiency and outreach of central and state government schemes. This paper seeks to examine the socio-economic conditions of unorganized workers in West Bengal and to evaluate the effectiveness of current policy interventions aimed at addressing their vulnerabilities.

We are living in a digital era, and India is emerging as one of the leading global powers, akin to the veto-powered nations. While India's rise to superpower status is often discussed, it cannot be confidently claimed unless all sections of society have the capability to access the essential services that contribute to their well-being. The concept of 'valuable services' refers to those goods and services that individuals seek to consume after fulfilling their basic needs. This is where **Professor Amartya Sen's Capability Approach** becomes significant. Sen's theory emphasizes that the quality of life of individuals, particularly unorganized workers, should be assessed not only by their access to basic resources but also by their ability to function and participate in society. In this context, the unorganized labour force's capacity to lead a fulfilling life is central to understanding their welfare.³

2. Statement of Problem

It is not feasible to compare the living standards of the labour class with those of higher socio-economic groups, as the understanding of "basic needs" differs significantly across these segments. Historically, it has been evident that a nation cannot prosper when its labour force—particularly those in the unorganized sector—remains in adverse conditions. Although various welfare legislations have been introduced since the British era to uplift labourers, the unorganized sector remained largely overlooked until the enactment of the *Unorganized Workers' Social Security Act, 2008*, which became effective in 2009.

In the contemporary digital age, the concept of basic needs for labourers should be viewed through the lens of **Amartya Sen's Capability Approach**—emphasizing not just survival, but the real freedom to lead lives they value. This includes the ability to access healthcare, education, using LPG, hygienic toilets and other social services at par with other groups.

The government has a constitutional and moral obligation to reduce poverty and inequality, thereby ensuring that every citizen lives with dignity. Labour welfare laws that ensure access to healthcare, education, and humane working conditions play a critical role in this endeavour. In their absence, labourers may experience socio-economic alienation, potentially leading to class conflicts or criminal activities, threatening social harmony and national unity.

Periodic assessments of labourers' well-being must be grounded in evaluating their actual **quality of life** and the effectiveness of government interventions aimed at improving these standards. The unorganized sector, long marginalized in the national policy discourse, functions almost as a parallel socio-economic world. This research seeks to examine the degree of **social cohesion and sense of national belonging** among unorganized sector workers and to assess the impact of existing welfare measures on their quality of life.

3. Objective of the Study

To assess the national consciousness and the role of government welfare schemes in improving the socio-economic conditions and national identity of unorganized sector workers.

³ CMI Universal. (n.d.). Amartya Sen's capability theory/approach. CMI Universal. <https://www.cmiuniversal.com/en/amartya-sens-capability-theory-approach/>



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4. Research Methodology

This study adopts a **qualitative research methodology**, employing a **case study approach** to understand the lived experiences of unorganized sector workers in Dum Dum, a suburban region in the North 24 Parganas district of West Bengal. The qualitative design was chosen to capture in-depth, subjective experiences that cannot be quantified, particularly in relation to how individuals perceive their socio-economic conditions and state support mechanisms.

4.1. Study Area and Rationale

Dum Dum was selected as the field site owing to its dense population of informal sector workers, including rickshaw pullers, domestic workers, construction laborers, and street vendors. The locality reflects a microcosm of urban informal labor realities and offers a pertinent ground for examining the efficacy of government welfare schemes in practice.

4.2. Sampling Method

A **purposive sampling technique** was used to select participants who are actively engaged in informal labor and are likely beneficiaries of state or central welfare schemes. A total of **30 respondents** were selected, comprising both men and women, across various occupations in the unorganized sector.

4.3. Data Collection Tools and Techniques

Data was collected using **semi-structured interviews**, **non-participant observation**, and **informal interactions** to elicit rich narratives. The interviews were conducted in Bengali and Hindi, ensuring that participants could express themselves freely. Each interview lasted between 20 to 40 minutes, and informed consent was obtained from all participants.

The interview guide included questions on:

- Employment history and income stability,
- Awareness and access to government welfare schemes,
- Experiences with government institutions,
- Perceptions of social mobility and security,
- Affective ties to the idea of the Indian nation and the welfare state.

Field notes were maintained to document non-verbal cues and situational contexts that enriched the analysis.

4.4. Data Analysis

The responses were transcribed and coded using **thematic analysis**. Thematic categories were developed inductively and included access to entitlements, bureaucratic challenges, trust in institutions, and perceptions of inclusion or exclusion. Coding was done manually and triangulated with field observations to ensure reliability and contextual depth.

4.5. Ethical Considerations

Confidentiality and anonymity of participants were maintained throughout. Pseudonyms were used in reporting responses, and care was taken to avoid any harm or discomfort to the participants during the interview process.

