
MCDONALDISATION OF LABOUR IN INDIA'S FAST-FOOD INDUSTRY: EFFICIENCY, PRECARITY, AND THE QUEST FOR DIGNIFIED WORK

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I. INTRODUCTION

McDonaldisation is a term and a concept introduced by sociologist George Ritzer to describe the trend in which the ideals of the fast-food restaurant are increasingly taking hold in an increasing number of areas of American society, as well as of the rest of the world¹(Ritzer, 1993, p.1). These values are efficiency, calculability, predictability, and control, all which are rationalisation of production and consumption that focuses more on the speed, standardisation and profit than human factors.² Although initially noted in the United States, McDonaldisation has spread globally very fast transforming the service economies of developing countries such as India.

The fast-food or Quick Service Restaurant (QSR) industry of India is an example of this phenomenon. The industry, which previously was characterised by a variety of street-food customs, has seen a radical change ever since the liberalisation of the economy that was introduced in the 1990s. McDonalds initially entered India in 1996 in a joint venture and its menu was adapted to Indian taste by introducing vegetarian dishes such as the Mc Aloo Tikki burger and Maharaja Mac without compromising its operational efficiencies. The QSR market today is estimated to reach USD 30.37 billion in 2026, and with its increasing growth at CAGR 9.26 per cent to reach USD 47.28 billion by 2031, it is attributed to urbanisation, higher disposable incomes, online delivery systems (Zomato, Swiggy), and consumerism amongst the youth³ (Mordor Intelligence, 2026). The chains like McDonalds, KFC, Dominos and the local players have flourished and provided thousands of people with jobs, including McDonalds

¹ George Ritzer, *The McDonaldisation of Society: An Investigation into the Changing Character of Contemporary Social Life 1* (1993).

² *Id.* at 9–12.

³ Mordor Intelligence, *India Quick Service Restaurant Market Size & Share Analysis - Growth Trends & Forecasts (2026–2031)*, <https://www.mordorintelligence.com/industry-reports/india-quick-service-restaurant-market> (reporting market value of USD 30.37 billion in 2026, projected to USD 47.28 billion by 2031 at 9.26% CAGR).

India North and East operations alone offering direct employment to over 6,000 people with similar numbers in its West and South operations with hundreds of outlets⁴ (Economic Times, 2025; McDonalds India North and East, 2026), but at the expense of labour dignity and traditional work cultures.

The paper investigates the McDonaldisation of labour in Indian fast-food industry using a socio-legal perspective, evaluating the extent to which rationalised labour processes collide with the Indian cultural, economic, and regulatory environment. Relying on qualitative case of studies and theoretical paradigm, it contends that McDonaldisation has yielded both benefits of creation of employment and consumer choice, and it has also brought about deskilling, precarious working environment, and irrationality of rationality (Ritzer, 1993) where efficiency has created human costs such as exploitations and alienation.⁵

In this analysis, it is presented in five parts as the rise and localisation of the fast-food culture; the extension of the McDonaldisation principles to labour; labour conditions and issues; the legal framework and regulation reactions; and effects, opposition, and future opportunities. It is based on the major sources such as the work of Ritzer, empirical studies conducted by Bathini (2017) and Mathur (2021),⁶ and the analysis of India labour legislation.

II. ANALYSING MCDONALDISATION IN INDIA'S FAST-FOOD SECTOR

1. Emergence and Localisation of Fast-Food Culture in India

The food culture of India rested on slow-cooked, regionally varied, home or street stalls cooked food. It was interfered with by globalisation with the introduction of multinational QSR chains since 1991 economic reforms.⁷ The localisation approach of McDonalds, separate vegetarian and non-vegetarian kitchens, no beef or pork, and India-specific dishes is also an example of the so-called "glocalization" the global standards and hyper-local taste (Mathur, 2021).⁸ The same modifications can be found in KFC (spicy Indian masalas) and Domino (paneer toppings).

⁴ McDonald's India – North & East, Employment and Expansion Update (Jan. 2026); Economic Times reports on workforce and outlet growth (2025).

⁵ Ritzer, *supra* note 1, at 121–42.

⁶ Dharma Raju Bathini, McDonaldisation of Work in Indian Fast-Food Industry, 52 *Indian J. Indus. Rels.* 408 (2017); S. Mathur (2021).

⁷ Ministry of Finance, Gov't of India, Economic Survey 1991–92.

⁸ S. Mathur, McDonaldisation and Glocalization: A Study of McDonald's in India, *Int'l J. Soc. Sci. & Econ. Rsch.* (2021).

