

The Indian Society of Labour Economics

The Indian Society of Labour Economics (ISLE) is a professional association of researchers, scholars and other stakeholders interested in the area of labour, employment and development issues. The Society promotes scientific studies of labour markets, employment, employment relations and related issues and disseminates knowledge. It publishes a quarterly, peer-reviewed journal The Indian Journal of Labour Economics (IJLE), which is now in its 69th year of publication. Promoting and featuring scientific studies on labour and employment issues, the journal is co-published with Springer. More information on the journal is available on <http://www.springer.com/economics/journal/41027>



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6th THE INDIAN SOCIETY OF LABOUR ECONOMICS ANNUAL CONFERENCE
19-21 January 2026 | Symbiosis School of Economics, Symbiosis International (Deemed) University, Pune, India

Panel on
**Community-Based Mobilizations:
Contemporary Challenges
in Organizing Labour**

Organised by

act:onaid

21 January 2026 | Pune



About the Panel

Community-Based Mobilizations: Contemporary Challenges in Organizing Labour

Background

India's labour force estimated at over 600 million workers is marked by deep informality, heterogeneity, and structural vulnerability. More than 90 percent of workers are engaged in informal employment, including self-employment, casual wage labour, home-based work, seasonal migration, and platform-mediated services. For the majority of these workers, livelihoods are shaped by income volatility, weak or absent legal protections, and limited access to institutions of collective representation. These economic insecurities are further compounded by entrenched social hierarchies of caste, gender, ethnicity, and region, as well as by unequal access to land, housing, and public services.

These conditions place India at the centre of contemporary debates on labour, informality, and institutional change—debates that lie at the heart of the intellectual concerns of the Indian Society of Labour Economics (ISLE). The past decade has seen significant shifts in the legal, technological, and political landscape governing work. The consolidation of 29 central labour laws into four labour codes—on Wages, Industrial Relations, Social Security, and Occupational Safety—was presented as a landmark reform aimed at simplifying regulation and improving compliance. Simultaneously, the rapid expansion of platform-based work, digital surveillance, and fragmented supply chains has transformed labour processes across sectors.

While these developments are often framed in terms of efficiency and modernization, their implications for labour institutions and collective action remain deeply contested. Empirical evidence suggests that the new labour codes primarily address the concerns of the formal sector, which constitutes a small fraction of India's workforce, while leaving informal, self-employed,



and migrant workers only marginally covered or administratively burdened. Procedural constraints on strikes, ambiguities around social security delivery, and the relocation of dispute resolution away from courts have altered the terrain of labour relations. In parallel, algorithmic management and platform governance have weakened traditional employer–employee relationships, complicating established modes of unionization.

Within this evolving institutional context, the task of organizing workers has become both more urgent and more complex. Classical models of trade unionism—historically rooted in stable workplaces and identifiable employers—are increasingly difficult to sustain in an economy characterized by informality, mobility, and dispersed worksites. Yet, rather than signalling the decline of labour organizing, these shifts have catalysed new and adaptive forms of collective action.

Across rural and urban India, workers continue to organize through community-embedded and hybrid forms of mobilization. These include informal unions, neighbourhood-based collectives, women’s self-help groups, cooperatives, caste- and community-based associations, and sectoral or city-level platforms. Such formations often blur the boundary between workplace and community, reflecting the lived realities of informal workers for whom struggles over wages are inseparable from struggles over housing, land, forest access, safety, care work, and social protection.

Women workers, in particular, have played a central role in shaping these forms of organizing. Mobilizations around sexual harassment, unpaid care burdens, access to welfare entitlements, and survival in contexts of violence and displacement demonstrate how labour struggles intersect with social reproduction. Migrant workers, meanwhile, have developed translocal networks that link source regions with destination cities, creating new solidarities that transcend firm-level or sectoral boundaries. In resource-dependent sectors such as mining, quarrying, and forestry, labour organizing is often intertwined with movements for land rights, environmental justice, and community control over natural resources.

This panel, proposed for the ISLE–IJLE Conference 2026 (21 January 2026), seeks to examine these emerging and evolving forms of worker mobilization within a broader political economy perspective. It aims to contribute to ISLE’s long-standing engagement with questions of labour institutions, informality, and development by foregrounding organizing practices that operate outside—or alongside—formal industrial relations frameworks.



