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## **Regimes of Work in the Textile and Garment Industry in India: A review of some of the literature**

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**ILO's Work in Freedom Project RAS 13/55/UKM**



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## **Regimes of Work in the Textile and Garment Industry in India: A review of some of the literature**

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India's textiles have a storied past, of craft excellence, global commerce and of being specially targeted for de-industrialisation by the colonial power, so that its own mill industry could take over the Indian market. The modern textile industry came up drawing on the specific advantages of cotton-conducive farm tracts and plentiful, cheap labour, competing against colonial policy that favoured produce from the home country<sup>1</sup>. British mill owners sought to raise labour costs in India by petitioning the Crown to legislate labour laws. The assortment of labour laws that ensued, along with the accompanying paraphernalia of factory inspectorates and commissions of inquiry, conditioned the growth of the modern mill sector in the country.

Textile mills, in early 20th century India, were capable of plucking men, women and children who toiled on the land to grow produce, as their forebears had done ever since humans learned the art of settled agriculture, and transplanting them into the modern industrial workforce. The change in their occupation did not, of course, alter the social matrix in which they were located. Social hierarchies of caste, divisions on the basis of religion, traditional notions of gender carried over into mill work, and mediated new identities. Things have not altered all that radically nearly a century on, our survey of the literature on conditions of work in the textile and apparel industries reveals.

The Indian textile industry has inherent linkage with agriculture, culture and tradition of the country making for versatile spread of products appropriate for both domestic and export markets. The textile industry contributes 7% of industry output in value terms, 2% of India's GDP and to 12%-13% of the country's export earnings, according to the Ministry of Textiles, Government of India. India has a 5% share in the global trade in textiles and apparels. With over 45 million people employed directly, the textile industry is one of the largest sources of employment generation in the country, says the Annual Report of the Ministry of Textiles 2017-18<sup>2</sup>.

The mill sector, with 3,400 textile mills, with an installed capacity of more than 50 million spindle and 842,000 rotors, is the second largest in the world. However, the handloom,

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<sup>1</sup> M V Shobhana Warriar, *Class and Gender: A study of women workers in cotton textile mills of Madras, Madurai and Coimbatore, 1914-1951*, doctoral thesis, JNU, New Delhi, 1995

<sup>2</sup> Ministry of Textiles, GoI, *Annual Report 2017-18*

handicraft and small-scale power loom units are the biggest sources of employment. Powerlooms employ 44.18 lakh persons and more than 60% of fabrics meant for exports come from the powerloom sector. Which also explains why the bulk of the workers in the textile industry, one of the largest employers of workers in India, are in the unorganised sector.

The textile and apparel industry is geographically concentrated in southern and western India for the most part. The literature on the conditions of work in the industry is even more skewed, towards southern India in the recent past.

A survey of the literature on work in the textiles and garments sector brings out trends of informality in the sector's wage relations verging dangerously on bondage and illegality. However, recent developments could formalise parts of the industry and bring in transparency, but there is no guarantee that large swathes of the industry would not continue with labour regimes that remain opaque or altogether invisible to the official machinery.

There are three policy-induced pressures to exit informality. One of them is the introduction of the Goods and Services Tax, with effect from July 1, 2017. If a company becomes part of the GST network, that is to say, starts supplying to or procures from another company that pays GST, it becomes difficult for it to shelter behind opaque accounting. This brings out total sales and total purchases, with audit trails to those who bought the company's output and to the company's suppliers.

There are, however, reports of extensive GST evasion as well. Once a company goes outside the GST framework, it would turn informal, including on labour.

Another incentive to turn formal is the offer of subsidy by the government to employers to bear the cost of wages. The government is providing 3.67% of employer's contribution to the Employees' Provident Fund (EPF) for new workmen in addition to existing reimbursement of 8.33% of employer contribution under the Pradhan Mantri Rozgar Protsahan Yojana (PMRPY). A modification to the Income Tax Act offers, via section 80JJAA, holds out an extra deduction equivalent to 30% of the cost of hiring new employees, according to the Textile Ministry<sup>3</sup>.

Some of the flexibility offered by the informal economy is being accommodated in the formal economy. Fixed term contracts tailored to suit the seasonality of the garment industry has become legal, with effect from October 7, 2016. Fixed term workers are to be treated on par with permanent workers in terms of working hours, wages, allowances and other statutory dues. The overtime cap has been raised from 50 hours per quarter to 100 hours per quarter. EPF is also optional for employees earning less than Rs 15,000 per month.

Powertex India, launched in April 2017, offers concessional credit, loom upgradation and infrastructure creation, seeking to invite Rs 1,000 crore of investment and employment of

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<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

10,000 people. To avail of assorted government subventions, the industry will have to show workers on their rolls, that is, turn formal.

This is in addition to the unrelenting pressure from large brands that source garments from India to keep themselves insulated from the stigma, in the eyes of the all-powerful retail consumers, of profiteering through excessive labour exploitation. Some of the literature surveyed in this paper has stemmed from such brand consciousness.

So, while the Survey will serve to provide the immediate historical context in which the industry and its labour practices are poised to evolve, it is unlikely to offer many insights into emerging labour practices, shaped as they are, by a new set of economic compulsions and structural changes.

The general picture of the conditions of work in the textile and apparel industry that emerges from the survey of literature is one that has invited descriptions such as modern slavery, captive labour and camp coolies. Workers in Tamil Nadu's Erode district, who had earlier worked in some of these industries narrate about a system of exploitation and bonded labour that has raised a storm over India's long-established textile industry in Southern India. The excerpt below is a representative sample of how surveyors have perceived conditions of work at the mills.

"I tell all the women I meet not to go and work in the mills. I know what the agents promise and what is real. It is not the same," said 23-year-old Kavita, dressed in a lime sari, a crimson flower in her long black plait, sitting on a woven mat in her village home.

"For almost a year, I wasn't allowed to leave the compound where the hostel and mill was (sic). They made me work double shifts. I only got out because I lied and said my aunt had died and I had to attend the funeral. I never went back."

Barely 13 when she joined the workforce, Kavita, in Tamil Nadu is one instance of the thousands recruited under the so called "marriage schemes" instituted by mills that benefited from the opening up of the Indian economy in the early 1990s.

The schemes draw in cheap labour - mainly young women from poor, illiterate and low-caste or "Dalit" communities such as the Arunthathiyar - and offer lump sum payments at the end of a three-year period. They are promoted as an easy way to obtain the hefty dowries families need to marry off daughters".<sup>4</sup>

These 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 and under the

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<sup>4</sup> Nita Bhalla, *Captured by cotton: Girls duped into "bonded labour" in India's textile mills* August 6, 2015 Reuters /<https://goo.gl/BAuiah>

oppressive control of the maistry (jobber/contractor) who secured them the job and enjoyed the power to dismiss them from work, too<sup>5</sup>.

In some ways, the conditions of women workers in the contemporary period would appear to be worse than in the early years of the mill industry, when workers were free to go home after work, instead of being restrained in prison-like hostels. Such barracks as convenient ways of holding labour make for easy, flexible deployment of labour as and when required. Confinement is presented as safety and security to the parents of young girls and women, generating consent and producing legitimacy for this labour practice, an added bonus for the contractors and industry as many of the studies document.

“Numerous studies by civil society groups such as the Freedom Fund, Anti-Slavery International and the Centre for Research on Multinational Companies say the women are kept in closed hostels, overworked, underpaid and abused”<sup>6</sup>.

“The binding of workers in this way, where they cannot change employers, is a form of bonded labour,” a 2014 study by the Freedom Fund and the C&A Foundation said.

“Very low wages, excessive and sometimes forced overtime, lack of freedom of movement and of association, verbal and sexual abuse were found<sup>7</sup>.”

A number of monographs document women’s employment in contemporary India, as to their nature, conditions of work and the background to women securing employment. The present review of the literature on the scope of employment opportunities for women and their conditions of employment focuses, primarily, on the southern part of India, in particular, on Coimbatore and the areas around it. A common thread that runs through the different studies is the preponderance of women workers in the unorganised sector, regardless of the scale of the enterprise, whether large or small.

Globalisation of the economy has produced myriad opportunities for women workers — in garments, fish processing, textiles and packaging. The common denominator seems to be the unorganized nature of work and the contractualisation of employment. More than half the workforce comprises young women. Almost all workers secure their employment through a contractor, setting up what has come to be the normative, primary relationship at the workplace: the management of work is under the contractor, who plays the role of employer, jobber, manager and master to be trusted, feared, respected and obeyed in a paternalistic regimen of power and subordination with no scope left for dissent except difficult, dangerous exit.

What makes up this workforce? Are these the images of new women? Emancipated from paternal authority and caste oppression and in untrammelled search of opportunities? Unfortunately, a lot of the surveys and the review of literature from the field suggest otherwise.

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<sup>5</sup> M V Shobhana Warriar, *Class and Gender: A study of women workers in cotton textile mills of Madras, Madurai and Coimbatore, 1914-1951*, doctoral thesis, JNU, New Delhi, 1995

<sup>6</sup> Nita Bhalla, *Ibid.*

<sup>7</sup> Nita Bhalla, *Ibid.*

Women or rather young girls — many of them even under eighteen — got enticed into work with promises of secure wages and accumulated savings for a dowry, to be given as a lump sum after a three-to-five-year period, of the kind found in some of the production units, are by no means embedded in modern wage relations. Their choice of work was, to some extent, a break from the drudgery and poverty of women's lives in their villages. The prospect of return to that hardship makes them amenable to easy management, discipline and control, to low wages under conditions of virtual subordination and bondage. Import of such a pre-modern regimen into the globalized present has produced a 'pliant', 'willing', 'disciplined', 'docile' women-dominant workforce vital to the functioning of these units geared towards domestic and export production<sup>8</sup>.