4.6. Analytical Scope

In addition to assessing access to welfare schemes and institutional barriers, the analysis also explored **respondents' subjective perceptions of national identity, civic belonging, and their symbolic relationship with the Indian state.**



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This allowed for a deeper understanding of how structural exclusions shape or hinder a sense of attachment to the nation among marginalized labor populations.

5. Hypothesis

Effective implementation of government welfare schemes significantly improves the living standards of unorganized sector workers and strengthens their sense of national identity and belonging.

6. Discussion & Findings

6.1. Methodology Overview

The study, based on qualitative interviews with unorganized sector workers from the Dum Dum area of North 24 Parganas, reveals a complex intersection of socio-economic vulnerability, exclusion from formal welfare structures, and a deep, yet often symbolic, connection to the Indian nation. While the workers struggle daily to secure basic needs such as food, housing, and healthcare, they express a persistent sense of resilience and dignity rooted in their cultural and national consciousness.

6.2. Demographic Profile of Respondents

- Gender Distribution: 60% female, 40% male
- Age Range: 21 to 55 years
- Occupations:
 - Domestic Workers: 12
 - Street Vendors: 6
 - Construction Workers: 8
 - Others (e.g., rickshaw pullers, cleaners): 4
- Education Level:
 - Illiterate: 10
 - Primary education: 12
 - Secondary: 6
 - Higher secondary: 2
- Monthly Household Income: ₹6,000–₹12,000 per month.

Demographic Category	Sub-category	Number of Respondents	Percentage
Gender	Female	18	60%
Gender	Male	12	40%
Occupation	Domestic Workers	12	40%
Occupation	Street Vendors	6	20%
Occupation	Construction Workers	8	26.7%
Occupation	Others	4	13.3%
Education	Illiterate	10	33.3%
Education	Primary	12	40%
Education	Secondary	6	20%
Education	Higher Secondary	2	6.7%
Income	₹6,000–₹8,000	14	46.7%
Income	₹8,001–₹10,000	10	33.3%
Income	₹10,001–₹12,000	6	20%

Table 1: Demographic Profile of Respondents



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6.3. Descriptive Analysis

1. Identity and Belonging to the Nation:

Despite their marginalization, many respondents expressed pride in their Indian identity. For instance, some workers referenced national holidays, democratic values, or historical figures like Dr. B.R. Ambedkar and Mahatma Gandhi as sources of inspiration. These references indicate an aspirational connection to the nation-state—one built not on material inclusion, but on symbolic association with the values of equality and justice. However, this pride coexists with a feeling of being *excluded citizens*—those who belong to the nation in spirit but remain invisible in the eyes of governance.

2. Citizenship and Documentation Struggles:

Several participants described repeated attempts to access identity documents (such as Aadhaar, voter ID, or ration cards) as a means of being “seen” by the state. The lack of documents not only blocks access to schemes but symbolically excludes individuals from the national identity project.

3. Social Welfare and State Engagement:

The inconsistent delivery of West Bengal Government schemes—like old age pensions or health coverage—has led to disillusionment among many workers. Several respondents voiced the perception that they are not valued by the Government, despite their contributions to the economy. This creates a paradox: while the workers see themselves as part of the nation, the state's failure to include them meaningfully in the welfare framework undermines their confidence in the state's promise of equal citizenship.

4. Perceived Role in National Development:

Many respondents recognized themselves as contributors to the nation. A sanitation worker said, “Hum safai karte hain, tabhi toh sheher saaf dikhta hai. Desh ke liye kaam karte hain par koi nahi maanta” (We clean the city, only then does it look clean. We work for the nation but no one acknowledges it). This sentiment reflects an *aspirational nationalism*—a belief in the value of one’s work to the country, coupled with frustration over lack of recognition. National identity, therefore, becomes aspirational rather than experiential.

7. Socio-Economic Conditions Of Unorganized

The socio-economic conditions of unorganized sector workers in Dum Dum location at West Bengal, as revealed through the empirical data, present a complex interplay of deprivation, resilience, and marginalization. These lived realities form the basis upon which a fragmented yet evolving sense of national identity is constructed.

1. Living Conditions and Basic Amenities

A substantial portion of respondents reside in semi-permanent or rented accommodations with poor access to sanitation and hygiene. The reliance on common toilets—sometimes shared by over 30 individuals—exposes them to health hazards and infringes upon basic human dignity. Similarly, irregular access to safe drinking water and dependence on kerosene or wood for cooking underscores the absence of infrastructural support. These deficits not only impair quality of life but also reflect systemic neglect, influencing how workers perceive their inclusion in the national developmental agenda.

