

Original Article

Assessing Labour Market Transformation in India: Insights from the Redesigned Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS) 2025

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Abstract - The labour market in India has been undergoing major changes in recent times due to sustained economic growth, demographic transition and changing patterns of employment. However, it is not clear whether improvements in key labour market indicators are the result of real structural transformation or merely greater labour absorption in relatively low-productivity employment. Prior research has largely depended on earlier rounds of the Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS) and has generally considered dimensions of the labour market in isolation, thereby constraining the scope for a full appreciation of recent developments. In this regard, the present study uses data from the redesigned Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS) 2025 to examine the Indian labour market. The study is descriptive analytical in nature and uses the Annual Report 2025 of the National Statistical Office to examine Labour Force Participation Rate (LFPR), Worker Population Ratio (WPR), Unemployment Rate (UR), employment status and demographic variations in terms of gender, rural – urban residence, age and educational attainment. The findings reveal continued improvements in labour market participation and unemployment outcomes. Nevertheless, the persistent dominance of self-employment, rural–urban disparities, gender inequalities in employment quality and earnings, and relatively high unemployment among educated youth suggest that improvements in employment quantity have outpaced gains in employment quality. The study concludes that India's labour market is undergoing a gradual, not total, structural transformation. The study provides one of the earliest comprehensive assessments based on the redesigned PLFS 2025, contributing updated empirical evidence and policy-relevant insights for promoting productive, formal and inclusive employment to support sustainable and inclusive economic growth.

Keywords - Labour Market Transformation, Periodic Labour Force Survey, Employment Quality, Structural Change, India, Labour Market Inclusion.

1. Introduction

The transformation of the labour market is an important part of structural economic change, because it influences the extent to which economic development results in improvements in living standards, increased productivity of workers and productive employment. Classical development theories describe this process as the movement of labour from less productive agricultural activities to more productive industrial and service activities (Lewis, 1954; Ranis & Fei, 1961). Building on this view, recent literature points to the fact that structural transformation should also mean better employment quality, earnings, social protection and resilience of the labour market (McMillan & Rodrik, 2011; International Labour Organization [ILO], 2024). Changes in labour markets are, therefore, evaluated by means of multidimensional indicators that consider not only the volume of employment generated but also its quality, inclusiveness and sustainability.

India provides an important context in which to examine these challenges. It has the world's largest working-age population and one of the fastest-growing economies, with large demographic potential. The economy needs to generate productive and decent jobs for its expanding labour force to benefit from this demographic dividend (World Bank, 2024). While India's economy has grown strongly over the last two decades, the country's labour market remains beset with deep-rooted structural problems such as high levels of informality, low female labour force participation, a rural-urban divide and disproportionately high unemployment among educated youth.

This has generated an intense debate on whether the recent improvements in labour market indicators reflect a real structural shift or an increase in the absorption of the workforce into low productivity and vulnerable forms of employment (Kannan and Raveendran, 2019).



Timely and reliable labour market statistics are, therefore, important for assessing these developments and for evidence-based policy making. The Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS) has been the main source of labour market statistics at the national level in India since its inception in 2017. The redesigned PLFS 2025 has a new sampling frame, a reference period of January-December and produces combined monthly, quarterly and annual estimates (Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation [MoSPI], 2025). Such methodological changes improve the consistency, comparability and policy relevance of official labour market statistics, thereby providing a more solid empirical basis for the assessment of recent labour market developments.

The PLFS 2025 indicates positive developments in key labour market indicators such as increased LFPR, improved WPR, and decreased UR across most demographic groups. However, there are still large differences by gender, rural-urban residence, age, educational achievement and employment status. Furthermore, the persistence of self-employment implies that positive aggregate indicators are insufficient to assess the extent of structural transformation. Therefore, the overall assessment should be based on changes in labour market participation and employment composition and quality (Fields, 2011; ILO, 2024).