What is the nature of the work? The literature describes a workforce, largely of women, who are free enough to work outside the home, but lack agency thanks to the power wielded by the contractor in a framework of uncertainty where the contract of employment offers temporary work, depending on the season and the unit's ability to procure orders. The justification for holding labour in such a precarious condition in the textile, garment as also fish-processing sectors is the seasonality of their jobs, geared as their production is to fickle demand, necessitating flexibility in the deployment of labour, unlike in the case of traditional manufacturing. Cheap, flexible labour is cited as the source of competitiveness for these producing units in a global market. An aspect that would be useful to look into is exactly what share labour accounts for in the cost of production for the entrepreneur.

A big part of the textile and garment export industry is located in western Tamil Nadu, where Namakkal, Coimbatore, Tiruppur, Karur, Erode and Salem districts are referred to as the "Textile Valley of India" and Coimbatore as the "Manchester of India".

An early study by C.V.S Rao addresses state policy and its contribution to lopsided development that created problems early on in the textile sector for both labour and industry<sup>9</sup>. Government policies, it is argued, spawned the growth of spinning mills, but not of looms in composite mills. Therefore, the share of the organised (composite) mill sector in fabric production steadily declined: 70% in 1950 to about 20% by 1988. Most fabric is produced by the powerloom sector (about 55%) and the rest (about 25%) by the handloom sector. The spinning mills in the organised sector supply yarn to both these decentralised sectors and also to the decentralised knitting industry.

Low productivity, cut-throat competition from the decentralised powerloom sector/process houses and total production far outstripping the demand in the country as a whole, it is argued, meant the organised textile industry made little profit. Investment in high technology machines did not therefore make economic sense.

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<sup>8</sup>Warrier, Shobhana, "Women at Work: Migrant Women in Fish Processing Industry", *Economic and Political Weekly* Vol XXXVI No 37, Sep 15, 2001

<sup>9</sup> C. V. S. Rao, "Productivity, Technology and Industrial Relations in Textile Industry" *Indian Journal of Industrial Relations*, Vol. 25, No. 2, Oct., 1989, pp. 144-156.

The study notes that workers' strikes and unrest in the textile industry was high at this point, the late eighties. The textile industry was racked by competition: spinning mills from one another, as capacity was twice the demand, composite mills from the larger and profitable powerloom sector. The study posited that an organised sector mill can thrive only if : (a) the capacity utilisation is above 90%, and (b) the technical performance is excellent in terms of productivity and quality. To achieve either goal, workers must cooperate.

In the context of retarded modernisation and strained industrial relations, management and the unions arrived at a policy of 'rationalisation without tears' according to the study. Intense competition demanded a compact workforce. Composite mills struggled in the face of competition from powerlooms and power process houses in the decentralised sector whose competitiveness they could hardly take on. This decentralised sector produced more than half the cloth needed by Indians.

This study traces the historical shift in the textile industry at a point when textile policy in the country was moving in the direction of rationalisation to take on the competition emerging from the small-scale sector. The small-scale was also emerging as a mechanism of remaining competitive. That the small-scale aka informal sector complemented the organised, formal sector is also to be seen in this study. In some senses, the late eighties marked the beginning of the decline of labour rights as "retrenchment without tears," as the author puts it, began a program of gradual closure of mills after they turned sick.

A study by Uma Ramaswamy and Sarath Davala on the textile policy, the garment industry and division of labour in Western India traces the shifts in textile policy and its consequences for work and work relations. The authors make a case that the textile policy since the fifties has had to balance the growth of the large-scale organized mill sector alongside the labour-intensive informal traditional handloom sector<sup>10</sup>. Handloom weaving it is pointed out continued then as now to be the main source of income and livelihood for weavers and workers. The handloom sector, historically the source of large-scale employment, was threatened by the rapid growth of production in the modern, capital-intensive mill sector. This set in roll policy measures to restrict expansion thereof. Freezing loom capacity in the organized mill sector by curbing the number of looms per mill, and reserving certain categories of cloth for production in the handloom sector were some of the initiatives. Cooperatives to help weavers sustain their livelihoods through government subsidies, access to raw materials and marketing facilities were initiatives in the direction of stabilisation.

On account of the ceiling on loom capacity in the mills, mill owners, the study points out, began setting up more spinning units, which spawned the growth of spinning mills. Mill owners subcontracted production of cloth to the powerlooms, whose growth bypassed trade unions and cut labour costs. Powerlooms, being in the informal and unorganised sector, were outside the legal framework and, therefore, were able to carry on production under extremely exploitative

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<sup>10</sup> Uma Ramaswamy and Sarath Davala, *Women in the Indian Textile and Garment Industry in Mills, Powerlooms and Handlooms, The Textile Policy and Framework Conditions Development of Export Production Textiles in Bombay: A Case Study Production Processes and Sexual Division of Labour Working Conditions in the Garment Industry Trade Unions and Women*, Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, 1992.

conditions. Unorganised industry produced a regime of complete denial of basic rights to workers

Women, it is seen in the study, found employment predominantly as reelers and packers and have 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. Women who dominated the reeling departments of mills complained of poor quality of yarn as this affected their efficiency<sup>11</sup>. Winding was work where both men and women were employed in the mills, but, over time, women winders were replaced by men. The decline of women's employment has been gradual but rather steep in the textile sector. "There are, however, regional variations. They are found in larger numbers in South India than in the textile centres of Ahmedabad or Bombay. In Bombay, for example, it is reported that their numbers have come down to 2.1 per cent between 1974 and 1981. According to the National Sample Survey, the overall presence of women in all textiles is a mere 2.87 per cent"<sup>12</sup>.

Women were virtually absent in the mill sector in early Independent India. Their numbers dwindled on account of technology upgradation, rationalisation and modernisation. This history of the beginning of the elimination of women from the textile industry in the period between 1937-1951 has been studied by Radha Kumar for Bombay and by the author of this review in the region of Madras, Madurai and Coimbatore. Historically, the retrenchment and exit of women coalesces with the emergence of workers' organisation demanding better wages for both men and women and the textile industry complying with minimum wage and standardisation norms. The patriarchal notion of the man as the primary wage-earner eased women out of the well-paid workforce of the textile industry. It was again when the textile industry, once again, required huge pools of cheap, pliable labour, that women returned to the workforce.

"Paradoxically, it is argued, protective legislation such as a ban on women's night shift, maternity and child care benefits have not worked in their favour. Mill owners have looked at these benefits as costly and bothersome and have resorted to ways of circumventing welfare measures such as the provision of creches and other benefits. An indirect consequence of protective legislation has been casualization of women's work according to this study"<sup>13</sup>. Even the few women who were employed, worked as temporary, and casual workers. Characterising women as being prone to intermittent absence at work helped the management at textile mills in colonial South India deprive women of their legal right to avail of maternity benefits.

Ramaswamy points out that the powerlooms tended to combine family labour with wage labour. Women appeared less segregated by function in this sector in comparison with the mill

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<sup>11</sup> In the case of the mills in colonial Tamilnadu, the demand for quality yarn by women in the reeling department that did not break easily was an often mentioned issue on the charter of the union.

<sup>12</sup> Uma Ramaswamy and Sarath Davala, *op.cit.*

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.* However, historically it has been established by this reviewer that the maternity benefit Act did not immediately result in the retrenchment or casualisation of employment for women earlier in Coimbatore and Madurai in the cotton mills. It was only after the standardisation of wages and rationalisation post 1946, that women began to be excluded from the workforce.



sector. In Coimbatore, in the late eighties, the percentage of women in powerlooms was reported as almost 33%. Women also formed a larger part of the workforce per unit - between 21 and 50 per cent of the employees. Notably, women constituted a significant section of the workforce when production was home-based and the technology labour-intensive. The division of work in the handloom sector, it is pointed out, copied the powerloom sector. Though production drew on family labour, women seldom were paid for their labour.

Trade unions, the study found, 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. Gender ideology and culture hampered women's active involvement with trade unions. The study finds that while trade unions were missing in action, organisations such as SEWA (Self-Employed Women's Association) in Ahmedabad and Annapurna Mahila Mandal in Bombay actively organized retrenched women and turned them into home-based and self-employed workers. Unionizing women workers in the garments, handlooms and powerlooms sector was difficult. SEWA affiliated itself to the ITGLWF. SEWA's focused primarily on worker education programmes.

Jeemol Unni et al, in their study, have looked at the developments in the garment industry in Western India, particularly the region of Ahmedabad<sup>14</sup>. The contractual nature of employment and the presence of women in the unorganised sector of garment production where production was organised through layers of sub-contracting is empirically established in the study. Interestingly, women workers in the small garment units were found to be relatively young. The study also documents the diverse age groups of women employed. As large a proportion as 56 percent of the women were below the age of 25 years and 36 percent between the ages of 15 and 20 years. At the same time, 21 percent of the male workers were below the age of 20 years. In terms of marital status, 45 percent of the women workers were unmarried while among men only 37 percent were unmarried. While 63 percent of the men were currently married, only 45 percent of the women were married. Young, unmarried girls were clearly not prevented from working. A small proportion of the women in these units were widowed (7 percent) and divorced (4 percent). This implies as the study puts it that some of these women started working in the factories after divorce or widowhood.

The discussion paper by Sheela Varghese situates the employment of women in the garment industry in the changes taking place with the emergence of international opportunities in the eighties<sup>15</sup>. She draws from a study, of the garment industry in Calcutta, by Nirmala Banerjee, who states that the entry of women in large numbers in the garment industry is a phenomenon that began from the early eighties not just in India but in most developing countries. The growth rate of women workers in the export-oriented industries was seen to be more than twice that of

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<sup>14</sup> Jeemol Unni Namrata Bali Jignasa Vyas, *Subcontracted women workers in the global economy: The case of garment industry in India*, Gujarat Institute of Development Research and Self Employed Women's Association Ahmedabad, India, 1999.