2. Economic Insecurity and Welfare Exclusion

Although some households reported receiving old-age pensions and widow allowances, the majority were excluded from comprehensive social security mechanisms. The irregular or absent access to ration cards, BPL benefits, or health insurance indicates weak penetration of welfare schemes. This exclusion fosters a sense of alienation, where the state appears distant and unresponsive. It raises a fundamental question: Can national identity flourish among citizens who feel economically abandoned?



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3. Educational and Informational Deficit

The predominance of primary-level education and low digital or institutional literacy among respondents further hinders their capacity to engage with state services, rights-based entitlements, or democratic processes. Many are unaware of programs designed for their upliftment, including labor cards or social insurance schemes. The absence of access to timely and accurate information exacerbates dependency on informal networks. Such structural disempowerment dilutes their ability to assert their identity as informed and active members of the nation.

4. Labour, Identity, and Belonging

Despite their precarious livelihoods, respondents contribute significantly to urban economies—as domestic workers, vendors, and construction laborers. Yet, their visibility in the national consciousness remains minimal. This paradox—of being economically essential but socially invisible—produces a fragmented national identity. While some respondents expressed pride in Indian festivals and traditions, many struggled to connect their daily struggles with national progress narratives. Nationalism, in their context, is experienced more as a cultural sentiment than as a lived reality of inclusion.

5. Implications for Policy and Social Work

The data reinforces the need for targeted social work interventions that bridge the gap between the state and the unorganized sector. Capacity-building, legal literacy, and access to documentation (like voter ID, ration card, Aadhaar) are essential to nurture not only social protection but also a grounded sense of belonging. National identity, when rooted in dignity and rights, becomes meaningful. Without equitable access and state recognition, nationalism remains abstract for the unorganized poor.

Summary of Findings:

The empirical data suggests that national identity among unorganized sector workers is not absent, but rather *contested* and *aspirational*. These workers see themselves as Indians and often take pride in national symbols, but their lived experiences—marked by poverty, invisibility, and exclusion—create a dissonance between symbolic belonging and practical citizenship. The idea of the nation, for them, remains a moral and emotional anchor, even when state institutions fail to affirm their inclusion.

8. Conclusion & Recommendation

This study set out to explore the living conditions of unorganized sector workers in Dum Dum, West Bengal, and assess the effectiveness of government welfare schemes in improving their quality of life. The empirical data points to a persistent gap between policy intent and on-ground implementation. However, beyond the material dimensions of deprivation, the findings also highlight deeper issues related to national identity, citizenship, and recognition.

The notion of **national identity** emerges as a complex and layered construct in the lives of these workers. While they remain at the margins of socio-economic structures and are often excluded from state-provided benefits, their sense of belonging to the Indian nation is not entirely diminished. Instead, it is refracted through their struggles for dignity, visibility, and acknowledgement. The symbolic weight of having an Aadhaar card, participating in elections, or celebrating national holidays points to their aspiration for inclusion in the national fabric—not merely as laborers, but as rightful citizens.

Government welfare schemes such as the Pradhan Mantri Jan Arogya Yojana, Atmanirbhar Bharat Abhiyan, and the schemes under the Unorganised Workers' Social Security Act, while well-intended, often fail in execution at the grassroots level. Bureaucratic delays, lack of awareness, digital illiteracy, and corruption act as barriers to effective implementation. This not only affects workers' access to social security but also erodes their trust in the state—consequently weakening their experiential connection to the nation. When rights and entitlements become conditional or inaccessible, the promise of equal citizenship is undermined.



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From a theoretical standpoint, the lived experiences of these workers challenge conventional notions of national identity as merely legal or symbolic. Instead, national identity must be viewed as an evolving relationship between the citizen and the state—mediated by recognition, access, and participation. In this context, **material inclusion** through welfare schemes is not just a matter of poverty alleviation; it is also a means of strengthening the social contract and fostering a more inclusive national identity.

The community-driven resilience and moral attachment to the nation among these workers reveal a paradox: those who are structurally excluded still demonstrate emotional allegiance to the idea of India. This **aspirational nationalism**, as seen in their desire for recognition and inclusion, suggests that policy reforms must go beyond administrative efficiency. They must seek to affirm the dignity and identity of unorganized sector workers as equal members of the nation.

While this study offers valuable insights into the socio-economic conditions and evolving national identity of unorganized sector workers in Dum Dum, West Bengal, it is essential to acknowledge certain limitations that influence the generalizability of the findings. These limitations can impact the broader applicability of the study's conclusions, especially when attempting to draw comparisons or apply recommendations to other regions or contexts.