This cultural change has commoditised food consumption and eating out has become an identity factor to the urban middle class and the young generation.⁹ Online platforms have enhanced speed in delivery, with 70 percent of some of the chains having their orders online (Mordor Intelligence, 2026).¹⁰ Nevertheless, localisation does not weaken McDonaldisation, rather it spreads it. In the argument of Mathur (2021), glocalization is a weak form of the process that ensures efficiency and standardisation, offering foreign practices as culturally sensitive and speeding up the transfer of rationalised work models to India informal service economy.¹¹

2. Application of McDonaldisation Principles to Labour Processes

Ritzer (1993) recognises four overlapping dimensions that characterise McDonaldised work, which are all present in the Indian fast-food restaurants.¹² Efficiency entails the most desirable approach to the completion of tasks. QSR kitchens have assembly-line production and scripted service routines that reduce the time between order and service delivery. Burgers or fries are prepared in a specific manner, which the workers are trained to do in the shortest time possible (Bathini, 2017).¹³ Calculability puts more emphasis on quantity and speed than quality; the sizes of portions are standardised the performance is measured in orders per hour and the value meals are also provided to the customers in quantified form.¹⁴ Uniformity is guaranteed by predictability, the Mc Aloo Tikki in Bengaluru is the same as in Delhi, scripted greetings, the same store design, all of this assists in the uniformity.¹⁵

The most widespread dimension is control, which is applied by means of technology and management. The speed of workers is determined by timer, computerised ordering systems, and surveillance cameras; non-human technologies (fryers, cash register) limit discretion. In Indian stores, the regulation goes as far as the dress code, the hygienic standards, and the performance indicators that are based on the bonuses or job retention (Bathini, 2017).¹⁶ The

⁹ George Ritzer, *The McDonaldisation of Society: An Investigation into the Changing Character of Contemporary Social Life* 180–85 (1993).

¹⁰ Mordor Intelligence, *India Quick Service Restaurant Market Size & Share Analysis - Growth Trends & Forecasts (2026–2031)*, <https://www.mordorintelligence.com/industry-reports/india-quick-service-restaurantmarket>.

¹¹ Mathur, *supra* note 2.

¹² Ritzer, *supra* note 3, at 9–12.

¹³ Dharma Raju Bathini, *McDonaldisation of Work in Indian Fast-Food Industry*, 52 *Indian J. Indus. Rels.* 386, 408–15 (2017).

¹⁴ Ritzer, *supra* note 3, at 12–14.

¹⁵ *Id.* at 14–16.

¹⁶ Bathini, *supra* note 7, at 415–20.

work in fast-food is compartmentalised and easily monitored unlike the traditional Indian restaurants with flexible and skill-based jobs.

These values are not practiced in every chain of India. The qualitative case study of domestic fast-food restaurant presented by Bathini (2017) demonstrated that routinisation was not as strict in this country compared to McDonalds or Domino restaurants, but MNCs put these principles more rigorous, exporting them to the country level.¹⁷

3. Labour Conditions and Challenges

Precarious and de-skilled labour has been created through McDonaldisation. Bathini (2017) records that employees, who are usually young rural migrants, have poor wages, heavy work schedules, and little career prospects.¹⁸ Monotonous, departmentalised jobs, such as flipping patties, cleaning, or upselling, are soon acquired but undermine skills, thus having workers easily replaced (Mathur, 2021).¹⁹ This de-skilling conforms to the criticism of Ritzer as labour is turned into McJobs, low status, high turnover jobs with little autonomy and promotion.²⁰

The wages are still low compared to the costs of living in the urban areas. Most of the entry level employees have salaries close to state minimum wages (depending on the region mandated by Minimum Wages Act, 1948), long hours (usually 10-12 hours per shift), unusual working hours and very few benefits.²¹ High attrition is caused by rural recruits finding it difficult to adapt to the urban environment and hard routines (Bathini, 2017).²² Gender and caste relations aggravate the vulnerability where women and representatives of the lower caste switch to the first-line work that is accompanied by the additional risks of harassment during the late-night work.²³

The irrationality of rationality is also demonstrated by the health outcomes of stress, repetitive strain injuries and burnout, although the system looks efficient. According to Mathur (2021), the rationalised framework is concerned with quantity and profit, which makes labour

¹⁷ Id. at 420–25.

¹⁸ Id. at 410–12.

¹⁹ Mathur, *supra* note 2.

²⁰ Ritzer, *supra* note 3, at 121–25.

²¹ Minimum Wages Act, 1948, § 3; Code on Wages, 2019, § 5.

²² Bathini, *supra* note 7, at 412–14.