Although an expanding body of literature has examined India's labour market using earlier rounds of the PLFS, important research gaps remain. Most existing studies predate the methodological changes incorporated in the redesigned PLFS 2025 and, therefore, do not capture the latest evidence on labour market performance. Moreover, previous studies have generally examined labour force participation, unemployment, informality, employment structure, or gender inequality as separate issues, providing a limited understanding of how these dimensions collectively shape the transformation of the labour market. Consequently, there is insufficient empirical evidence on whether recent improvements in aggregate labour market indicators represent a broad-based structural transformation characterised by productive and formal employment or merely increased labour absorption without corresponding improvements in employment quality.

In this context, the present study provides a comprehensive assessment of India's labour market using evidence from the redesigned PLFS, 2025. The study combines labour force participation, employment, unemployment, employment structure, and demographic disparities within a unified analytical framework to evaluate the nature and extent of labour market transformation. The novelty of the study lies in three important respects. First, it is one of the earliest comprehensive assessments based on the redesigned PLFS 2025. Second, it takes into account multiple dimensions of labour market performance

simultaneously rather than considering individual indicators separately. Third, it distinguishes between gains in aggregate labour market performance as well as broader structural transformation through the explicit assessment of employment quality in addition to labour market participation. In this way, the paper offers policy-relevant insights and updated empirical evidence to promote productive, formal and inclusive employment in India.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Labour Market Transformation and Structural Change

The transformation of the labour market is widely accepted as a key element of economic development, reflecting the movement of labour from low-productivity to high-productivity activities and improving employment quality, earnings and labour productivity. Lewis (1954) first described the process with the dual-sector model, in which he argued that surplus labour gradually moves from traditional agriculture to the modern industrial sector. The role of capital accumulation and productivity growth in bringing about this transition was further stressed by Ranis and Fei (1961). These classical models are still influential, but more recent studies have argued that structural transformation should be assessed not only in terms of the sectoral reallocation of labour but also in terms of improvements in the quality of employment, formalisation, productivity and social protection.

There is also empirical evidence in support of the broader view. McMillan and Rodrik (2011) argue that structural transformation can promote economic growth only if it is associated with a shift of labour to more productive sectors. Conversely, the shift of labour to informal and less productive activities may slow productivity growth. The ILO (2024) also points out that resilient labour markets are characterised by low unemployment rates as well as productive employment, decent work and effective social protection. The World Bank (2024) points out that demographic dividends can only be realised if labour market growth is accompanied by sustained investment in human capital and productive employment. Overall, these studies indicate that the labour market transformation has to be analysed from a multidimensional perspective, considering the quantity, quality, productivity and inclusiveness of employment.

2.2. Recent Developments in India's Labour Market

The labour market in India has been the subject of much scholarly attention, as rapid economic growth has not always been accompanied by commensurate gains in employment. Earlier studies have characterised India's post-reform experience as one of 'jobless growth' with employment creation lagging behind economic growth (Mehrotra et al., 2014). However, some more recent studies indicate that labour force participation and employment improved following the COVID-19 pandemic.

There are authors who reported consistent improvements in labour force participation and employment using PLFS data from earlier rounds (Chand, 2023) and some others who observed enhanced labour mobility in urban labour markets (Bhattacharya, 2023). However, these trends should be read with caution. According to Mehrotra (2019), the employment problem in India is increasingly one of low growth of productive and formal employment and not merely one of job creation. Kannan and Raveendran (2019) similarly suggest that the decline in unemployment may conceal the labour market's underlying vulnerabilities, as job creation continues to be concentrated in the informal and low-productivity sectors. This is shown by the *State of Working India 2023* (Azim Premji University, 2023), which points to continued wage inequality, insecurity of employment and pervasiveness of informality. Overall, the literature suggests that changes in aggregate labour market indicators should be interpreted in the light of changes in employment quality and productivity.

2.3. Gender, Youth, and Employment Quality

Labour market inclusion has become an important aspect of structural transformation in India. Although female labour force participation has improved in recent years, there are still significant gender gaps. Educational expansion, household income effects, labour demand constraints and socio-cultural norms have interacted to depress female labour force participation, according to Klasen and Pieters (2015). Mehrotra and Parida (2017) also contend that women's employment outcomes are constrained by limited access to suitable work and persistent structural barriers.