1. The study relies on a sample of 30 respondents, which, although providing rich qualitative data, is too small to make generalized claims about the entire unorganized sector workforce in West Bengal.
2. The research does not include a comparative analysis with workers in other regions of West Bengal or India, which could have shed light on whether the findings are specific to Dum Dum or reflective of broader trends.
3. The study excludes other informal workers who may face different socio-economic conditions, such as migrant laborers, agricultural workers, or those in industries like textiles.
4. Data collection was limited to interviews and observations, which, while providing rich qualitative insights, may not fully capture the complexity of unorganized workers' lives.

8.1. Policy Recommendations

Given the socio-economic challenges faced by unorganized sector workers in Dum Dum and similar areas, it is crucial to develop comprehensive policies that not only enhance their living conditions but also foster a deeper sense of social inclusion and national identity. Based on the findings of this study, the following policy recommendations are proposed:

1. **Strengthening Access to Welfare Schemes and Legal Protections:** One of the most critical challenges highlighted in this study is the limited access to government welfare schemes for unorganized sector workers. While the Government has launched numerous initiatives aimed at improving the conditions of informal workers, the lack of awareness and bureaucratic hurdles often prevent workers from benefiting. It is essential to streamline the registration process and ensure that these workers are easily able to access social security programs such as the Pradhan Mantri Shram Yogi Mandhan Yojana, Atal Pension Yojana, and other state-specific initiatives. Additionally, the creation of a national database for informal sector workers would improve the targeting of welfare schemes and ensure that these workers receive the support they are entitled to. Training local authorities to identify and reach these workers through community-based outreach efforts would be an effective strategy to enhance their participation in these schemes.
2. **Enforcement of Social Security Laws:** Policymakers must enact strong social security laws for the informal sector workers, similar to EPF Act and ESIC Act.



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3. **Promotion of Workers’ Social Identity and National Integration:** The study emphasizes the importance of fostering a stronger sense of national identity among unorganized sector workers. One way to achieve this is through educational and awareness campaigns that highlight the contributions of these workers to the nation’s economy and society.
4. **Targeted Skill Development Programs:** To improve the long-term economic mobility of unorganized workers, there must be a stronger emphasis on skill development and vocational training programs. While the government has made some strides with initiatives like the Pradhan Mantri Kaushal Vikas Yojana (PMKVY), these efforts must be expanded to include workers in low-skill occupations, such as domestic labor, street vending, and construction work. Providing workers with the tools to upgrade their skills will not only help improve their wages but also empower them to enter more stable and formal job sectors. Special attention should be given to providing gender-sensitive training programs for women workers, who are often marginalized both socially and economically.
5. **Creation of Social Safety Nets for Workers in the Informal Economy:** While schemes like the Employee Provident Fund (EPF) and Employee State Insurance (ESI) are beneficial for formal sector workers, their applicability to informal workers is limited. Policymakers should consider creating a parallel system of social safety nets for unorganized workers that provides coverage for health, pensions, and unemployment benefits. The introduction of portable social security schemes, which workers can able to transfer the perid of service as they shift between different jobs or sectors, would increase the sense of security among informal workers and encourage greater participation in welfare programs.
6. **Increasing Collaboration Between Government and Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs):** To address the challenges of reaching unorganized sector workers effectively, there needs to be greater collaboration between government agencies and NGOs that are already working on the ground in various communities. NGOs often have established trust within marginalized communities and can play a pivotal role in bridging the gap between workers and government schemes. By working together, the government and NGOs can create a more robust support system for informal workers, particularly in rural or remote areas where access to resources is limited.
7. **Empowering Workers Children with Literacy and Support:** The government should invest in targeted literacy and skill development programs for the children of unorganized sector workers. These initiatives should combine formal education with vocational training to enhance future employability and break intergenerational cycles of poverty. Additionally, the government must proactively introduce dedicated educational schemes tailored to meet the specific needs of these children, ensuring equitable access and long-term upliftment.
8. **Registration of the Workers of Informal Sector:** Introducing a mandatory registration system for informal sector workers will enhance their visibility and enable the government to make more informed and organized policy decisions. Such registration would also serve to formally acknowledge and value the contributions of unorganized workers, thereby integrating them more meaningfully into national development frameworks.
9. **Incorporating Worker Representation in Policy Making:** Finally, unorganized sector workers must be given a voice in the policy-making process. This can be achieved by establishing workers' councils or advisory bodies that represent the interests of informal workers at both the state and national levels. Including informal sector representatives in discussions on social security laws and national development initiatives will ensure that policies are more reflective of their needs and realities, leading to better outcomes for this vulnerable group.

By implementing these policy recommendations, the government can not only improve the living conditions of unorganized sector workers but also empower them to play a more active role in the nation’s socio-economic development. These efforts will ultimately lead to greater inclusivity, fostering a society where all citizens, regardless of their employment status, feel connected to the national identity and enjoy equal access to opportunities.



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