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Regimes of work in the textiles and garment industry in India

An overview

- India's modern textile industry came up drawing on the specific advantages of cotton-conducive farm tracts and cheap labour, competing against colonial policy that favoured produce from the home country.
- Textile mills, in early 20th century India, employed men, women and children who toiled on the land to grow produce, as their forebears had done. Social hierarchies of caste, divisions based on caste and religion, and traditional notions of gender were carried over into mill work which mediated new identities.
- The textile and apparel industry is geographically located in southern and western India for the most part. A part of the textile and garment export industry is located in western Tamil Nadu. The districts of Namakkal, Coimbatore, Tiruppur, Karur, Erode and Salem are referred to as the "Textile Valley of India" and Coimbatore as the "Manchester of India".
- The general picture of the conditions of work in the textile and apparel industry is one that has invited descriptions such as modern slavery, captive labour and camp coolies. Recruitment under 'marriage schemes' drew in cheap labour- mainly young women from poor, illiterate and low caste or dalit communities such as the Arunthathiyar- and offered lump sum payments at the end of a three year period. The conditions of work closely resemble those in early 20th century colonial Tamil Nadu, when unskilled rural women and children joined the workforce of newly established cotton mills.
- Women were underpaid, overworked, denied decent work conditions under the oppressive control of the *maistry* (jobber/contractor) who secured them the job

and enjoyed the power to dismiss them from work, too.

- Employment in the manufacturing sector in India has become further squeezed post liberalization as it is increasingly turning towards globally competitive, capital intensive, and technology based production, further creating vulnerabilities for the unskilled workforce.
- Under globalization, apparels production that was located in the industrially developed countries until the 1970s or 1980s, moved in search of cheap labour to less developed countries and China. Thereafter, predominance of female workforce has become a defining feature of the ready-made garment (RMG) sector, even in India.
- According to one study, 90% of the workers in the textiles and garments industry were in the unorganized sector. Garment industry has a larger percentage of unorganized workers as compared to the textile industry (Hirway 2011).

Patterns of migration

- The dynamics of textiles and garment industry are closely related to the issue of migration.
- There is a clear distinction between the migrant workforce in this industry in different parts of the country. In north India, particularly in the NCR region, the workforce is predominantly male, while in the south, particularly in Karnataka, close to 90% of RMG workers are female. In Bangalore, migration was primarily short distance, from within the state.
- This is changing as Bihar, Orissa, West Bengal and Chhattisgarh appear to be the states from which increasing numbers of garments workers are being drawn. Extreme poverty and deprivation in the villages of origin force women to move out to earn a living. In the NCR region, in contrast, the trajectory of migrants appears to be different as predominantly single men travel from different parts of north India (U.P, Bihar) to find work in RMG sector.
- Young women hailing from Orissa aged between 18-23 years migrated alone. Most of them were either Scheduled Castes or Scheduled Tribes. No opportunities were available for them in their home states. Skills were offered to workers in the destination states and post-skilling they were employed for around 6 months. Even if workers left, the earlier batch was replaced by newly trained workers. In Bangalore, it was found that through this planned migration, industry's continuous need of workers was met.

Nature and conditions of women's work

- With globalisation of the economy, employment opportunities for women workers in garments, fish processing, textiles and packaging are marked by the common feature of unorganized nature of work and contractualisation of employment.

- Low wages, non-compliance with minimum wages, harsh working conditions and insecure tenures have characterised the apparel industry for a long time. At the same time, it must be acknowledged that the industry definitely plays a very useful role in providing employment to a large number of unskilled women with low levels of education, particularly in a context where factory employment is drying up.
- Almost all workers secure their employment through a contractor. The management of work is under the contractor, who plays the role of employer, jobber, manager and master.
- Women in the textile industry earlier found employment predominantly as reelers and packers and had a minor presence as cone winders. Women also worked in small numbers as sweepers in some mills.
- The Report of the Committee on the Status of Women in India (1975) mentions that out of about 200 operations in the textile industry, women were confined to four or five. The decline of women's employment has been gradual but rather steep in the textile sector.
- Feminisation of the workforce is found only in certain sectors, not in the overall macro-picture. It was found in the export oriented units studied by N. Neetha in the Tiruppur region.
- Discussing the issue of flexibility, Neetha argues “central to the success of Tiruppur is the feminisation and gendering of jobs, brought out through split production and modernisation. Feminisation in Tiruppur is the result of the combination of the two processes, women replacing men and also the creation of jobs specifically for women”.
- Feminisation of labour has been more in processes that are highly labour-intensive. The operations in the finishing units (thread cutting and stitching) are the most labour-intensive in nature and employ the largest number of workers.

Wages

- One method by which workers are denied minimum wages and other social security measures, is by being categorised as ‘trainees’, ‘learners’, ‘contract labourers’, etc.
- In Tiruppur, on the question of the fixation of wages for different categories of workers, there is a tripartite industrial wage agreement that exists between the industry or TEA (Tiruppur Exporters’ Association), government representatives and central trade unions in the Tiruppur garment cluster.
- The industrial wage agreement was the result of a struggle between the workers (represented by trade unions) and the employers association since the 1980s. Several strikes and protests finally settled in a wage accord (viz. negotiated every three years), that is endorsed by the state labour department as a third party. Industrial wage

agreements served as the basis for fixation or revision of wage and social security benefits in Tiruppur.

- The implementation of minimum wages in the garments sector remained faulty with a disparity created between skilled and unskilled workers in the industry.
- There is also a difference in the average wage between RMG workers (mostly male, Rs. 11000 per month) of NCR region in north India and RMG workers (mostly female, Rs. 8000 per month) of Bangalore and surrounding areas in south India.
- The Karnataka government issued a preliminary minimum wages notification for the garments sector in 2018, which was later withdrawn. Wages in apparel industry remain at minimum wages or below.
- Minimum wages itself is a deeply contested terrain for it excludes a large number of technical factors and practical issues at the time of computation.
- In women headed households, being the sole wage earner, women have to augment their incomes from the factory by engaging in other income generating activities. Minimum wages is therefore not designed to meet the real needs of the workers.

Collective action in garments and textiles sector

- The structure of the textiles and garment industry is marked by a predominantly non-unionized factory-based workforce. Precariousness of work and migration, further, hindered unionisation of the workforce in the industry.
- The Garments and Textiles Workers Union (GATWU), affiliated to a national level organization of the same name, is the largest trade union in the RMG sector in Bangalore. The other two trade unions in this sector are: the Garments Labour Union, (GLU) and the Karnataka Garments Workers Union. These trade unions have a history of originating from NGOs.
- An important achievement for the GATWU in recent years has been the securing of dearness allowance for workers who are paid above the minimum wage. GATWU's most significant contribution has been to maintain a steady pressure for the upward revision of the minimum wage.
- In 2010, a serious internal conflict situation within the CIVIDEP (Civil Initiatives for Development) led to the splitting of GATWU away from the NGO. Thereafter, CIVIDEP floated a second trade union, GLU. GATWU, now delinked from sources of funding, has diminished its resources, both in terms of finances and manpower.
- Most trade unions did not address the question of women's employment or their rights. There is evidence of women's struggles at individual, departmental and even plant level to protect their employment. While women leaders were active in their respective departments, women workers' visibility in the trade unions was low.