

# Work from Home & Remote Work – Panacea to All Ills of Unionization?

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*COVID-19 pandemic led Indian organizations to take strategic action related to human capital. What came handy to them to run their businesses with a handful of workers after laying off others whom they wanted otherwise by giving the excuse of the pandemic is “work-from-home”. The new work arrangement happened to be unique to the majority workforce in India as there has been no federal labor law in the country that allows employers to get work done from home. However, on a deeper analysis, we cannot dispense with its long term adverse consequences on workplace solidarity. It will cripple this small section of the workforce as employees would seldom be able to meet or have regular workplace meetings, ravaging collectivization, union coverage and union density.*

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## Remote Work as The Future of Work

Ever since the COVID-19 crisis struck hard, social distancing and stay at home policies as a part of the nationwide lockdown declared by the government in the first year of the pandemic have had an adverse employment impact in India. As organizations realized that the impact arising from the pandemic could be muted if workers perform their jobs at home, as an alternative to dragging out with their trials of paying part of wages, forcing workers to go on leave-without-pay, maintaining thin work-strength to continue limited production of goods and delivery of services or retrenching workers in the first six to eight months, majority employers decided to send workers to home offices. These organizations adopted remote work, also known as ‘work-from-home’, presumably an ad hoc, interim and contingent alternative. As Miyumara (2021) cited, half of those employed in the US and UK worked from home in April and May 2020 (Brynjolfsson et al., 2020), and this inspired organizations to promote regimes

to manage a remote and flexible “future of work” (Naude, 2020). By ‘future of work’ in the Indian context, to an extent, we are trying to relate to the transition in work organization that began in the early 90s (Sarkar & Chakraborty, 2021). Work from home *ceteris paribus* embodied in the new normal for the urban workforce in India during the COVID-19 pandemic, especially for those whose jobs are steered by digital technology, an advancement, that had been supported by several structural changes in the composition of labor and workers’ organizing experience (Sarkar, 2008; 2014).

As the popular press reported, 66-88 per cent of this workforce in India preferred, wanted and favored work from home. The global research reports by *McKinsey Global Institute*, *Lenovo*, and *SAP Concur* (an expense management firm) validated the growing sentiments favoring remote work empirically. Market forces detected the potential for remote work and its determinants. Scientific management confirmed that organizations would see a jump in productivity, and workers will favor remote work because homework will liberate them. Additionally, organised capital attached a feminist hue to remote work, heralding its benefit to women’s employment (Dangler, 1994) and gender-based pay gap on account of work flexibility. However, the gender-based pay gap has not evolved in India as a consequence of major policy reforms that normally has been noticed in other growing Asian economies as a result of which participation of women in the labor market has changed resulting in an increase or decrease of skilled

jobs and investment from foreign nations (Lai & Sarkar, 2017; 2016; 2013).

Through the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 and 2021, not many organizations wanted granularly defining activities and occupations that can be done from home to better understand the future staying power of remote work in India. However, remote work raised a vast array of issues and challenges by the end of 2020 for workers globally. Only a specific section could reap the benefits of working remotely. Mostly highly educated, high-income, and white workers in the US worked from home during the 2020 pandemic (Bick, Blandin, and Mertens, 2020). They maintained employment following the pandemic suggesting that demand conditions mattered for job losses. Therefore, Saltiel (2020) was sceptical of the feasibility of working from home, citing workers’ educational background and the nature of the occupation. Saltiel reported that only 13 per cent of workers in developing countries during the COVID-19 pandemic have worked from home. Brussevich, Dabla-Norris, and Khalid (2020) estimated that approximately 15 per cent of workers, mostly from low-income groups in the informal sector in developing countries, were engaged in jobs that cannot be carried out by remote working. In most Western studies, it has been found that high-school dropouts, in the age group of 40 years and more, males from the bottom asset quintile in informal sectors are those who could not work from home. Mongey and Weinberg (2020) have shown that workers with less than a college degree are 33 per cent more likely to work in a low

work from home occupation vis-à-vis their more educated peers. Workers' educational attainment, household capital to support insurance (asset index), gender, age, and occupation, are the dominant predictors. Dingel and Neiman (2020) and Mongey and Weinberg (2020) assessed the extent of low remote work careers, along with worker characteristics associated with jobs taken to the home. Mas and Pallais (2017) studied the prevalence of flexible work arrangements. According to them, the feasibility of working from home depends on the job and workers. As per Venkatesh and Bitalari (1992), work self-determination variables like flexibility and control, portability of work tasks and household income positively influence the amount of time spent working at home.