<sup>15</sup> Sheela Varghese, *Employment of Women in the Garment Industry*, Discussion Paper No. 9, Kerala Research Programme on Local Level Development CDS. TVM, December, 1999.

men workers in Korea, Malaysia, and Singapore; and women accounted for about half of the manufacturing workforce in these countries (Banerjee, 1991:239). ILO reports, she says, indicated that the situation was similar in many other Southeast and East Asian market economies. Most of these countries were already enmeshed in the new international division of labour through investment in Third World countries by multinational corporations.

Such feminisation of the workforce was found to be the case 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”<sup>16</sup>. She cites Jeyaranjan to point out that 50% of the workforce of 200,000 to 300,000 were women by late 1990s. Men workers dominated jobs that called for working with machines. But when power was added to the machines, women easily displaced men. Stitching was dominated by men workers during the initial years of the industry when women found work as helpers, but Power Tables, introduced in the early 1990s, created employment opportunities for women as stitchers. Power Tables constituted 70 per cent of the total stitching machines: these facilitated the replacement of men by women. As large a proportion as 60% of tailors were women towards the end of the nineties, a rise from 10-15 % in stitching during the early 1990s. Estimates are of some 40,000 female workers employed in these units at the turn of the century. According to the data provided by the Chief Inspectorate of Factories, Tiruppur, the proportion of female workers in the garment making units increased from 7.51% in 1990 to 33.23% 1998, finds the study.

Feminisation of labour has been more in processes that are highly labour-intensive. The operations in the finishing units (cutting and stitching) are the most labour-intensive in nature and employ the largest number of workers. Moreover, these are the core units and hence the labour processes in these firms are extremely important. The criteria and the definition of skill seem ambiguous. Women could end up stitching, folding and packing, and doing other jobs as well, depending on the availability of work and workers. Women thus moved down the skill ladder and horizontally as well, at the same unit or at another, but mostly under the same contractor. What is significant to note here is that mechanisation in the form of the electric power table here displaces men in favour of women, a change from the general trend in the early years of industrialisation when machine and men’s work established filial bonding excluding women and consigning them to occupations that celebrated their ‘nimble fingers’.

Neetha’s survey found that 42.6% of the workers belonged to the age group of 15-20, the adolescent age group. The proportion of female workers in the age category of 20-25 and 26-35 was 16.9 and 23.6 respectively. Not a single woman worker was older than 45. The data showed that, among migrant women workers, a considerable proportion (around 60%) belonged to scheduled castes. Of the total women workers surveyed, 96% of workers were employed as casual workers. Can we then say, that precarious employment in India for women has deep roots in caste vulnerability too? Is this study also an example of caste and gender

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<sup>16</sup> N Neetha, “Flexible production, Feminisation and Disorganisation”, *EPW*, Vol. 37, No. 21, May 25-31, 2002.

working together to produce a cheap, pliable and docile workforce, to the advantage of industry?

Deepita Chakravarty's work brings nuance to the proposition that trade liberalisation victimises women workers. Discrimination is a complex process taking different forms in different contexts leading to different outcomes<sup>17</sup>. This study, based on the garment manufacturing industry, suggests that in the context of a dynamic industrial activity of a poor, labour-surplus economy, discrimination against women can take place outside the labour market. For example, employment depends on education and skills, to which women have unequal access. She finds that low wages overall lead even men workers to accept low wages, depressing women's wages further. She notes that, in her sample, the percentage decline in women's employment is much sharper in the case of technologically advanced firms than in the technologically backward ones. This does not necessarily contradict Neetha's finding (op. cit.) that technology, in the form of power tables, raised women's employment, because this relates to overall employment and not to particular divisions of labour.

When jobs call for education and training, Deepika found, women's lower educational attainment favoured men workers. Labour laws that prevented women working late hours also curtailed opportunities, compounded by the reality that even if women work outside the home and bring home a wage, they alone have to shoulder the responsibilities of housework. Constrained utility maximisation by women from their work outside the home has been extensively dealt with in the context of the Bangladesh garment manufacturing sector in the works of scholars such as Kabeer (2001).

It is not so much labour market discrimination arising from technological upgradation in the industry a la Joeques, 1982<sup>18</sup>, as overall social discrimination against women that worked against them in the garments industry, Deepika posits. Women were the dominant presence in the units the author surveyed, but their share declined somewhat over the years. This is so, even as managements claimed that they prefer women workers because they are more efficient and sincere, besides being 'docile', meaning, less likely to take part in trade union activity, deemed damaging in export production.

The author finds that men earn more by working on a piece rate basis, while women do waged work, mirroring the experience in Mumbai (Krishnaraj 1987), that, too, in just one shift, except in units that have their own facility for women workers' transport at night.

The presence of men workers in every category of work in the sample firms was, therefore, not for 'breaking women's solidarity', as found by Joeques (1982) in another context. In Deepika's study, this situation was better explained in the West Bengal Garment Industry,

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<sup>17</sup> Deepita Chakravarty, "Expansion of Markets and Women Workers: Case Study of Garment Manufacturing in India", *EPW*, November 6, 2004.

<sup>18</sup> Joeques, S. 1982. *Female-Led Industrialisation, Women's Jobs in Third World Export Manufacturing: The Case of the Moroccan Clothing Industry*, IDS, Brighton. Joeques said that technology depressed women's formal sector employment.

where the process of informalisation became the management's choice to reduce labour costs in a distorted labour market<sup>19</sup>.

G.B. Nath discusses the surge in GDP growth in India, with the advent of globalisation and liberalisation of its economy and how issues such as workers security of employment became the casualty<sup>20</sup>. Growth in employment opportunities in the organised industrial sector, in general, and the manufacturing sector, in particular he points out has not kept pace with the demand for jobs. Rather, this has made a section of the working class redundant, encouraged labour market flexibility, informalised the labour market, denuded workers of social security, increased the workload, lengthened the working hours, feminised the labour force and suspended trade union rights. The challenge is to observe all core labour standards, social security, basic human rights and trade union rights, to make the world decent and less precarious. State intervention is needed to achieve this.

Flexibility of labour is the watchword for employers operating in the globalised economy. To this end, they have invested in labour-saving equipment, restricted formal employment to a core set of workers, resorted to contractualisation, informalisation and feminisation of the rest of the workforce and even put out work to be done at home. The state has played along, by formal and informal withholding of enforcement of assorted labour laws, particularly in Special Economic Zones and the information technology industry.

He points out on the basis of various studies that, although the share of wages in the national income rose, it still was below rich country levels. The real wage barely moved over 1961-82. He cites work by Sudha Despande and Lalit Despande to show how the Minimum Wage Act had been bypassed by the industry while practising wage flexibility. Rising wages were more than offset by gains in productivity. Employers have actively worked against unionisation, including by liquidation of trade union leaders, apart from via informalisation: witness the Chhattisgarh Mukti Morcha's (CMM's) struggle in Bhilai, Rajnandgaon, in the Raipur industrial belt of Chhattisgarh. Wage freezes, downsizing, relocation, violation of labour rights, and suspension of social security measures followed<sup>21</sup>.

The 61st Round of NSS data revealed, says Nath, that nearly two-thirds of the jobs are in the category of self-employment, in which there is no direct employer. A range of industries such as food processing, textiles, garments, catering, lace-making, beedi and cigar rolling, and the packaging industry, require low levels of skills and employ temporary, part-time home-based female workers.

The study brings out the fact that more than 50 per cent of the women workers do not get any paid holidays. Often, workers are denied minimum wages and other social security measures, by being categorised as 'trainees', 'learners' 'contract labourers', etc. Employers have been

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<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>20</sup> G.B. Nath, Globalisation and growth of precarious jobs in the Indian labour market: Implication for economic policy, *The Indian Journal of Labour Economics*, Vol. 51, No. 4, 2008.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*

increasingly employing contract labourers enlisted by officially approved contractors. Nath cites research to claim that flexible labour market practices had become so well entrenched over time that almost all the workers were 'permanently temporary', the status of badli had become an everyday experience for the bulk of workers in this environment. Such labour regimes virtually reduce all workers to being permanent members of the reserve army of labour.

The author discusses informalisation and the weakened power of trade unions. Governments, at the Centre and particularly at the State level, have adopted several welfare measures, such as a range of public services and basic goods at below market prices. Such measures impact labour markets by increasing the reserve price of labour<sup>22</sup>. It is noted that state policy and conduct promoted private enterprises and stripped labour of state protection, facilitating informalization, even as employment, income and exports grew in Tirupur until the global financial crisis struck.

Also noted is the steady erosion of standards of implementation of labour laws during this period. The proportion employed in the organised sector marginally declined from 8.46% in 1993-94 to 7.42% in 2004-05 and from 20.46% of manufacturing sector employment in 1999-2000 to 17.92% in 2004-05. Informalisation had, evidently, set in earlier. The share of contract labour in the total labour employed grew rapidly from 7.82% in 2000-01 to 13.3% in 2004-05. Further, the share of employment in smaller factories that were not covered by social security provision in Tamil Nadu rose. Not surprisingly, real wages declined, even as white collar earnings grew.

In 2000, the National Textile Policy de-reserved the garment industry and, subsequently, knitwear production in 2005, which meant that they were no longer reserved for the small-scale sector. This made way for large-scale expansion in capacities and larger firms. However, most labour was recruited in the garment industry's "unorganised" or "informal" sector. Even large firms that employed 500-700 workers, it was found, depended on contractors to manage their labour requirements. This production order was sustained by a highly flexible labour market dominated by casual and non-secure employment, high inter-firm and inter-regional mobilities<sup>23</sup>. While economists and the so-called reform lobby have been pushing for changes in labour laws to bring in flexibility, this survey shows that existing labour markets are remarkably flexible. Incapacity or unwillingness to enforce labour laws eroded, in fact, the nominal protection afforded by labour laws that meet globally mandated norms.

Among this migrant labour force, two distinct types were identified by the author. One section of the workers came with entire families, with each member taking up various kinds of jobs in the industry and settling down. The other set of migrant labour, which would form anywhere between 30% and 50% of the migrant population, comprised temporary workers who switched between rural and urban workspaces and different production regimes.