The panel will bring together scholars, activists, and worker-organizers to address the following core questions:

- How are workers organizing in contexts of legal exclusion, informal employment, and fragmented production systems?
- What continuities and ruptures can be observed between traditional trade unionism and newer community-based or sector-spanning forms of mobilization?
- How do labour codes, platform governance, and digital surveillance reshape possibilities for collective action?
- In what ways are labour struggles increasingly linked to broader claims around land, forest rights, housing, safety, and access to state welfare?
- How do translocal and transnational solidarities—particularly within supply chains and platform economies—redefine labour institutions and worker agency?

By engaging with sectors such as agriculture, sanitation, domestic work, plantations, mining and quarrying, and app-based transport, the panel will offer grounded insights into how organizing unfolds under conditions of informality and precarity. At the same time, it will reflect on the institutional implications of these mobilizations, asking what they reveal about the future of labour regulation, representation, and democratic participation in India.

In keeping with the ISLE-IJLE Conference's emphasis on rigorous scholarship and policy-relevant analysis, the panel does not approach community-based mobilization solely as a response to institutional failure. Instead, it examines these forms of organizing as sites of innovation, negotiation, and political imagination—while remaining attentive to the structural constraints that shape their possibilities and limits.

Ultimately, the panel seeks to reframe labour organizing not merely as a workplace phenomenon, but as a broader social and political process—one that connects work to citizenship, dignity, and the pursuit of inclusive development. By situating contemporary mobilizations within India's changing labour institutions, the discussion aims to enrich ongoing debates within labour economics and political economy on how collective action evolves under conditions of structural transformation.



Programme

WEDNESDAY, 21 JANUARY 2026

- Chair : **Sandeep Chachra**
Executive Director, ActionAid India
- Presentations : **Smita Gupta**
Activist , Rashtriya Adivasi Adhikar Manch
- : **Mulchand Sharma**
Development Practitioner Workers Facilitation Centre
Action Aid Association, Jaipur
- : **Shaikh Salaudin**
Founder State President, Telangana Gig And Platform
Workers Union (TGPWU) and National General
Secretary, Indian Federation of App Based Transport
Workers (IFAT), Hyderabad, Telangana
- : **Rakhi Sehgal**
Trade Unionist
- Discussants : **Ravi Srivastava**
Professor and Director, Centre for Employment
Studies, IHD, New Delhi
- : **D N Reddy**
Hon. Visiting Professor, Institute for Human
Development, New and Former Professor of
Economics, University of Hyderabad
- Moderator : **Iyce Malhotra**
Project Lead, ActionAid Association



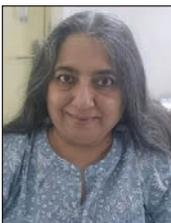
Biographies of the Resource Persons

Sandeep Chachra



Sandeep Chachra is a social anthropologist, activist and a human rights defender. With more than three and half decades of experience in India and across the Global South, Sandeep is currently the Executive Director of ActionAid Association, Managing Editor of “Agrarian South: Journal of Political Economy” and the Secretary of CARES. He serves on the steering committee of “The Academy” of Progressive International, is a core group member of Agrarian South Network and a founder member of the Global University of South, and has been the elected cochair of the World Urban Campaign on UN-Habitat . He has been active at both the policy level and with grounded social momentums on multiple issues, including land, commons, indigenous people’s rights, agricultural, labour, housing and urban issues. He has been active in building international alliances, global networks of movements and civil society and in capacity building and training. He is active in media debates and writes on various social issues.

Smita Gupta



Smita Gupta is an economist and activist associated with the Adivasi Adhikar Rashtriya Manch, working on issues of gender, employment, rural development, land acquisition, tribal rights, displacement, mining, and natural resource governance. She previously worked at the Institute for Human Development, New Delhi, contributing to policy research for the Planning Commission, including the Manipur State Development Report and A Water Policy for Chhattisgarh. She has authored India chapters for multiple editions of the South Asia Human Development Report and worked with UNDP to monitor the



implementation of MGNREGA. Smita regularly makes submissions to Parliamentary Committees on employment guarantee, forest rights, mining, and land acquisition, and works closely with women's, Adivasi, and workers' mass organisations. She is currently engaged in household survey-based research on the living and working conditions of the working poor at the Institute of Social Sciences, New Delhi.

Mulchand Sharma



Mulchand Sharma is a development practitioner with over a decade of experience working on labour rights and community mobilisations in Rajasthan. He has worked with organisations including Grameen Evam Samajik Vikas Sanstha, Aajeevika Bureau, and the School for Democracy, and is currently associated with ActionAid Association. His work focuses on strengthening entitlements and protections for unorganised sector workers such as construction labourers, migrant workers, domestic workers, gig workers, and street vendors. Mulchand has been involved in grassroots mobilisation, worker training, and social audits under schemes such as NREGA and the Building and Other Construction Workers Act. He has also contributed to national-level discussions on microfinance, rural livelihoods, and labour migration, bringing a field-informed perspective to policy and advocacy efforts.