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Notwithstanding the concerns scholars conveyed about the practicality of remote work, work from home lived through lockdown in India. When organizations send off workers to the home office, and physical meetings no longer remained a possibility, even the simplest form of coordination at work took slews of telephonic and email communication. A whole day of the Zoom meeting had grown into a new normal for thousands of workers. Still, a significant portion of them, young and educated, have found them more productive while working at

home during the pandemic, although no reference to the quality of work was made in any significant studies. And others, especially those with children at home, have not realised a productivity difference yet preferred remote work since they liked the flexibility and how homework has liberated them.

### **Work Externalization Can Live on Post-COVID-19**

Organizations know that they can resolve the challenges of work externalization. They have the talent to tweak jobs, deform occupations and bend roles that can transmute “desk work” and “workstation job” to “remote work”. How to make one size fits all and whether it can be applied to remote work across traditional and non-traditional roles, jobs, occupations, industries, and sectors are known to agencies of an unfettered market (Balasubramanian & Sarkar, 2017). Consequently, organised capital employed technology and innovation to rein in uncertainties and uncontrollable factors such as the human agency of labor. This uncertainty reduction has taken shape through the commoditization of work and omnipresent digital surveillance.

As per Pfeffer and Baron (1988), remote work, a form of work externalization is not new. It is a node in the continuum of employment relationships that keeps evolving. Historically, organizations desisted from endorsing work externalization since they were not confident that they would preserve their bureaucratic controls over jobs and

workers. Organizations renounced, save otherwise, the job such as the field sales job was such that it could not be performed inside their physical confines. However, supplemental work at home trounces these apprehensions (Venkatesh & Bitlari, 1992: 1702).

As per Dangler (1994) not only was home-based work continuing to flourish in the needlework trades, it was being used in a variety of industries from electronics, computers, banks in the US in the early 80s. So, Dangler (1994:5) questions whether the “pockets of home-based work discovered simply anomalies in the modern world economy, or were they an integral and growing part of contemporary capitalist production”. Bringing labor flexibility by removing barriers and sensors from the workplace and allowing workers to take their work home can be a socially accepted “informal productive structure” that grows to be part of capitalist production during the post-COVID transformation in India. In the growing uneasy relationship between labor and capital under conditions of declining economic growth in the post-pandemic period, there will be an increasing precarity at the heart of the society. In this context, the purpose of this article is to reflect on the impact the spatial dispersion induced by remote work as an offshoot of the COVID-19 pandemic will have on unionisation in India.

### The Aftermath

The jury is out on how remote work can form part of the new employment model in days to come. There is a panic

of skating on thin ice that cannot be dissociated from the working class—will home-based work be a spatial entrapment for workers? Miyamura (2021), Sinha (2020), Berkhout et al. (2021), Kapoor (2020) and Kannan (2020) showed the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on labor in India, deteriorating material conditions of subsistence for the working poor, and randomly shifting bargaining relations in India giving rise to inequality that has afflicted the economy. However, as a part of this broader discourse, we cannot shy away from specifically contemplating the jolt that remote work can bring to the potential of unionization.

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Trade unions in the post-pandemic period can prove to be the knight in shining armour representing workers in their fight against mass job cuts and retrenchment. As unionization has the potential to reduce the number of cases of COVID-19 (Firouzi-Naeim & Rahimzadeh, 2020), support of unions in tempering the impact of COVID-19 on the job insecurity of workers cannot go unnoticed (Tan et. al, 2021). Scholars have expressed their optimism about the continuation of the labor movement to shape post-COVID economic relations in India (Miyamura, 2021). However, reprisal, if any, could be impeded if workers are united. But the impediments to workforce mobilisation in the post-pandemic period are broken net-

works, no physical contact and shared workspace and spatial dispersion (Sarkar & Kuruvilla, 2020) due to working from home. In addition, “spaces for trade unionism have opened up in some sectors and occupations while being suppressed in many others during the pandemic” (Miyamura, 2021: 173; Balasubramanian & Sarkar, 2020). The faculty of remote work that let workers physically dispersed and emotionally disengaged falls in with employers’ obsession with unilateralism. The unitary approach in a capitalistic society represents a management ideology and subconscious foundation of the right to manage conflicts devoid of intrusions by any entity, including unions. It allows controlling the human activity of paid work by applying an individualistic strategy (Sarkar, 2009; 2012), which in several cases can lead to violence, especially the murderous type in past in India (Sarkar, 2015). So, the dominant worldview in favor of remote work conforms to organizations’ disquiet for unionization.

