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unorganised sector
in India

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Holding up more than half the sky

AS MORE THAN ONE WRITER in this issue has emphasised, the unorganised sector in India is huge — at least 395 million people. That is, about 85% of India's workforce is engaged in this sector. Work in India then primarily means work in a sector that is "unorganised", but only to the extent that it implies uncertain and exploitative work conditions. It is, however, highly "organised" in the sense that it is the systemic, structural exclusion of a majority of the country's working population from stable and safe employment, incremental wages that can at least meet minimum living standards, access to basic services and welfare measures, and the protection of labour laws.

A recent report of the National Commission for Enterprises in the Unorganised Sector (NCEUS) says that 79% of the 395 million workers in this sector live on an income of less than Rs 20 a day — and that the total number of Indians living with this amount is 836 million. Approximately 28 million people who work in the organised sector work as informal workers, with the same uncertainties of employment as the unorganised sector. This means a total of about 423 million, or at least 90% of India's workers. The report speaks of the "utterly deplorable" conditions in this sector, where workers have "extremely few livelihood options".

A dual process is underway. On the one hand, the Indian government appointed the NCEUS, and it has introduced important schemes like the National Rural Employment Guarantee Programme. On the other hand, with the ongoing changes in economic and social policy in India, an even greater number of people are being pushed into the folds of this unregulated sector, where they must manage as best they can, without any substantive guarantees from the State.

The great majority of women in India work in the unorganised sector. They do home-based work, are self-employed, employed in household enterprises, small units, on land as agricultural workers, as labourers on construction sites, as domestic workers, and in many other forms of temporary employment, in rural as well as urban areas. As some of the writers in this issue have pointed out, liberalisation has ensured that when employment becomes sub-contractual or piecemeal, an even greater number of women join the ranks of the unorganised.

As women in a vulnerable and impoverished sector, they face the additional inequalities of gender. These translate into many tangibles — unequal wages, no maternity benefits, sexual harassment, and poor nutrition and ill health. Women in the unorganised sector as well as countless other women invariably also do a wide variety of "invisible" work, and often shoulder the dual burden of paid and unpaid labour. The unpaid contribution of many of the activities associated with household maintenance,

provisioning and reproduction — which are typically performed by women or female children — tends to be ignored in calculations of labour.

When caste or adivasi status intersects with poverty and gender, the status of workers in the labour hierarchy drops even more sharply. On the one hand, the pernicious "traditions" of caste ensure that women as well as men in India continue to be forced to work in dehumanising caste-based occupations; on the other hand, "development" projects such as big dams or policies that are changing the agrarian economy are taking away from women the space and opportunity to work with their traditional skills and knowledge.

The articles and papers in this dossier cover these as well as other issues associated with women working in the unorganised sector. Some of the articles are, variously, overviews, conceptual, or ideological pieces. They cover issues such as the nature of the unorganised sector, of unpaid work, of labour laws, of globalisation and the "feminisation" of the workforce, and the very idea of work in the Indian tradition. Some other pertinent issues, such as attempts at unionising in the unorganised sector, are covered in the online version of *Agenda*.

Other articles are reports from the field. These are by no means intended as a comprehensive typology of women at work in India — very many types of women's work are not included in this issue. The complex and multi-layered nature of women's work can perhaps only be described through a few representative accounts. These include stories of women migrating for work, working on the land, selling firewood, carrying human excreta, doing domestic work, working on construction sites, on plantations, as waste-pickers, as sex workers, and as water collectors. In addition, this issue contains articles on micro-credit "self-help" groups and commuting on "ladies special" trains.

At times, readers ask for "positive" or "success" stories. Success however need not only be manifest in measurable results or in vivid transformations. Success is inherent in the daily struggles of the women workers of India, in their constant confrontations with survival, in the sheer effort of their labour. To say this obviously does not amount to a validation of the unorganised sector or an argument for the status quo. It is, instead, an attempt to look at another dimension of success, to recognise women's negotiations with seemingly insurmountable odds and their role in holding up more than half of the sky. — **Sharmila Joshi**

Sharmila Joshi is an independent journalist and researcher based in Mumbai, India. She has written extensively about issues related to gender; her research interests include problems of development, globalisation and labour