Recent evidence suggests that the increase in women's participation in the labour force has not necessarily resulted in improvements in the quality of employment. The *India Employment Report 2024* (ILO & Institute for Human Development, 2024) highlights the over-representation of women in self-employment, unpaid family work and other forms of informal employment. Hence, increased participation should not be considered as higher economic empowerment unless it is coupled with increasing wages, employment stability and career progression.

Another important challenge is to provide employment opportunities to young people, particularly educated youths. India has a favourable demographic profile; however, the unemployment rate among educated youth is significantly higher than the national average. The problem is due to persistent mismatches of skills, technological progress and changing occupational structures (OECD, 2024). The ILO (2024) points to the lack of gainful employment opportunities to absorb an increasingly educated workforce. In addition, Fields (2011) notes that unemployment is not a suitable measure of labour market performance in developing countries because many people enter low-productivity self-employment when there are no jobs in the formal sector. In

all, the studies point to the necessity of considering employment quality along with the more traditional labour market indicators.

2.4. Research Gap and Contribution of the Study

Despite the increasing number of PLFS-based studies, there are still significant gaps. Most of the existing studies are based on the earlier rounds of the PLFS and hence do not capture the methodological changes introduced in the redesigned PLFS 2025. In addition, previous studies have tended to focus on specific dimensions of labour market performance such as labour force participation, unemployment, informality or gender inequality in isolation, which has limited our understanding of interrelationships between them. Hence, there is relatively little evidence that provides a comprehensive assessment of labour force participation, employment structure, unemployment and demographic disparities within a unified analytical framework using the redesigned PLFS 2025.

This study fills this gap by providing one of the earliest comprehensive assessments based on the redesigned PLFS 2025. It incorporates labour force participation, employment, unemployment, employment structure and demographic differences in a multidimensional analytical framework for the purpose of distinguishing improvements in aggregate labour market indicators from wider structural transformation. The study produces policy-relevant insights for the promotion of productive, formal and inclusive employment and provides updated empirical evidence on the changing nature of India's labour market.

3. Objectives of the Study

This study aims to evaluate recent developments in India's labour market using evidence from the PLFS Annual Report, 2025. The study specifically aims to:

- (i) Examine recent trends in Labour Force Participation Rate (LFPR), Worker Population Ratio (WPR) and Unemployment Rate (UR) in India;
- (ii) Analyse differences in the labour market by gender, place of residence (rural/urban), age group, educational attainment, and employment status;
- (iii) Evaluate the structure of employment in terms of the relative shares of self-employment, regular wage/salary employment and casual labour;
- (iv) Assess whether progress in key labour market indicators is symptomatic of wider structural transformation and labour market inclusion; and
- (v) Derive policy implications for the promotion of productive, formal and inclusive employment in India.

4. Data and Methodology

4.1. Data Source

The present study uses a descriptive analytical research design, relying solely on secondary data from the PLFS

Annual Report, 2025, published by the National Statistical Office (NSO), Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation (MoSPI), Government of India. The redesigned PLFS 2025 incorporates significant methodological improvements, including a revised sampling framework, a January-December reference period and the production of integrated monthly, quarterly and annual labour market estimates. These improvements increase the consistency, comparability and policy relevance of India's official labour market statistics and make the new dataset especially suitable for evaluating recent labour market developments.

4.2. Analytical Framework

The study assesses labour market transformation using a multidimensional analytical framework. The analysis does not use improvements in aggregate labour market indicators as sufficient evidence of structural change, but rather looks at labour force participation, employment, unemployment, employment composition and demographic disparities together.

This framework distinguishes between improvements in employment quantity and improvements in employment quality, thereby providing a more comprehensive assessment of structural transformation.

The analytical framework draws on the theories of structural transformation by Lewis (1954) and Ranis and Fei (1961), as well as on labour market views by Fields (2011) and McMillan and Rodrik (2011). These studies suggest that meaningful structural transformation requires not only more employment, but also a gradual shift towards more productive, formal and higher-quality employment.