Two primary ways remote work can create a spatial entrapment and inhibit the labor-power are – the organic way of impeding collectivism through spatial dispersion of workers and breeding home-based workers whom organizations can control without an employment contract.

### **Spatial Entrapment**

The role of a shared workspace such as an office, factory, mine in helping mobilize/unionize workforce is a well-researched area and has earned its due place in academic commentaries. We will not reproduce it here (Maffie, 2020; Dangler,

1994; Chloe, 2019; Rapino, 2008; Dey, 2012). A shared workspace has its significance in shaping workers’ positive union attitude. According to Maffie (2020: 123 ), “frequent interaction with other workers (even) in online communities is associated with improved views of union instrumentality and interests in joining unions”. As per Becker’s (1981) and Sundstrom’s (1986) seminal works, shared workspaces help shape interpersonal relationships at work, communication and group formation outcomes, cohesion, and connections with workspaces features. From the perspective of environmental psychology, a fair amount of scholarly work has proven the role of a workspace and workers’ concentration in defining their collective goal to protect their interests, instrumental in collectivising workers (Balasubramanian & Sarkar, 2020). Specifically, facets of the physical environment such as workspaces differentiation, room layout, seating arrangements, inter-workspace proximity, gathering spaces and enclosure of workspaces are essential. They impact individual and organizational outcomes such as group formation and cohesion (Sundstrom, 1986).

Workers typically shared proximity at work and shared spaces to gather while transferring collective strength into action during the pre-COVID period. Sales workers have sensed it several years back in India. To them, organizing has been challenging because of not sharing proximity, and salesforce unions had to design innovative ways to rise over spatial dispersion. When there is no more a physical environment like a factory and office, workers can find it challenging to

coordinate in executing any action. They can suffer in strike leverage if they are not working within the physical confines of the work, where it becomes easy to apply coercive tactics like boycott, wild-cat strike, gherao, gate meeting, slogan shouting, and picketing (Balasubramanian & Sarkar, 2015).

### **Systematic Alienation of The Home-based Worker**

Sociological analysis of unionization upheld employment relationship as the antecedent to unionization. As working-class organizations at the time of mobilization in their struggle to protect workers' rights, trade unions' strategies are in the conjecture of employment contract between capital and labor. During COVID-19, advances in information technology and social and economic relationships have led individual workers and organizations to explore types of distributed work arrangements such as remote work. Suppose organizations switch a variant of jobs with continuous algorithmic control and panopticon digital surveillance (Veen, Barratt, & Goods, 2020) to the workforce that has moved to the home office. In that case, they can abolish the employment contract and treat home-based workers as independent contractors.

To Tassinari and Maccarrone (2019), workers' systemic alienation is not new, and it happened to be a part of a work arrangement where firms scrupulously overplayed omnipresent surveillance. The repudiation can erase employment relations and leave no spaces for social dialogue. These workers' contentious em-

ployment status can become a significant factor from home-based work's social and economic realms, which can be the most significant barrier to collectivizing them. Organizations can shift from the employment contract towards a principal-agent contract and build a notion of 'independent contract' endorsed by them. An independent contractor's tag would abet organizations since it can absolve them from incurring employment contracts' statutory costs (DeStefano, 2016). A new generation of the workforce can replace the existing one, with India's witnessing a large part of job creation through home-based workers' engagement. Resorting to their technological innovation of aggregating demands and supply, organizations across sectors can look forward to higher transaction efficiency and turn into potential employment providers.

