

'Make agri more productive, don't move millions out of it'

Greeshma Kuthar, Ritika Chopra joint winners of Chameli Devi award

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At a time when jobs are a major talking point, especially ahead of Lok Sabha elections, eminent journalist and author T N Ninan spoke not just about the challenges but also the silver lining in the employment sector while delivering the BG Verghese Memorial Lecture here on Friday. In the lecture titled 'Work and Wages: Old Challenges in the Age of Automation and AI', Ninan, former editor and chairman of *Business Standard*, narrated the current scenario with pertinent data while presenting a future landscape.

Ninan's lecture followed the Chameli Devi Jain Award presentation for outstanding media person of the year. This year's award was jointly won by independent journalist Greeshma Kuthar and Ritika Chopra of Indian Express. According to The Media Foundation—the organisation behind the award—an independent jury selected the winners from more than 65 entries of women journalists. Kuthar's work has been focused on long-form investigative reporting from Manipur. Chopra's work has revolved around the complexities and controversies in the education sector and the Election Commission of India.

In his lecture, Ninan said that India's employment situation needs a nuanced study, rather than a mere examination of numbers, for data can be presented and interpreted in various ways depending on who is handling them.

The lecture drew from Verghese's own writings to drive home the significance of women employees in any organisation. Whether it's organised versus unorganised or manufacturing versus services, Ninan explained the intricate details of the much talked about contrasts in the employment scenario as he took the audience through the entire story of jobs in India.

The manufacturing sector would find it difficult to create the scale of employment required in India, he argued. Manufacturing companies in India would not acquire global scales by focusing on the domestic market, however large that might be, he pointed out. Challenges of globalisation formed a part of the very engaging lecture.

Ninan also turned to a book co-authored by Raghuram Rajan and Rohit Lamba to make a point. He said he did not fully agree with the contention of the authors that the services sector is more important for employment.

In conclusion, Ninan said the employment scenario must be viewed through the lens of artificial intelligence, which could either fizzle out, as 3D printing did, or become transformational, like the internal combustion engine, though at the moment the latter looked more likely.

Human civilisation, Ninan said, had faced many disruptions caused by technology, but artificial intelligence could cause one at a speed not seen before. He quoted Elon Musk to cite the disruption that AI may bring.

Even so, he had a solution to talk about. The solution to India's unemployment problem and low wages uncharacteristically lies in making agriculture more productive rather than thinking of moving millions out of it.