4.3. Variables and Analytical Approach

The analysis focuses on the principal labour market indicators reported under the Usual Status [Principal Status (PS) + Subsidiary Status (SS)] approach, namely the Labour Force Participation Rate (LFPR), Worker Population Ratio (WPR), Unemployment Rate (UR), and the distribution of workers across self-employment, regular wage/salaried employment, and casual labour.

The indicators are disaggregated by gender, rural-urban residence, age group and educational attainment to determine trends of labour market participation, employment quality and structural transformation.

The results are interpreted by descriptive statistical comparisons and are supported by existing theory and empirical literature. The analysis, therefore, examines whether recent improvements in labour market indicators are accompanied by corresponding changes in the structure and quality of employment, thus providing an in-depth understanding of the transformation of the labour market in India.

4.4. Scope and Limitation of the Method

As the study relies on officially published aggregate statistics, the analysis is descriptive and interpretative rather than causal. Consequently, the study does not estimate econometric models or test statistical hypotheses. However, the PLFS is representative at the national level and hence provides a strong empirical basis for examining recent trends in the labour market and drawing evidence-based policy implications. No ethical approval or primary data collection procedures were needed, as the research only used secondary data publicly available.

5. Results and Discussion

5.1. Labour Force Participation and Employment Trends

The PLFS 2025 indicates that India's labour market continues to improve. The Labour Force Participation Rate (LFPR) rose to 44.9 percent, the Worker Population Ratio (WPR) was 43.5 percent, and the Unemployment Rate (UR) fell to 3.1 percent (Table 1). The relatively small gap between LFPR and WPR implies that a large proportion of labour market entrants got absorbed into employment. This suggests a stronger absorption of the labour market. The present results are consistent with earlier PLFS-based evidence, which indicated improvements in labour force participation and employment (Chand, 2023).

Table 1. Key Labour Market Indicators in India, 2025 (Usual Status)

Indicator	Overall	Rural	Urban
Labour Force Participation Rate (LFPR) (all ages)	44.9	46.6	41.3
Worker Population Ratio (WPR) (all ages)	43.5	45.4	39.3
Unemployment Rate (UR) (all ages)	3.1	2.4	4.8

Source: PLFS Annual Report, 2025. Percentages are reported under the Usual Status approach.

These indicators, although reflecting favourable labour market conditions, are not to be taken as sufficient evidence of structural change. In developing economies, low unemployment can coexist with high informal or low-productivity employment, because workers often turn to self-employment or casual work when formal wage opportunities are scarce (Fields, 2011; Mehrotra, 2019). Consequently, labour market performance should be assessed alongside changes in employment composition and quality. The following sections examine these aspects.

5.2. Rural–Urban Labour Market Differentials

India's labour market continues to be characterised by high rural-urban disparities (Table 2). The labour force participation rate and worker population ratio are higher in rural areas (46.6% and 45.4%) than in urban areas (41.3% and 39.3%), and the unemployment rate is still much lower

there (2.4%) than in urban areas (4.8%). However, differences in these aggregates conceal substantial variation in the composition and quality of employment.

Table 2. Rural–Urban Differences in Labour Market Indicators, 2025

Indicator	Rural	Urban
LFPR	46.6	41.3
WPR	45.4	39.3
UR	2.4	4.8
Self-employment (% of total workers)	62.4	40.4
Regular wage employment (% of total workers)	14.1	47.6
Average earnings per day by casual labour engaged in work other than public works	₹433.00	₹549.00

Source: PLFS Annual Report, 2025. Percentages are reported under the Usual Status approach.

Self-employment accounts for almost two-thirds (62.4%) of rural employment, compared with just over two-fifths (40.4%) in urban areas. In comparison, regular wage or salaried employment is concentrated mainly in urban labour markets (Rural 14.1% vs. Urban 47.6%). Urban casual labourers also receive substantially higher average daily wages (₹549) than their rural counterparts (₹433). These patterns show that the lower rural unemployment is mainly a reflection of the absorption of labour by agriculture and household enterprises rather than an expansion of productive and formal employment. This result is in line with the theory of structural transformation, which stresses the reallocation of labour to higher productivity activities as the basis for sustained economic development (Lewis, 1954; McMillan & Rodrik, 2011).