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<sup>22</sup> M Vijayabaskar, "Global Crises, Welfare Provision and Coping Strategies of Labour in Tiruppur", *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 46, No. 22, May 28-June 3, 2011, pp. 38-45.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*

Exporters benefited from automation and advanced processing techniques. Concurrently, their just-in-time recruitment of labour to access the required quantities of labour at short notice, gainfully depended on labour contractors. The rise in product market flexibility also saw rapid expansion in production. Spurt in exports from Tiruppur increased demand for labour, giving it an image of a region where jobs are aplenty, to an extent that produced labour shortage.

Employment was casual, except in about 40-50 large export firms that had a core workforce of about 40,000 workers. Variations in demand disincentivised firms to rely on a large pool of permanent workforce, finds the author. Apart from a core workforce, firms recruited whenever they had orders for exports. The study shows that the networks of labour contractors leading all the way up to the villages of origin of the workers emerged. This not only generated a new spatial geography of labour recruitment, but importantly, a set of production relations that belied Tiruppur's movement into more sophisticated process technologies<sup>24</sup>.

Though trade unions have fought to ensure permanent employment and social security in the past, they have not been able to address the process of casualisation that has accompanied export-orientation, finds Vijayabaskar. As an official of one of the largest unions in the town remarked, "if they (workers) have a problem, they go to the contractor. Or else they move to the next firm. Or they go home. They don't want to come to us because they think it is a waste of time. They are also worried that the management may come to know. Management find ways of getting them out of their factories if they know they are union members" (interview dated 22 May 2009)<sup>25</sup>.

Workers in Tiruppur were found to work a minimum of one and a half shifts (10 hours) a day under normal circumstances. When delivery schedules approach, the work hours increase to 12-16 hours and there are several days when workers work almost non-stop for two days except for short breaks<sup>26</sup>.

Workers had to put in such long hours to make ends meet and save some money to send back home. Nominal wage increases did not meet worker expectations of a living wage, the study found, with rents and other expenses rising and eroding the value of their earnings. The author cites study (A study by Praveen Jha is cited to point out that anywhere between 40,000 and 1,00,000 workers had lost their jobs by December 2008<sup>27</sup>. There is however no clear evidence of firms closing down during this period because of a lack of demand. Even subcontracting firms, it is said, stayed afloat though many did feel that there had been a demand slump. The author makes the point that it needs to be remembered here that the entire cluster has always been marked by a high entry and exit of firms.

Reliance on the public distribution system (PDS) has been critical to the mobility and livelihood strategies among both long distance migrants and daily migrant workers. Heyer

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<sup>24</sup> M Vijayabaskar op cit

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>27</sup> Jha, P "The Well-Being of Labour in Contemporary Indian Economy: What's Active Labour Market Policy Got To Do With It?", Employment Working Paper No 39, Employment Analysis and Research Unit, Economic and Labour Market Analysis Department, ILO: Geneva, 2009.

(2010) in her study of dalit households in villages near Tiruppur pointed out the critical role played by the enhanced PDS and the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA) in improving their real incomes and even resulting in a reduced incentive to offer their labour in the market<sup>28</sup>.

Precariousness of work and migration, the study finds, hindered unionisation of the workforce. The Centre of Indian Trade Unions (CITU) mobilised workers' families around access to basic services like water, roads, street lights and house titles in the slums that house the migrant worker. The regimes of work that emerge are not favourable for the labour rights of the workers.

A study by Indira Hirway looked at both the garment and the textile sectors and their interconnectedness in the different parts of the country. It provides data on the rising importance of Tiruppur where exports value rose from Rs 186.9 million in 1985 to nearly Rs 4.3 billion in 1991, Rs 35.3 billion in 2001 and Rs 110 billion in 2007<sup>29</sup>. The target for 2012 was Rs 250 billion. Tiruppur's share in the total exports of garments from India increased from 5.42 per cent in 1989 to 16.48 per cent in 2001 (White and Sinha, 2007). Leading brands and chain stores of the world, finds the study, work with Tiruppur.

The study provides the following details of the shifts and growth in the industry. The number of large-scale composite textile mills, which stood above 1,500 in 1985, began falling in the 1980s: to 1,000 in 1991, down to 281 in 1998–99 and 210 in 2006. Since large-scale spinning mills are technologically and financially viable, these 1,780. It was 1,543 in 1998 and 1,570 in 2006. The number of SSI spinning mills has also continuously increased: 901 in 1998 and 1,173 in 2006. The number of large-scale weaving mills declined to 199 in 1998, but has shown a marginal increase to 204 in 2006. The number of power loom units, however, has continuously increased, reaching 358,000 in 1998 and 434,000 in 2006. The number of looms in the large-scale organized sector is 92,000 (2006) against nearly 1.94 million in the power loom sector in the same year. In this history of development, the small sector dominated in the spinning as well as weaving sectors, though in recent years there has been a marginal increase in the number of large-scale units, both spinning and weaving<sup>30</sup>.

In 1985, the study notes that policies of deregulation and liberalization were initiated. "In rupee terms, textile exports increased from Rs 20 billion in 1990–91 to Rs 168 billion in 2003: fabric exports increased from Rs 11 billion to Rs 52 billion, yarn exports from Rs 5 billion to Rs 58 billion and made-ups (towels, carpets and rugs, bed sheets and bedspreads, pillow covers, home furnishing textiles and the like) from Rs 4.5 billion to Rs 58 billion. India's share in the global textile and garment market increased from 1.5 per cent in 1975 to 3.3 per cent in 2003. It also acquired a significant position in the US and EU markets. India currently exports 83 per cent

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<sup>28</sup> M Vijayabaskar *op cit*.

<sup>29</sup> Indira Hirway, *Restructuring of Production and Labour under Globalisation: A Study of the Textile and Garment Industry in India*, ILO, 2011.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid*.

of its total clothing exports and 52 per cent of textile exports to the US and the EU”<sup>31</sup>. According to the author, liberalization policies opened up the global market, particularly the two markets important for the industry. Indian imports in four major items for the textile and garment industry, namely, fibre (raw cotton, raw silk, flax and jute and man-made fibre), semi-raw material (fibre waste: wool, cotton, silk and man-made fibre waste), yarn (silk, yarn, wool yarn, cotton yarn, man-made filament yarn and flax and jute yarn) and fabrics. Imports into India are from China (about 40 per cent), followed by Hong Kong, the US, Australia, South Korea and Thailand, each of which constitute 4–5 percent of the total imports (2005–06).

Ninety per cent of workers in the textiles and garments industry were in the unorganized sector. In the case of women workers, 96.57% of them were in the unorganized sector, while the percentage is 86.39 in the case of men workers, the study reports. Garment industry has a larger percentage of unorganized workers as compared to the textile industry.

Feminization of the workforce is captured in the rising proportion of women workers across the textile and garment industry in this study too. The annual rates of growth of employment for men have been 0.1 per cent in textiles and 8.2 per cent in the garment industry. The corresponding rates for women are much higher, 1.5 and 33.1, respectively. The number of women in the garment industry has constantly been growing. As seen above, most of this employment has been in the unorganized sector, mainly as home-based workers. However the author notes that employment growth has trailed both output growth and increase in capital in the textile and garment sectors.

The author points out an interesting decline in the share of home-based workers in the textile industry between 1994–95 and 2000–01 and suggests that this is evidence of textiles shifting to non home-based venues gradually, maybe for technological reasons. The overall trend is giving out work to home workers for cost reduction by both the textile and garment units, particularly the garment industry. In both the organised and unorganised segments, significant progress is documented in the value added and labour productivity of workers in the pre-reform and post-reform period. The author shows the differences between the pre- reform and post reform period in both textiles and garments.

Textiles and garments show a higher growth rate, from 2.88 per cent pre-reform to 6.26 per cent post-reform in the case of textiles, and from 6.24% to 14.40% in the case of garments. The growth in labour productivity is also seen in the case of textiles. Growth in employment per year has been much lower at 0.16 per cent per year for textiles. The share of home-based women workers in the total unorganized workforce is much higher in textiles and garments (almost half the workers are home-based) than in the manufacturing sector as a whole, which has 46.3 per cent home-based workers. This clearly means women predominate as home-based workers, compared with men workers. This paper clearly establishes the consequences of reforms for the gender component as pretty much adverse, as mechanisms to squeeze women’s labour through their location largely in the unorganised sector, to the advantage of the industry.

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<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*



Home, thus, is no longer the refuge of the worker, instead it now becomes indistinguishable from the workplace for home-based workers.

The study by Arpan Ganguly on the Indian ready-made garment industry focuses on the dynamics with regard to wage and working conditions in this sector. This was based on a field study conducted in the garment clusters of Gurgaon, Bangalore, and Tiruppur, which found “minimum-wage violations, non-payment, underpayment and late payment of basic wages as well as illegal overtime wages, theft of social security benefits, threats to break union formation, and sexual harassment of female workers”<sup>32</sup>.

This was facilitated by the informalisation of the workforce and denial of the right of association, including union busting. The hiring of workers on regular contracts declined while short-term informal and irregular contracts emerged as the basis of most new recruitment in this sector (NCEUS Report, 2009).

The study urges intervention by the stakeholders: brands, suppliers, trade unions and the state, to secure commitment to human rights (in tune with the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights, 2011) and a rights-based approach to labour. It is argued that brands could train workers and managements to accommodate, rather than oppose unions. It is important that firms appreciate that professional management cuts costs, and not just wage suppression<sup>33</sup>.

The Indian garment industry, as per the study, employed 6 million workers out of the 35 million employed in the textiles and apparel industry. In other words, nearly 18% of the total industrial workforce were employed by the apparel sector. Around 80% of the workers in this sector were women (Rural Development Department, Govt. of Andhra Pradesh). More than 60% of the garment workforce in India were informal labourers, casual, contract labour, without social security benefits, and freedom of association. A majority of workers were migrants from UP, Bihar, Jharkhand, Orissa, West Bengal, etc.