Shaik Salauddin



Shaik Salauddin is a labour organizer and trade union leader working with app-based transport and platform workers since 2012. Based in Hyderabad, he has been organising drivers since 2014 and has played a key role in building collective platforms for gig workers. He founded the Telangana Four Wheeler Drivers' Association in 2014 and later established the Telangana State Taxi and Drivers' Joint Action Committee, bringing together multiple drivers' unions across the state. In 2019, he was elected National General Secretary of the Indian Federation of App-Based Transport Workers (IFAT), a registered trade union representing workers across 15 cities. In 2022, he founded the Telangana Gig and Platform Workers' Union (TGPWU), focusing on organising gig workers across sectors. His work spans collective bargaining, social security advocacy, and engagement with policy processes on platform labour.



Rakhi Sehgal



Rakhi Sehgal is an independent labour and trade union researcher with over two decades of experience working on global supply chains, contract labour, industrial relations, and the social reproduction of labour. Her research also engages emerging concerns such as Industry 4.0, the future of work, climate change and just transition, workplace violence, and occupational health and safety. She has previously worked with the International Transport Workers' Federation (ITF) as a Just Transition Organizer, and with Safe in India, focusing on corporate accountability for occupational health and safety in automobile supply chains. Rakhi has led and co-led several major research projects, including an ILO-supported study on industrial relations in India's export garment industry and an IDRC-supported multi-country project on labouring women and workplace violence. Her work bridges grounded research with rights-based policy engagement.

Ravi S. Srivastava



Ravi Srivastava is currently Professor and Director, Centre of Employment Studies at the Institute for Human Development, Delhi. Earlier, he was Professor of Economics, Centre for the Study of Regional Development, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi. He received his education in the University of Allahabad (BA), the Delhi School of Economics (MA), Jawaharlal Nehru University (Pre PhD), University of Cambridge, UK (Ph. D.).

He was full-time Member of the National Commission for Enterprises in the Unorganised Sector (NCEUS), chaired by late Dr. Arjun Sengupta, in the rank of Secretary, Government of India (2006-09). The advisory Commission to the Government of India, which wound up in May 2009, submitted a dozen reports and made wide ranging recommendations to government on all aspects of policy related to informal sector enterprises and the informal workforce. Its recommendations led to the enactment of the Unorganised Workers Social Security Act 2008, and the launch of the Rashtriya Swasthya Bima Yojana, a public funded health insurance scheme for the poor, to which currently more than 35 million poor families are subscribers, and more recently, of MUDRA bank, a bank for the unorganised sector.

His main areas of research and publication include agriculture, rural development and rural poverty, the informal sector, regional development, decentralization, human development, land reforms, social protection, labour and employment, and migration.



He has published several books, monographs, reports and more than a hundred research papers in these areas.

He has been involved with scores of major research studies and consultancies involving national and international agencies and has received several prestigious academic awards and Fellowships from the University Grants Commission and other organisations. He has also been the conference President of the Indian Society of Labour Economics and the President of the Uttar Pradesh and Uttarakhand Economics Association.

D. Narasimha Reddy



D. Narasimha Reddy, a noted development economist, is currently Visiting Professor at the Institute for Human Development, New Delhi and has been an ICSSR National Fellow and. He was formerly Professor of Economics and Dean, School of Social Sciences at the University of Hyderabad, where he taught for over two decades. His specialization includes science policy studies, the political economy of development and labour economics. During the last decade, he has worked extensively on globalization, WTO and agrarian crisis. His recent publications include a book on Agrarian Crisis in India (OUP). He was a member of the Farmers Welfare Commission set up by Andhra Pradesh Government to look into the issues of farmers; suicides and the agrarian crisis.

Iyce Malhotra



Iyce Malhotra works in the Policy Research team of ActionAid Association, engaged in rights-based work on labour, gender justice, and social protection with informal and marginalised communities. Her work is closely rooted in community-based organising and participatory research with informal workers, refugees, denotified and nomadic tribes, and women in precarious forms of work. She has been involved in building evidence from the ground up to support collective demands and policy advocacy before public institutions, including the National Human Rights Commission and the National Commission for Women. Iyce's work seeks to strengthen the linkages between lived experiences, organising processes, and structural critiques of labour, informality, and inequality in India.