In contrast, urban unemployment is relatively high, but the situation does not necessarily imply poorer labour market performance. The measured rate of unemployment is higher because urban workers, in particular educated youth, are more likely to remain unemployed while seeking regular wage employment, despite better access to formal jobs (Fields, 2011). Overall, the evidence suggests a segmented labour market in which rural employment remains concentrated in relatively low-productivity activities, while urban areas provide greater access to formal employment but show stronger competition for such opportunities.

5.3. Gender Differences in Labour Market Outcomes

Besides regional differences, gender is still an important dimension of labour market inequality (Table 3). The PLFS 2025 reflects similar unemployment rates for men and women, but the differences in labour force participation and employment outcomes for men and women remain significant. Female labour force participation (30.7%) and worker population ratios (29.8%) continue to be significantly lower than for males (LFPR=59.1% and WPR=57.2%),

indicating the persistent presence of unpaid care responsibilities, social norms and limited access to appropriate employment opportunities (Klasen & Pieters, 2015; Mehrotra & Parida, 2017).

Table 3. Gender Differences in Labour Market Outcomes, 2025

Indicator	Male	Female
LFPR	59.1	30.7
WPR	57.2	29.8
UR	3.1	3.1
Average earnings per day by casual labour engaged in work other than public works	₹455.00	₹315.00

Source: PLFS Annual Report, 2025. Percentages are reported under the Usual Status approach.

Wages show an even wider gap between men and women. The daily average wage of a casual woman worker (₹315) is much lower than that of a man (₹455). This implies that occupational segregation and concentration of women in relatively low-paid and informal employment still exist. Similar trends are reported in India in the *India Employment Report 2024* (ILO & Institute for Human Development, 2024).

These findings suggest that recent gains in women's labour force participation have not been matched by gains in the quality of employment or earnings. As a result, the gender gap in labour market transformation is still large, and hence, it is important to consider the quality of employment in addition to traditional labour market indicators.

5.4. Employment Structure and the Nature of Structural Transformation

Employment composition is a better metric for structural transformation than aggregate labour market indicators per se (Table 4). Labour force participation and employment have improved, but self-employment (56.2%) is prevalent in India's labour market, especially in rural areas. Regular wage or salaried employment remains relatively small (23.6%) and is concentrated mainly in urban labour markets. Casual labour (20.2%), on the other hand, continues to be an important component of total employment.

Table 4. Distribution of Workers by Employment Status (%), 2025

Employment Status	Overall	Rural	Urban
Self-employed	56.2	62.4	40.4
Regular wage/salaried	23.6	14.1	47.6
Casual labour	20.2	23.5	12.0

Source: PLFS Annual Report, 2025. Percentages are reported under the Usual Status approach.

These trends indicate a gradual, rather than a complete, structural transformation of the Indian labour market. Regular wage employment is increasing, and this is a trend

towards more stable employment. However, the large share of self-employment indicates that a large number of workers are still in relatively low productivity or informal activities. This interpretation is consistent with Fields (2011), who argues that self-employment in developing economies is often a reflection of poor access to formal wage employment rather than an entrepreneurial choice.

Overall, the evidence suggests that the quantity of employment has improved more than the quality of employment. Therefore, the recent labour market progress is better described by an incremental structural transformation than by a full transition to productive, formal and secure employment (McMillan & Rodrik, 2011).

5.5. Labour Market Outcomes across Age and Educational Groups

Aggregate indicators do not show labour market inequalities by age and educational attainment (Table 5). Young people (15-29) continue to have a much higher rate of unemployment (9.9%) than the average (3.1%), indicating that there are still difficulties in the transition from school to work, even though there has been a general improvement in the labour market.