Cheap seasonal labour and availability of cheap raw materials (or fabrics) like cotton, blended and man-made fibre materials from the handloom, power loom, and mill sectors are aspects that made the industry competitive. The rapid rise and spread of industrial clusters or districts in semi-urban, semi-rural pockets of the country allowed firms in these clusters to acquire cost efficiency via access to government incentives reserved for industrial clusters, the study reports<sup>34</sup>.

India, it is argued by the author, has sustainable backward linkages as compared to China, Bangladesh, or Turkey, which depend heavily on raw material imports. Though India achieved self-sufficiency in raw material production considerably, China (as, to a lesser extent, Bangladesh or Turkey) was far ahead as far as exports were concerned. Low wages alone are

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<sup>32</sup> Arpan Ganguly, Wage Structure in the Indian Garment Industry, Society for Labour and Development, Asia Floor Alliance, September, 2013

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*

not the reason as almost all the garment-exporting nations in South Asia share this commonality of low wages.

The debate about fair wage, minimum wage, equal wage and living wage has a long history. Trade unions in the early period in colonial India have contributed much to this debate. Living wage is a concept that goes beyond the minimum wage, by not only adjusting for inflation but also taking into account the requirements of a decent life for a three member worker family<sup>35</sup>. The author estimates living wage for the Indian garment industry as on January 1, 2012 as INR 12,096 per month -- a basic wage before benefits or overtime. This reflects a significant break from the minimum wage estimates that have dominated the ongoing discourse on an appropriate wage level for India according to the author.

The study identifies a majority of garment workers in Bangalore, 80%-85%, to be women, driven by self-employed women tailors working at home. Migration, in this case, was primarily short distance, from within the state. The religious and caste profile of the workforce showed that bulk of the employees were Hindus, and were from castes like Gowda, Kurubas, Thigala, Kalinga, etc. There were also the SCs, STs and OBCs (Other Backward Classes). Dalit workers (especially women) were in large numbers in the garment cluster of Bangalore. This is again an instance that corroborates the perspective that caste and gender vulnerabilities work together in producing a workforce that is easily managed.

On the question of the fixation of wages for different categories of workers, the study draws attention to the tripartite industrial wage agreement that exists between the industry or TEA (Tirupur Exporters' Association), government representatives and central trade unions (like CITU, AITUC) in the Tirupur 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 in fact 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 Tirupur. In December 2006, an agreement was signed between the employers' association and five central trade unions to be in effect for a period of four years. The agreement provided for a mechanism of increase in wages in the export units as well as domestic garment manufacturer. After the expiry of the agreement in 2010, the tripartite agreement has not been revised. Unions in the region were politically strong and established, however their decline in recent times has affected the renewal of the tripartite wage agreement. The tripartite mechanism of negotiating a better deal for workers is effective only in the presence of strong unions, clearly.

As far as working conditions went, the study notes that the Tirupur garment industry was relatively better off as compared to Gurgaon or Bangalore. The working day was organised around a single general shift that lasted either from 8:30 am to 5:45 pm or from 9 am to 6 pm. There were no hourly production targets across the Tirupur cluster and workers were allowed

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<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*

a 45 minute to 1 hour lunch break and two 15-minute tea breaks. Instances of verbal or physical abuse or sexual discrimination and harassment were dealt with sternly in the garment sector in Coimbatore. Gender discrimination was not a major issue in Tirupur, unlike in Gurgaon and Bangalore. The general conditions of work in Tirupur appeared better. Can this difference also be seen against the background of a vibrant history of struggle for workers rights that involved women workers in the region of Coimbatore?

The garment sector in Tirupur employed both men and women workers though the proportion of women in the total working population marginally exceeded that of men. A majority of these workers were migrants, both long distance and from the neighbouring areas. The workers were mostly Hindus. There were a few Christians. Muslims were virtually absent in the garment workforce of Tirupur. With respect to the caste profile among the Hindus, Brahmins were a minority, Other Backward Castes and Dalits being the principal caste groups among the workforce. A majority of the workers interviewed belonged to Gounder, Nadar, Gavudar, Pallar, Nayar and Devar castes.

The difficulty of establishing unions within the factories comes from a host of factors according to the author. Garment factories have seen shrinking profits, leading them to either close down their operations or relocate. “The nexus of business and state in the region, on the one hand, and the failure of unions in the region as inclusive and credible organisations have managed to passively disorganise the workforce. Second, as the interviews conducted with the trade union organizations revealed, the management in recent times have resorted to hiring mostly female workers as they feel that male workers are more susceptible to engage in union activities. Third, a majority of the workers are migrants who often quit their jobs to go tend to agriculture or families back in their villages, making it difficult for unions to sustain their membership. Also, high rates of labour mobility within the cluster from one industry to another restrict the scope of initiating a union within a specific business enterprise”<sup>36</sup>.

Though wages and working conditions have indeed shown some improvement over the years due to persistent efforts of unions operating at the state level, the ready-made garment industry in Tirupur, has been in a state of flux, finds the study. At the time of this field study, industries were facing a dearth of production orders and several industries wanted to shut down their operations. Both the state and unions worked to prevent industries from closing down. The workers feared loss of jobs. “This has made labour relations in the cluster ‘unfree’ and coercive. More importantly, the operation of so-called welfare schemes like the ‘Sumangali Scheme’ has made matters worse for labour in the cluster. The scheme came into operation essentially as a welfare scheme promoting women labourers in the textile sector of Tamil Nadu in the late 1990s. The scheme allowed young women workers to be hired on short-term three-year contracts with the promise of a lump sum payment (Rs 25,000-Rs 50,000) at the end of the contract period”<sup>37</sup>.

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<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*

However, the study notes that the scheme was virtually absent among the women workers interviewed during the course of the survey at Tiruppur. Four crucial reasons could be identified for women in the Tiruppur garment industry not being associated with this scheme. The scheme was operative mostly in the cotton, silk and spinning mills in Tamil Nadu and was barely there in the ready-made garment industry of Tiruppur. The migrant workers came from states like Bihar, Orissa, Jharkhand or West Bengal, whereas the Sumangali scheme had been started when the girls were recruited from the villages in Tamil Nadu. At the time of the study, the production of ready-made garments in the cluster had witnessed a decline and such schemes of a three-year lock in period of workers was an added burden (in terms of additional costs) for firms<sup>38</sup>. Finally, the Government of Tamil Nadu had to ban Sumangali Scheme since January 2013 due to pressure from foreign organisations, local NGOs and trade unions (Business Social Compliance Initiative, Feb. 2013).

This study recommends a reworking on the state's perspective to labour issues. "Strengthening prevailing labour law mechanisms should not be seen by policy-makers as a hindrance to the market-led model of development. Rather, it should be recognised that a rights-based approach to development requires markets to be regulated as markets are intrinsically exclusionary and selective by nature, especially if left unregulated. Relevant incentives to promote competition can surely be encouraged, though such competition needs to be regulated. In other words, large enterprises that have developed significant organisational capabilities will institute structural barriers to entry, thereby preventing the growth of small- and medium-scale enterprises. This, in turn, would reinforce tendencies towards cost-cutting labour market strategies in such enterprises."<sup>39</sup>

A monograph titled, *Flawed Fabric*, deals with the working conditions in the spinning and textile mills of Southern India and describes the working of the so-called Sumangali scheme, outlawed in 2013, at length. It documents extensive short-changing of young workers on wages. The Sumangali scheme defers a part of the wages for several years, to accumulate a sum that would be available for dowry. Other malpractices deal with deductions from the salary for the Employees' Provident Fund that are not credited to the EPF Organisation. Abuse of Provident Fund deductions was documented by civil society organisations and trade unions<sup>40</sup>. A conference on labour rights issues in the garment industry in February 2014, CITU-affiliated unions Baniyan and the General Workers Union demanded an inquiry on the violations relating to the Provident Fund Scheme.

Forced overtime work, sometimes not compensated for, is another feature of work at the mills, which operate round the clock. "(Forced) overtime work is a standard practice and happens year-round. Mills are in operation 24 hours per day, seven days per week, all through the year.

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<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>40</sup> *Flawed Fabric: the abuse of girls and women workers in the South Indian textile industry*, October 2014, done by SOMO (Centre for research on multinational corporations) and the India Committee of the Netherlands.

Contrary to garment units, spinning mills do not experience high and low seasons<sup>41</sup>. In the words of one of the interviewed workers: “it is always peak season”. Majority of the interviewed workers said that it is not possible to refuse overtime hours, which, in some cases, are not paid for. At Jeyavishnu Mill, workers said that if they do not achieve the production target, they have to continue working without the extra hours being paid for. Work breaks are short — 10 minutes at Premier Mills — and restricted — two toilet breaks of five minutes in the evening and night shift, at another mill<sup>42</sup>.

The workplace is hot and humid, and full of cotton dust, to protect against which workers must wear masks. Though production workers were mostly women, the supervisors in the five investigated mills were men<sup>43</sup>. A common experience of discomfort and fear of the supervisors was shared by the women as also their authoritative and abusive attitude towards the workers. Such regimes for women workers were part and parcel of early industrialisation in the textile mills of Coimbatore in the first half of the twentieth century. An early demand made by the women and the unions in this region was for women *maistris* to be appointed in departments that were predominantly women<sup>44</sup>.

Workers stayed at company-provided hostels. Rooms were cramped and crammed with as many as they could take, toilet and other facilities were shared, there was little to no entertainment and the place felt like a semi-prison, in the words of one worker. Hostels were considered secure and preferred by the parents of workers<sup>45</sup>. Cell phones were banned and women had to rely on the company phones, limited in number and access to which could be easily monitored. Workers did go out to shop, but rarely. In the fish processing units surveyed by this reviewer too, the girls went out to shop either with the agent/ contractor or his trusted lieutenant.