²³ Id. at 418–20.

dispensable and reduces bargaining power.²⁴

4. Legal Framework and Regulatory Responses

The peculiarities of McDonaldised work have been hard to deal with by the labour laws in India. Wages and hours are governed by Minimum Wages Act, 1948 (now consolidated in the Code on Wages, 2019) and Shops and Establishments Acts which were formulated to apply to the traditional industries.²⁵ Most of the employees of fast-food companies have short-term contracts and can be subjected to grey areas of either the casual or the contract labour, unavailable to the full protection of the Contract Labour (Regulation and Abolition) Act, 1970.²⁶

New four Labor Codes were announced and came into force on 21 November 2025 (Government of India, 2025), draft central rules were published in December 2025 and full operationalisation (including state rules) was planned in April 2026.²⁷ The Code on Wages, 2019 has brought in a national floor wage and the universal cover of minimum wage including banquet casuals or seasonal workers in hospitality/QSRs. It substitutes four outmoded laws, requires payment in time and eligibility of bonus.²⁸ The Code of Industrial Relations 2020 makes the recognition of unions easier, accompanied by higher thresholds, a move that may undermine the power of collective bargaining in segmented QSR stores.²⁹ The Code on Social Security, 2020 defines social security provisions as applicable to gig and platform workers, which is applicable when the delivery partners feed the QSR demand.³⁰

But there are still gaps in implementation during the transition. Workers are commonly categorised as chains in order to reduce compliance expenses and small or franchise stores are not highly monitored. Recent examples, including the Sapphire Foods, KFC operator, with a one-off charge of 80.26 million under the new codes (and a loss in Q3 2025-26) include increased operational costs but also increased accountability (Reuters, 2026).³¹ Bathini (2017)

²⁴ Mathur, *supra* note 2.

²⁵ Code on Wages, 2019; Shops and Establishments Acts.

²⁶ Contract Labour (Regulation and Abolition) Act, 1970, § 2.

²⁷ Gov't of India, Ministry of Labour & Employment, Press Release (Nov. 21, 2025) (notifying four Labour Codes effective Nov. 21, 2025; central rules Dec. 2025; full ops incl. states Apr. 2026).

²⁸ Code on Wages, 2019, §§ 3–10, 26–30.

²⁹ Industrial Relations Code, 2020, §§ 14–20.

³⁰ Code on Social Security, 2020, §§ 2(85), ch. IX.

³¹ Reuters, KFC India Operator Sapphire Foods Slips into Loss on One-Time Labour Charge (Feb. 6, 2026) (₹80.26 million one-time charge under new codes, Q3 2025–26 loss).

results highlight the importance of the lack of specific reforms so that the legal reason is not effective in countering deskilling and control systems. The specific guidelines of the sector of rationalised service work are required.

5. Impacts, Resistance and Future Prospects

The McDonaldisation, as practiced in society, encourages consumerism and health issues (increased obesity caused by diets of fast foods) and the loss of traditional food cultures. In the case of workers, alienation and the lack of movement is the order of the day. The future outlook is that with the expansion of the sector, the control increases due to technology (AI kiosks, automation) and labour requirements decrease.³² The policy should fill in the legal loopholes by increasing rigour in implementing the new codes, skill-upgradation programme, and union facilitation in QSRs.³³

III. CONCLUSION

The process of McDonaldisation of labour in the fast-food industry in India demonstrates both sides of the coin of globalisation; the efficiency and market expansion never seen before and work precarity and homogenisation of culture. Glocalization has adapted principles of efficiency, calculability, predictability, and control, which have deskilled workers, given them hectic workloads, and focused on profit over well-being (Ritzer, 1993; Bathini, 2017; Mathur, 2021).³⁴ The model increases inequalities although it creates jobs in a young economy, especially among the rural migrants and the disadvantaged segment of the society.

The new Labour Codes (since November 2025) are a step towards universal protections, which are enforced slowly in rationalised service industries, as the implementation of the changes nationally continues.³⁵ A socio-legal variant requires active reforms in the sector, minimum wage floors related to the workloads of the QSR and excluding inadequate skills training and protection against robotization of the automated stores. In their absence, the irrationality of rationality will continue to exist, efficient systems that deliver inefficient human results.

Finally, India needs to find some middle ground between economic dynamism and humane

³² Mordor Intelligence, *supra* note 4.

³³ Code on Wages, 2019; Industrial Relations Code, 2020.

³⁴ Ritzer, *supra* note 1, at 9–18; Bathini, *supra* note 1, at 408–20; S. Mathur, *McDonaldisation and Glocalization: A Study of McDonald's in India*, *Int'l J. Soc. Sci. & Econ. Rsch.* 208 (2021).

³⁵ Gov't of India, Ministry of Labour & Employment, Press Release (Nov. 21, 2025).

labour driven by fast-food. Further studies must be able to trace the implementation of the Code and worker resistance strategies after the implementation. It is the integrated policy, the sociological awareness that promotes legal protection, that would transform the sector into something more than McJobs, into a sustainable and just form of employment. The paper proposes that the academic, industry, and regulators should act in concert to make work rationalised in the Indian service economy transforming into a humanised form.