Table 5. Labour Market Indicators by Age Group and Educational Attainment, 2025

Category		LFPR	WPR	UR
Age Groups	15-29 years	46.0	41.4	9.9
	15 years and above	59.3	57.4	3.1
	All ages	44.9	43.5	3.1
Educational Levels (Age 15 years and above)	Not literate		57.0	0.3
	Literate & up to Primary		67.0	0.6
	Middle		59.6	1.6
	Secondary & above		52.9	6.5

Source: PLFS Annual Report, 2025. Percentages are reported under the Usual Status approach.

The pattern is similar for educational attainment. Unemployment among the educated (secondary and above) rises sharply (6.5%), indicating that the expansion of education has not been matched by an expansion of productive employment opportunities. This is in line with the *India Employment Report 2024* and the *OECD Employment Outlook 2024*, both of which point to persistent skill mismatches and the increasing disconnect between educational attainment and labour market demand (ILO & Institute for Human Development, 2024; OECD, 2024).

Taken together, these results imply that India's labour market faces the twin challenges of sustaining employment growth and generating productive employment opportunities for an increasing number of educated workers. Bridging this

gap is essential to realising the country's demographic dividend.

6. Conclusion

This paper focuses on the recent developments in India's labour market, based on evidence from the redesigned PLFS Annual Report, 2025. The study attempts to provide a comprehensive assessment of the nature and extent of change in the Indian labour market with reference to factors like labour force participation, employment, unemployment, employment structure and demographic differentials within a common analytical framework.

The results indicate sustained improvements in LFPR, WPR and UR, implying improved labour market participation and better absorption of employment. These positive trends, however, are accompanied by structural problems that remain, such as a high incidence of self-employment, large rural-urban disparities, gender differences in employment quality and earnings, and relatively high unemployment among educated youth. Taken together, the recent improvements suggest a gradual structural transformation marked by increased labour absorption, but they do not yet indicate a broad-based transition towards productive, formal and high-quality employment.

This study contributes to the literature in two ways. One, it is one of the earliest comprehensive assessments based on the redesigned PLFS 2025. Second, it stresses the need to interpret aggregate labour market indicators in relation to the composition of employment and demographic differentials. The findings suggest that improvements in key labour market indicators alone are not sufficient to assess structural transformation unless supported by sustained progress in the quality of employment, labour productivity and labour market inclusion.

The findings have important implications for labour market policies. Policy interventions should focus not only on the creation of more employment opportunities but also on the quality and productivity of employment, which is critical to sustain India's structural transformation. More productive employment in labour-intensive manufacturing, modern services and competitive micro, small and medium enterprises (MSMEs) would boost enterprise formalisation and technological advancement through increased labour productivity and quality of employment. It is also important to implement targeted measures to improve women's access to decent work, address the skills mismatch faced by the educated youth through stronger industry-academia linkages and apprenticeship programmes and expand employment opportunities in rural non-farm sectors through investments in infrastructure, digital connectivity and local enterprise development. These initiatives would help to build a more inclusive, resilient and productive labour market.

However, the findings have to be interpreted in light of the drivers of the observed patterns and some limitations. The analysis is based on published aggregate statistics from the PLFS Annual Report, 2025 and thus cannot analyse individual-level determinants of labour market outcomes or employment transitions. The descriptive analytical design does not allow for causal inference regarding the drivers of the observed patterns in the labour market. Future research could extend the present analysis by using unit-level PLFS data and appropriate econometric techniques to explore the determinants of labour force participation, employment quality, wage differentials and labour market transitions. Comparative analyses across states, sectors and socio-economic groups and longitudinal assessments of employment dynamics and labour market policy outcomes would offer more profound insights into the sustainability and inclusiveness of India's structural transformation.

Overall, the redesigned PLFS 2025 offers positive signals of enhancement in India's labour market performance. However, the translation of these gains into a

sustained structural transformation will depend on the country's ability to expand productive, formal and inclusive employment.

The challenge for India's labour market is to translate a higher labour force participation rate into sustained gains in employment quality. To meet this challenge and to convert India's demographic dividend into sustained, productivity-led and inclusive economic growth, concerted investments in skills, enterprise development, labour market formalisation, gender-inclusive employment policies and productivity-enhancing reforms will be crucial.

Conflict of Interest

The author has no conflict of interest.

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