Unionisation was next to nil and supervision by the state government’s labour department, minimal. Trade unions had little or no access to workers or workplaces in this sector. The report found that it was impossible for unions to get registered in India, due to the administration’s general anti-union stance, under the influence of employers. Several agencies monitoring the fairness of work practices have found work at the mills wanting. Whatever little access available was via non union networks of the civil society.

“In a May 2012 report, the Fair Labor Association (FLA) described how the Tamil Nadu Spinning Mills Association (TASMA) recognises that “the issue of Sumangali needs to be addressed if there are any exploitative practices”. The FLA report described that TASMA

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<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>43</sup> Warriar, In the case of the fish processing units too, the supervisors were men.

<sup>44</sup> M V Shobhana Warriar, *Class and Gender: A study of women workers in cotton textile mills of Madras, Madurai and Coimbatore, 1914-1951*, doctoral thesis, JNU, New Delhi, 1995

<sup>45</sup> Warriar, Shobhana, “Women at Work: Migrant Women in Fish Processing Industry”, *Economic and Political Weekly* Vol XXXVI No 37, Sep 15, 2001 *op. cit.*

developed a ‘Code of Conduct for Hostels’. TASMA officials explained that they had concerns about the perception by outsiders about hostels. They made it clear that ‘discipline cannot be equated with slavery, as depicted in the west’<sup>46</sup>. Awareness raising among the workers in the recruitment areas was the focus of local NGOs.

The involvement of Fair Labor Association, a US-based collaborative effort of universities, Civil Society Organisations and companies dedicated to protecting workers’ rights and Solidaridad, published a report on the Sumangali Scheme in May 2012. With its contacts in the local NGOs, FLA planned to launch a targeted programme on the issue of labour rights for its affiliates sourcing from the region.

Social Accountability International (SAI), a multi-stakeholder NGO describes its mission as follows: advancing human rights at work, driven by diverse perspectives to navigate evolving labour issues. The SA8000 Standard is the central document of SAI’s work. It is an auditable social certification standard for decent workplaces. Figures for 30 June 2014, show 847 certified companies in India, 499 are in the apparel and textiles sector. Of these, 7 have the term “spinning” in their scope of production. Two units that are the subject of this research: Jeyavishnu Spintex and Super Spinning Mills (Unit C) figure in the list but according to the SOMO (Centre for Research on Multinational Corporations) and ICN (India Committee of the Netherlands) report both units have labour rights violations: absence of employment contracts or any other form of agreement between employer and employee; excessive and forced overtime (Super Spinning Mills); limited freedom of movement and the absence of any process to express or discuss grievances. Responding to the issues raised by SOMO and ICN report, SAI pointed out that there is scope for improvement. SAI, Social Accountability Accreditation Services (SAAS) and Vizhuthugal – an NGO which works primarily with issues affecting the Dalit community and the eradication of bonded labour are involved with extensive studies on the practice and impact of Sumangali schemes on workers’ rights in Tamil Nadu.

“The Business Social Compliance Initiative (BSCI) is a business-driven corporate social responsibility (CSR) initiative. BSCI currently has over 1,200 participants, most from the textile and garment sector. BSCI audits are mostly done on the level of first tier suppliers. BSCI audits can only be conducted by SA8000 lead auditors of auditing companies that have been accredited by SAAS. The new Code of Conduct adopted in 2014, allows for audits in the second and third production tiers and aims to provide tools and solutions to address problems in the lower tiers”<sup>47</sup>. The BSCI audits of second and third tier suppliers are in the pipeline. Auditors will list all sub-suppliers that a factory uses and there would also be a grievance mechanism in place to look at the working of the new Code of Conduct

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<sup>46</sup> Flawed Fabric: the abuse of girls and women workers in the South Indian textile industry, October 2014, done by SOMO (Centre for research on multinational corporations) and the India Committee of the Netherlands. *op. cit.*

<sup>47</sup> Flawed Fabric: the abuse of girls and women workers in the South Indian textile industry, October 2014, done by SOMO (Centre for research on multinational corporations) and the India Committee of the Netherlands. *op. cit.*

A round table was organised by BSCI on industry and labour conditions in the South India textile sector' to lobby with the Southern Indian business associations SIMA and TASMA as, according to BSCI, to bring improvements. "There have been various efforts aimed at improving hiring and employment practices in textile supply chains. These efforts, however, have often been externally-driven and have given little choice for the local business community to develop its own solutions. Progress of these efforts has been slow and concerns have been rising"<sup>48</sup>.

The report talks about "Silent workers, silenced workers". There is no doubt that the right to associate and to bargain collectively are enabling rights that guarantee protection and respect for workers. The notion of freedom of association is alien to the women workers who were interviewed. That these workers, particularly young women and girls, came from dalit backgrounds with little awareness of their legal rights and basic education made them gullible and easy to control. In this study too, we have clear evidence of gender intersecting with caste vulnerabilities to produce extremely toxic conditions of work.

According to a report *Addressing modern slavery in Tamil Nadu textile industry*, the state of Tamil Nadu accounts for about 24% of the world's spindle capacity and 8% of global rotor capacity<sup>49</sup>. By the year 2021, it is estimated to reach US\$ 223 billion. The sector constitutes 14% of industrial production, 4% of the GDP and 27% of the country's foreign exchange inflow and provides direct employment to 45 million people, making it the second largest generator of income after agriculture. Thus, the growth and development of this industry is vital to the progress of the Indian economy as a whole.

The study notes that while certain improvements have been made, modern slavery persists in various parts of the supply chain in the textile industry in Tamil Nadu mainly in the forms of bonded labour, forced labour, child labour and human trafficking. The very regime of recruitment of labour from the hinterlands of the country through kin, agency, contract, sub-contract networks spawns such conditions.

Within the supply chain, the study focuses on textile mills and garment production with particular emphasis on spinning mills. Issues of labour rights violation in raw cotton production and ginning are not specifically taken up. The estimate is that there may be at least 100,000 girls and young women who work in such conditions, with many more working in environments that do not meet India's legal labour standards.

Apart from the spinning mills, bonded labour is deemed to be present in the power loom sector wherein it works through cash advances given to rural power loom labourers by owners of workshops, which tie the worker to the employer, at such low wages that they are unable to

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<sup>48</sup> Flawed Fabric: the abuse of girls and women workers in the South Indian textile industry, October 2014, done by SOMO (Centre for research on multinational corporations) and the India Committee of the Netherlands. *op. cit.*

<sup>49</sup> *Addressing Modern Slavery in Tamil Nadu Textile Industry* - Report by Association for Stimulating Know How (ASK) December 2014, Feasibility Study Report.

repay the loan. Adults and children from impoverished regions of India are being lured to work in the industry and face many violations of labour rights.

Post-liberalization, Tamil Nadu has modern slavery which has been defined, in accordance with the Freedom Fund's definition, as a phenomenon where "Individuals in slavery are paid nothing or below subsistence wages, they cannot walk away and are subjected to threats or violence. They have their freedom denied; they are used, controlled and exploited by another person for commercial and private gain"<sup>50</sup>.

Media reports, NGOs and research studies have highlighted a wide range of issues of exploitation of young women workers, as well as forced and bonded labour, and child labour in the textile industry in Tamil Nadu resulting in attempts to reform. These reports have been issued, for example, by Anti-Slavery International, Fair Wear Foundation, Global Studies Unit of University of Sussex, Centre for Research on Multi-national Corporations (SOMO), India Committee of the Netherlands, Dalit Freedom Network, and Fair Labour Association. Most of these report schemes, where girls' parents, usually poor and from the lower castes, sign up their daughter(s) freedom in contracts with agents/ contractors. The scheme talked about most promises a lump sum of Rs. 30,000. Such schemes found social acceptance as they allow young, unmarried women to make some money, which would go towards their dowry. Living on the economic and social margins, in a society where agriculture ill affords opportunities, the lucrative offer of cash becomes so attractive that it becomes impossible to reject. What follows, in the form of the experience of women of course brings resistance, rejection and dejection.

The study corroborates the findings of other studies on features of hostel life of the contractual workers, such as constrained communications and mobility. That mobile phones are not allowed and use of company phones is monitored. Families consent to these practices on grounds of their girls' security, physical and moral. They are paid well below the statutory minimum wages for the state, work 12 hours regularly, 16-24 hours during peak seasons and even on Sundays, without any overtime payment.

Labour contractors secure cheap labour in the form of migrant workers from Bihar, Odisha, Andhra Pradesh, West Bengal, Jharkhand and the north-eastern states. They double up as supervisors and intermediaries between workers and management for the different groups of workers, and the factory managers deal with the workers through them.

A thin line separates these secluded migrant workers from modern slavery, as they toil without minimum wages and little contact with the outside world, work extended hours sans health facilities or social security.

As a result of campaigns by NGOs linked to customers in export markets, civil society groups and local NGOs, as also trade unions and the state, against the Sumangali Scheme, child labour and camp coolies (the hostel system) to defend labour and human rights against modern slavery, mill owners, through their association, Southern India Mill Association (SIMA) and

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<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*



Textile and Spinning Mills Association (TASMSA), developed “guidelines and code of discipline for women’s employment in the textile industry”<sup>51</sup>.

A report on forced labour in the textile and garment industry in Tamil Nadu by Annie Delaney and Tim Connors discusses the grievances of young women, predominantly from disadvantaged Dalit and other so called low-caste communities, who are recruited from remote and impoverished villages to work in textile mills and garment factories (herein the ‘garment sector’) in a number of districts of Tamil Nadu in South India<sup>52</sup>. Many of them, they argue, are employed under bonded and forced labour conditions, commonly referred to as ‘sumangali’ schemes and ‘camp labour arrangements’. The terms sumangali, camp labour or camp labour coolies are frequently used interchangeably. ‘Sumangali’ refers to a form of bonded labour, in which unmarried young women on a fixed term contract have a portion of their wages deferred until the end of their employment term, at which point the accumulated deferred wages would be given to them as a lump sum that they can then use for their dowry, so that they can get married and become sumangalis, or happily married women. ‘Camp labour’ refers to workers living in company-controlled hostels with no freedom of movement, so that they would be available to work on call, would not defect to other factories or mills and would be deterred from joining a union. Both sumangali and camp labour are posited in the study as forms of forced labour. These practices are associated with other labour rights violations such as forced overtime, low pay and poor work conditions. The workers were also denied their rights to freedom of association and collective bargaining and were not given the minimum employee entitlements stipulated under national and state laws. Child labour was also a common occurrence.

