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[Review of the book *Urban Labour Market Structure and Job Access in India: A Study of Coimbatore*]

Abstract

[Excerpt] This is a book about "labor status"—what it is, how it works, and how it can be used in labor market analysis. The authors make a convincing case that the labor status approach is indeed a useful one to follow.

Keywords

labor market, labor status, India, employment

Disciplines

Labor Relations

Comments

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status" is to understand what it is not. It is not employed/unemployed/out of the labor force. Nor is it employer/self-employed/unpaid family worker/wage worker. Nor is it a simple formal/informal dichotomy. "Labor status," the authors tell us, derives from three elements of the job: protection, regularity, and autonomy. These elements matter, but in different ways, in different contexts.

The context for this study is Coimbatore, a city of one million people in South India. Some readers with long memories will find the Coimbatore study much in the tradition of the classic studies of the New Haven labor market by Reynolds (*The Structure of Labor Markets*, 1951) and the Chicago labor market by Rees and Shultz (*Workers and Wages in an Urban Labor Market*, 1970).

After administering a questionnaire to some 200 households and analyzing the results, Harriss, Kannan, and Rodgers conclude that Coimbatore has ten distinct labor statuses. At the two extremes are "protected regular workers" and "unprotected irregular workers." In-between are "unprotected regular long term workers," "unprotected regular short term workers," and "independent workers." Then there are two categories of self-employed: the "self-employed with capital" and the "marginally self-employed." Finally, we have "apprentices," "family workers," and the "unemployed."

The identification of these labor status categories provides the basis for a number of findings, documented throughout the book and nicely summarized in the concluding chapter. Although the underlying statistical methodologies are quite simple, the labor market lessons emerging from them are not. Among those that captured my attention are the following.

—The Coimbatore labor market is both stratified (that is, characterized by layering of individuals) and segmented (reflecting the differential workings of labor markets in different parts of the urban economy).

—Access to the better jobs is conditioned by control over particular occupations by specific groups, by fundamental characteristics of the social structure, and by acquired attributes of workers such as education.

—Private information channels and access to employment, though important for all status groups, are especially important for those in less protected, less regular jobs.

—Although mobility rates are low overall, substantial mobility is found among those who move *out of* protected regular employment and *into* small-scale self-employment with capital.

—Labor status is the single most important

Urban Labour Market Structure and Job Access in India: A Study of Coimbatore. By John Harriss, K. P. Kannan, and Gerry Rodgers. Geneva: International Institute for Labour Studies, 1990. 146 pp. ISBN 92-9014-468-8.

This is a book about "labor status"—what it is, how it works, and how it can be used in labor market analysis. The authors make a convincing case that the labor status approach is indeed a useful one to follow.

The best way to understand what "labor

factor determining whether or not a household is poor.

—A crucial determinant of labor status is education, which affects both initial job and subsequent mobility.

These findings pose powerful challenges. One is to the International Labour Organisation itself. In the authors' words (p. 106): "Dualistic conceptions of the urban labour market such as organised-unorganised or formal-informal sectors are too simplistic, in that they ignore the complex socio-economic realities of urban production systems and labour processes." These authors thus differ from others in the ILO who see the formal-informal dichotomy as of crucial analytical significance and the upgrading of the informal sector as the essence of a successful economic development program.

Another challenge is to the community of labor market analysts. The authors write (p. 113), "A more thorough understanding of the structure of the labour market . . . is necessary, not only for analytical purposes, but also for effective labour market interventions and labour policies." They are right. We need better models that take adequate account of empirical realities and processes. At a minimum, such models must have differential labor market opportunities and statuses for comparable workers as well as a hierarchy of workers. The task before the profession is to incorporate these complexities into formal, analytically tractable, empirically based, policy-relevant models.

Not a bad research program for the 1990s.

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