### **The Resistance**

Against the backdrop of the above-elaborated scenario, "stop work from home" ought to be the slogan in the unions' campaign post-COVID in India. It need not take long for organizations before remote work is inducted into the day-to-day regime because work from home help organizations bring to fruition unilateralism. From a deeply entrenched pessimism of "we can't return to normal", unions have to mobilize workers to believe that they can return to normal if they are united. This could be the way to help workers

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reach a consensus that remote work is a spatial entrapment, and they cannot be forced to fall into it. Or else, how could it be that working from home is perceived simultaneously as exploitative and liberating, as an expression of worker choice and a reflection of the lack of will?

Post-pandemic transformations should not hinder their plan to combat capital in preserving jobs and saving workspaces. But, trade unions cannot ignore the undertones of changes in the labor market because of the health crisis that upend the government and challenged the established social order. The pandemic has intensified the existing imbalances in the labor market. So, unions have to watch the role of saving and elasticity of substitution between labor and capital on the severity of systemic inequality under conditions of declining growth in the post-pandemic period (Jackson & Victor, 2021: 1). Labor unions have to put extra effort to understand how the pandemic has adversely impacted the key indicators and structure of the labor market. They cannot turn a blind eye to the quirks of post-pandemic recovery and the role of “hyper-capitalism” and “proto-socialism” in eliminating inequality caused by the pandemic recession.

In an economy with a declining growth rate, workers who have settled with remote work practices can barely bargain for jobs performed from the shared workspace as they were doing before 2020, and unions have to be mindful of it. Indeed, whatever per cent of India’s workers saved their employment during the pandemic was because they agreed to work from home. Saving jobs during the COVID-19 pan-

dem by conceding to firms’ changing work patterns was a bigger concern for thousands of workers who were at the brink of involuntary unemployment than anticipating the long term detriments of remote work. Unions must focus on institutional approaches that pursue inclusive strategies aimed at organising across labor market segments by incorporating workers’ dominant interests (job security). They have to give prominence to the prevailing sentiment (work from home has saved our jobs during the pandemic) from the beginning of their campaign.

Against labor market concentration, inequality, and down killing, trade unions must keep tabs on how workplaces are changing post-COVID-19. Unions have to be mindful of the extent to which demand in different sectors has reduced. While they take a jibe at organized capital’s new stragem to annihilate labor-power, unions cannot eschew how remote work can extinguish the way collectively represented interests have so far gotten formed. During the post-pandemic transformation, unions must gauge the reduction in labor-power because of spatial dispersion and design organizing strategies accordingly. For instance, they can succeed in foreseeing the recovery rates and a shift towards a new employment model if they know how the crisis has increased the inequality of regional labor markets.

They have to leverage organizations’ challenges in making remote work a part of manufacturing and assembly line production (Brussevich, Dabla-Norris & Khalid, 2020). Even if organizations claim that remote work is suited to work-

ers digitally connected in service industries, “a year of remote work is starting to take a toll on (these) organizations for forming new connections at work, where colleagues, suppliers, and customers have been reduced to invisible atoms in Zoom-space” (Dahlander, Wallin, Carnabuci & Quintane, 2021: 3) and unions have to use this as their bargaining chip (Sarkar & Singh, 2018).

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In addition, differences between freedom and flexibility exercised by home-based workers (who are allegedly no longer under the employer’s control) and factory/office workers (Forman & Phillips, 2017; Rosenblatt, 2018) need not be sufficient to establish a principal-agent contract in the court of law. Trade unions must be mindful of this distinction, especially given that offices of the judiciary had conveniently shifted stances in the post-liberalization era in India as observed by Sarkar (2019). Such reasoning need not necessarily rationalize the rapid curtailment of home-based workers’ employment rights. Workers’ freedom to choose the working time under the work from home need not be enough for employers to establish a principal-agent contract. Therefore, such incomprehension warrants political action where workers engage the organized capital to re-establish employment contracts with the support of unions even if the state is aloof because of its closeness with a specific section of the working population (Sarkar & Liu, 2019). The workers should not capitulate to the

new normal. The loud minority has to raise their voices and hands with their powerful sounds of protest urging regeneration of the spirit of labor activism post-COVID-19 to save their jobs. So, this article is worth sounding a note of caution for every worker who wants to remain connected, bonded, and united and does not want to fall into spatial entrapment as s/he believes in labor’s collective power.

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