The garment industry, an important export oriented one, geared to produce for global markets received its big push in the 1990s. Tirupur and Coimbatore and other nearby districts of Erode and Dindigul have grown rapidly in recent years, which has increased the cost of living and has also created labour shortage at the mills. The study points out that relaxed government regulation led to a dramatic increase in the number of mills, bias against employing male workers, and a change in the use of the apprenticeship scheme. Brands, it is argued, with purchasing power extend their production base and push down the prices they pay suppliers. Thus, the decline in labour standards down the supply chain.

The study on the basis of evidence from the South Indian Mill Association (SIMA) and South India Textile Research Association (SITRA) states that women workers were preferred, because they were more compliant, easier to supervise and less likely to join unions. It was found that SIMA initiated a three-point strategy to bring down labour costs, which included: a push against ‘militant labour’ by reducing the number of men employed; an increase in the employment of women workers; and the introduction of a three-year apprenticeship known as the sumangali scheme (Kumar, 1999; neetha, 2002). The workforce in the mills and garment factories thus got feminised as poor, rural women were identified as a potential pool of workers,

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<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>52</sup> Annie Delaney and Tim Connor, *Forced Labour in the Textile and Garment Sector in Tamil Nadu*, South India Strategies for Redress by RMIT University and University of New Castle, January, 2015.

and the sumangali scheme proved to be the dreamcatcher in the late 1990s to meet the employer objectives to recruit more manageable workers (Narayanaswamy & Sachithanandam, 2010; neetha, 2002).

Researchers for this report focused particularly on the extent to which non-judicial grievance processes address violations of the following human rights issues: freedom of association and the right to negotiate or bargain collectively (ILO Conventions 87 & 98, Article 20 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights); the right to job security and protection against irregular / precarious work arrangements (ILO Convention 158); the right to just and favourable remuneration (Article 23(3) Universal Declaration of Human rights) and a decent living for workers and their families (Article 7(a) International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights); elimination of forced labour (ILO Conventions, 29, 105) and the Protocol of 2014 to the Forced Labour Convention, 1930 (no. 29). the rights of women, the Convention on the elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against women (CEDAW)<sup>53</sup>

The youthful profile of the workers and that there were young girls employed may be gleaned in this ILO survey<sup>54</sup>. As a total proportion, more women than men were interviewed (representing 61% of the sample). There were marked differences between northern and southern India. Whereas the smaller northern India sample was heavily dominated by men (83%), the larger Bangalore sample was even more heavily dominated by women (93%).

The median age of the sample was 29 years. Half were in the age group 25-34 years. A quarter were aged less than 25, and a fifth were 35 or older. Two interviewees were aged less than 18 years (one 15 year old, and one seventeen year old i.e. none was less than the minimum working age who were in employment. Majority of workers (94%) were migrants; 92% had come from a rural village, mostly within the same state (56%) but a substantial proportion from a neighbouring state (38%). Most workers migrated with their family and lived in rented flats. Eighty per cent walked to work, and for most of them this took less than 30 minutes. In 70% of cases, the interviewee was the only household member in paid employment; in just over a fifth, there were two people working. Nearly 70% of interviewees reported that their income was vital for household maintenance.

Over half of the workers (56%) had outstanding household debts; a half of these indebted households owed more than Rs. 50,000 and a quarter more than Rs. 100,000. The majority - 75% - had borrowed from an informal money-lender or against gold, and the main reason cited for taking loans was to cover medical expenses.

The workers took up work on account of lack of any other opportunity and have been around for 3-10 years though there is dissatisfaction with pay and working conditions. Violation of hours of work, overtime wages and rest hours, for example, for lunch was a mere ten minutes were a given. Wage theft in the form of deduction of EPF lost to the worker if not deposited in the worker's account and loss of pay for any leave. Reports of sexual harassment, the "man

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<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>54</sup> *Insights into working conditions in India's garment industry*, Report by ILO, 2015

problem” as they put it when the supervisor resort to verbal and physical abuse over the predominantly women workforce. Forcible confinement of workers and the locking up of workers by managements apart from their confinement in hostel residences under the surveillance of managements was pervasive. However, the fact that a manufacturer bemoaning that things are not like what they were ten years back when you could get work done by force and that now you have to be diplomatic with labour suggests the impact of campaigns for labour rights at different levels beginning to bring some change in mindset.

The study by P Mala analyses, in depth, the socio-economic profile of women working in the textile units of Tiruppur district of Tamil Nadu. In Tamil Nadu majority of the textile and garment workforce is women and children. In the Textile mills women are about 65% mostly unskilled workers. There is evidence of child labourers both girls and boys in the age group of 11 to 14 years. Workers in the age group of 21 to 30 years are a minority<sup>55</sup>. Women were replaced by men in most of the mills. The decline of women’s employment has steep in the textile sector. There are, however, regional variations. The economic conditions of women have profound effect not only on women’s own but also on that of their children and families and on subsequent generations.

The textile Industry in Tamil Nadu is the source of massive employment in the State. It is mostly focused on spinning. “The State Textile Industry has a significant presence in the National economy also. Out of 2049 large and medium textile mills in India, 893 mills are located in Tamil Nadu. Similarly, out of 996 small units in India, 792 are located in Tamil Nadu. The 893 large and medium textile mills include 18 Cooperative Spinning Mills, 17 National Textile Corporation Mills and 23 Composite Mills”<sup>56</sup>.

The author discusses how competition in the global market led to flexibility and the feminization of labor in textile industry of Tamil Nadu, where garment exports on a massive scale was a push factor creating the demand for women’s labour since 1985.

The study on, Socio-Economic Profile of Women Working In Textile units of Karathozuvu in Tiruppur District in Tamil Nadu has revealed the following findings. Findings · “10% of the respondents were in the age group of less than 20 years. 38% of them were in the age group between 20 – 30 years. 30% of them ranged between 31 – 40 years of age. 22% of them ranged between 41 – 50 years of age. · 44% of the respondents were found to be married. 20% of the women were found to be unmarried and 16% of them were single. 16% of the respondents were widows. · 40% of the respondents in the study were found to belong to BC. 20% of them belonged to SC community. 30% of them belonged to MBC. All of them were Hindus. · 64% of the respondents were literates and 36% of them were illiterates. 56% of the respondents were found to have attended school till the primary level. 36% of them were illiterate and 4% of the respondents had education up to secondary level. None of the respondents were found to be

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<sup>55</sup> P Mala “Socio-Economic profile of women working in textile units of Tiruppur district in Tamil Nadu”, *Indian International Journal of Multidisciplinary Research and Development*, Volume 3; Issue 1; January 2016; Page No. 304-308.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*

graduates. · Nearly 20% of the respondents were found to be the only earning member of the family. Nearly 80% of the respondents were found to be supported by their family members. 20% of the respondents had at least 3 dependents in their families. 20% of them had no dependents. They were the respondents who were found to be single or divorced. 60% of the respondents were found to support either one or two of the family members. · 72% of the respondents were in permanent job and 28% of them were in temporary jobs · Nearly 50% of the respondents entered this job due to poverty. 32% of them found this job as they had no other employment and forced to take up work as being widowed or even abandoned by spouse. 8% of them took up the job as their family members were already in the same job. Only 10% were found to have taken up the job at their own willingness. · 64% of the respondents were working in spinning section. 10% were in winding and 12% of them were found to be working in cleaning. 28% of the respondents did all the above works as per instructions from their superiors. · 10% of the respondents had been working for more than 25 years. 40% of the respondents had an experience of 1-5 years in their jobs. 6% of them had working experience between 16 to 20 years. 4% were found to be working for 21 to 25 years. Nearly 32% of them were found to work for 15 years. · 10% of the respondents earned an income between Rs. 8,000 and Rs. 10,000. 46% of them were found to be earning an income between Rs. 6,000 and Rs. 8,000 and 28% of the respondents earned an income between Rs. 4,000 to Rs. 6,000. 16% of them were found to be earning an income between Rs. 2,000 and Rs. 4,000. It is evident that 44% of the respondents were found to have an income not exceeding Rs. 6,000 per month. · Likert ranking scale was used to estimate the job satisfaction levels of the respondents. Out of a sample of 50 respondents, 54% of the respondents were found to be satisfied or highly satisfied with the job. Nearly 36% of them were found to be either unsatisfied or highly unsatisfied with their job. These women are forced to work due to poor economic conditions, in order to maintain sustenance of their family. 10% of them were neutral in their opinions. · 76% of the respondents had awareness about trade unions. 24% of them did not know about trade unions. · Only 3 respondents had registered as members with trade unions. It was mainly for sake of pension in their old age. · 50% of the respondents recognized their superiors to be friendly. 42% of them found them to be kind. But 8% of the respondents identified their superiors to be arrogant. · 48% of the respondents did not face any type of provocations in their work place. 16% of them faced sexual harassment from their superiors. 12% of the respondents faced verbal abuse in their work place. There was no complaint about physical beating or eve teasing. 8% of the respondents felt that they were unnecessarily criticized for their work. · 48% of the respondents lived in their own houses whereas 52% of them lived in rented houses. · 88% of the respondents did not take any loans. Only 12% of them had taken education loan. · The 12% of the respondents who had taken loan for educational purpose had taken it from banks and SHGs. They did not prefer banks because of too many formalities followed by the banks. Many of the respondents were illiterates and it goes without saying that they were not interested in the formalities of the bank. · 24% of the respondents complained that they were beaten up, found their spouse to be in affair with another woman and very bad drinking habits · 54% of the respondents had the support of the family members in their household works. They were found to be assisted by their children, husbands, sisters and even parents. When women work for the sake of their family it is the responsibility of the family members to help them with their household works · 26% of the respondents' family members did all the

household works like cooking, washing clothes, cleaning house, taking care of the children etc. 28% out of 27 respondents were assisted in various activities”.

The study concludes that factory work will not be empowering for women workers unless the disadvantages they face are tackled head on. “Paid work can and should create opportunities for women to realize their rights, express their voice and develop their skills. Women need access to independent workers organizations that can empower them and represent their choices and interests in the workplace. Trade unions must be able to form, organize and to bargain on behalf of workers. Barriers that prevent them from doing so should be removed. By their own admission, workers organizations also have work to do to better represent women workers. Special measures should be taken to eliminate discrimination against women workers”<sup>57</sup>.

The last paper we discuss, is part of a comparative study covering countries and different industries but at the same time pointing out elements of similarities and differences. It concludes that the workers across both sectors in both countries are faced with triple absence: 1) the absence of recognised labour relations and recognised employers, 2) the absence of the right to organise and 3) the absence of rights other than those directly related to labour relations. The difference between real as opposed to formal rights and these absences are interrelated<sup>58</sup>.

Micro-units, the study argues, appear to be the dominant form of production and work across both domestic and export markets, while own-account workers tend to engage primarily in domestic production and homeworkers work primarily in export. “There is also a gender division of labour and space: women did sitara-moti (or simple sequin work) and embroidery on the adda loom in homes, while all micro-unit activities were done by men. Caste, religion and age of workers were roughly the same as in the factory sector”<sup>59</sup> Wages were similar with those of the factory sector, but fluctuated with spells of underemployment. Homeworkers were longer-term women migrants with low, fluctuating seasonally wages round the INR 1000 per month mark. There had no access to social security.

The study notes that the garment sector, whatever the size whether in Delhi or Shanghai are characterised by subcontracting of production arrangements and the use of a range of different kinds of labour relations, including agency work and other types of informalised relations. Such admixture segmented labour usefully. “The absence of local citizens’ rights for migrant workers in both India and China is a serious impediment for workers. They are treated as second-class citizens both at the workplace and in society at large: state and private sector oppression go hand in hand in our cases. In other words, citizen rights cannot be separated from class-based relations and class-based labour rights; there is a clear class-based rationale in not granting migrant workers citizen rights. This condition makes it more difficult for workers to

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<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>58</sup> Jens Lerche, Alessandra Mezzadri, Dae-Oup Chang, Pun Ngai, Lu Huilin, Liu Aiyu, and Ravi Srivastava, *The Triple Absence of Labour Rights: Triangular Labour Relations and Informalisation in the Construction and Garment Sectors in Delhi and Shanghai*, Working Paper 32/17 February 2017, Centre for Development Policy and Research, SOAS, University of London.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*

fight for more formal rights”<sup>60</sup>. Wages have increased much faster in China than in India recently. In India there is merely formal protection by law of labour rights and freedoms and social security is nearly absent here.

Migrant workers are in no position to put pressure on the government in India. The study notes that Rina Agarwala has recently argued for a citizens’ rights strategy for informalised workers in India, based on their electoral muscle (2013) but this is not so useful as a large section of informalised workers are circular migrant labour. The authors argue, “state-leveraged and state-implemented improvements are only of real importance in Shanghai. More than voting power, we would argue that what matters is the constellation of classes, including the interests and strengths of the class-based coalitions in power and the composition of the labouring classes”.

### **Summary:**

The review of literature suggests the complexity of the industry, the interconnectedness of its various segments--the garment, textile, handloom, cloth, yarn, domestic- and internationally-oriented production--and the difficulty of treating them in isolation. Most of the studies relate to the period of reform and liberalisation of the economy and, therefore, of the textile sector, and capture the period of transition from protection and export quotas under the Multi Fiber Agreement to outright competition in a global framework. The contours of the history of the textile sector from 1985 to 2015 are usefully engaged with in the literature. The period was a productive phase for the history of textiles in India, as reform of the sector, technological changes, new labour regimes and integration into the world market happened, for better or worse. In 2017, the government announced a slew of measures for the Textile industry in the form of EPF subsidy and encouragement to the export sector whose ramifications are yet to be studied. The shift of the industry from limited looms and mill control to protect the handloom sector and the powerloom expansion in the period of controlled production policy to the vertical integration of the industry now evident in the period post-liberalisation has impacted the workers, in particular, the women workers. The demonetisation of high-value currency notes announced by the government in November 2016 and introduction of GST on July 1, 2017 are bound to reshape informal production regimes and the employment of labour.

Many of the textile units in Coimbatore have a long history of development, such as the Premier Mills and the Lakshmi Mills, to name a couple of them. Even during the emergence of the mills in Coimbatore in the inter-war period, women workers played a significant role. At points of time, women dominated the reeling and winding departments. Unions complained about harsh measures such as making women sign a bond undertaking not to have a child for five years while they were on the job, when granting maternity benefit became an issue for the management. Later, SIMOA, the earlier version of SIMA, wanted the penalty for non-payment of maternity benefit to be reduced.

The Sumangali scheme, of getting young women to commit themselves to an extended, yet informal, contract of low wages, by promising them a lump sum of deferred wages at the end

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<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*

of three or five years, was not conjured up as an out-of-the-box solution to the industry's quest for cheap, docile labour, but had local lineage in earlier management efforts to control women's sexuality and reproductivity to marshal their labour in the service of capital.

A similar offer of a chance to accumulate funds for young women is what was operative in the fish processing industry in the nineties, when contractors recruited young women from the coastline of Kerala to take them to the units everywhere on the coastline of India. Soon enough, the women made the shift from contractor to contractor as and when possible, and that set the pattern for jobs inscribed in patron-client networks, with contractors competing with one another for clients when work was aplenty. As in the case of the Coimbatore textile workers during the inter-war period, where studies marshal evidence of sexual harassment, torture and, in extreme cases, suicide, similar experiences were also part of women's narratives in the fish processing sector. Large pools of contract labour comprising young women from poor villages looking for opportunities and social mobility, lack of freedom of movement, confinement in hostels, contractors as the sole point and sole agents of control and survival were elements of similarity in the textile and fish processing sectors.

The varied findings on different kinds of migration among the workers--circular, seasonal, short-term, long-term, inter-state and intra-state--are documented in the literature and are not contradictory: these coexist. There are women who go back after working for three to five years as may be seen in the uniformly disparaged Sumangali scheme. There are also large numbers of women forever in search of secure jobs but living on measly wages in precarious conditions of existence. There is also a section of workers, in the reformed firms, who have got the benefit of the work done by civil society groups, labour administration and brand-conscious buyers working to create a code of conduct for employers, incorporating best practices for workers and compliance with labour laws.

Studies that focus on individual segments of this broad spectrum of worker experience come up, naturally, with contrasting findings on the textile industry in Coimbatore: one study spots bonded and unfree labour and new forms of slavery in camp coolie system, even as another report insists that the Coimbatore garment industry compares favourably with that of Gurgaon and Bangalore.

Unfree labour is reported by most studies, as also minimal wages bordering on poverty, wage theft in forms ranging from deferred payments, denial of minimum wages, non-payment of statutory deductions for contribution to the Employee Provident Fund. Violation of workers' rights, denying them the right of association and collective bargaining are widely reported. The concepts of living wage and decent wage are taken up in some of the writings, but that remains a pipe dream.

A formal wage contract, a defining feature of capitalism, is absent in most of the industry. The contractor system is best described as the *maistry* or jobber system, to better capture its pre-modern essence, as it uses pre-capitalist relations of kinship, patronage, power and subordination to reproduce labour power in routinely servile forms. Using as it does the caste,

class and gender backgrounds of the workers, it becomes an eminently suitable regime of labour control.

Capitalism in contemporary India, it would seem, is reproducing caste, gender and regional identities, making use of them to obtain a steady stream of cheap, pliant labour outside the modern discourse of rights and entitlements.

It would be useful to examine the share of wages in the total cost of production in the industry, in aggregate terms and in individual units, compliance with EPF norms, insurance benefits for employees and outlays on maternity benefit, if any. The mediation of labour supply and labour flexibility through the *maistri* / contractor / agent calls for further scrutiny, both because it is pervasive in many industries such as fish processing and construction, besides textiles and garments, and because it draws on traditional group identities and reproduces them in new locations.

There are different aspects of the feminisation of labour in the industry that call for further study. G Vanithamani offers an interesting insight into the predominantly lower-caste origins of the women who produce the threads signifying the marital bond of upper caste women, but is more interesting for its finding that 80% of the women workers in this segment are in the 31-60 age group<sup>61</sup>. Similarly, the finding in the study by that 32.4% of women from Coimbatore who emigrate for work have never been married, even as 30.5% of migrant women from Coimbatore migrate for employment, raises questions about the compulsions of survival strategies of unmarried women<sup>62</sup>.

Are these contract workers inherently docile, or does the regime of work force that docility on them? How have women who left the Sumangali system behind fared, and how do they view their current status in relation to their past experience of constrained escape from domesticity? How have companies that have complied with best labour practices fared, and how extensive is the replacement of women by men in such better-paying companies? These and other questions arising from a likely shift towards greater formalization of the sector and its labour practices are worthy of investigation.

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<sup>61</sup> G Vanithamani *Socio-economic and working condition of unorganised sacred yellow-thread-making women workers in Tamil Nadu*, EPRA International Journal of Economic and Business Review Vol 2, Issue 11 Nov 2014

<sup>62</sup> S Irudaya Rajan, Bernard D'Sami, Samuel Asir Raj, *Non-resident Tamils and Remittances: Tamil Nadu Migration Survey 2015*, CDS, Thiruvananthapuram, Feb 2016.



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