Understanding the unorganised sector

Almost 400 million people — more than 85% of the working population in India — work in the unorganised sector. Of these, at least 120 million are women. The recent Arjun Sengupta Committee report is a stark reminder of the conditions in this sector. A subsequent draft Bill to provide security to workers, which bypasses regulatory measures and budgetary provisions, has generated intense debate

KIRAN MOGHE

THE UPA GOVERNMENT recently finalised the draft of a Bill purporting to provide social security to workers in the unorganised sector. The draft is likely to be tabled in the monsoon session of Parliament and it is bound to become a source of intense debate between unions representing the interests of workers in the unorganised sector and the central government. It would be useful to examine the issues and concerns of workers from the unorganised sector in India, and also evaluate whether the draft Bill is able to address some of these concerns.

The term 'unorganised' is often used in the Indian context to refer to the vast numbers of women and men engaged in different forms of employment. These forms include home-based work (for example: rolling papads and beedis), self-employment (for example: selling vegetables), employment in household enterprises, small units, on land as agricultural workers, labour on construction sites, domestic work, and a

myriad other forms of casual or temporary employment.

Workers engaged in the unorganised sector do not have the benefit of several laws such as the Minimum Wages Act or the Factories Act. They are also not covered by statutory welfare measures such as maternity benefits, provident fund, gratuity, etc, all of which were put in place after intense struggles by the Indian working class in the pre- as well as post-Independence period.

The term 'unorganised' is often used interchangeably with the term 'informal', or employment in the informal sector. Strictly speaking, 'informal' is used to denote those forms of enterprise that are not governed by any legal framework (for example, registration under Company Laws). Although it is quite logical that an 'informal' enterprise will employ 'informal'/unorganised' labour, it must be remembered that 'formal' enterprises also have 'unorganised' employees, and,

Rajesh Vora



in fact, there is an increasing tendency to informalise employment relationships in the formal sector.

The use of contract workers to run canteens or do housekeeping and gardening, employing teachers on a clock-hour basis, and 'outsourcing' jobs such as data entry are some examples that may unravel the complex nature of employment in the unorganised/informal sector in the country. What is important is this: whether in terms of the legal status of the enterprise or the employment relations, workers in this sector are the most disadvantaged section of workers in India.

Two National Labour Commissions, along with several other international and national commissions, committees and conferences in the last 50 years have documented the socio-economic conditions of workers in the unorganised sector in India. The latest is the National Commission for Enterprises in the Unorganised Sector (NCEUS), also known as the Arjun Sengupta Committee, which submitted its report to the Government of India in 2006.

The Committee's report estimated that there are over 390 million (or at least 37 crore) workers in the unorganised sector in India, and that they contribute around 60% to the national economic output of the country. Around 28 crore work in the rural sector, of which an estimated 22 crore are in the agricultural sector. Around 6 crore are in urban areas. Women make up 11-12 crore, of which around 8 crore are engaged in agriculture.

In terms of overall employment, the Committee's report estimates that over 92% of the country's working population is engaged in the unorganised sector, and that the majority of women workers also work in this sector. Yet, in spite of their vast numbers, and their substantial contribution to the national economy, they are amongst the poorest sections of our population. It is therefore imperative that urgent steps are taken to improve their condition — this is the constitutional obligation of those who govern the country.

By and large, there are three types of issues of unorganised sector workers that need to be addressed. One is the regulation of their working conditions, the second is provisioning for conditions in which they are unable to continue to work, such as old age and disability, and the third is measures to help them overcome situations of insecurity, such as major illnesses and the liability of losing employment or being laid off at the will of the employer, for which they have no legal remedy.

Unorganised sector work is characterised by low wages that are often insufficient to meet minimum living standards including nutrition, long working hours, hazardous working conditions, lack of basic services such as first aid, drinking water and sanitation at the worksite, etc. Even a cursory glance will identify several such occupations, including agricultural labour, construction workers on building sites, brick kiln workers, workers in various service industries ranging from transport and courier services to the hospitality industry.

A large 'invisible' section of workers are employed in what is called 'home-based work' where, typically, workers use their own premises to do piece-rated work. This not only includes traditional crafts, handloom weaving, beedi rolling, but also more modern industry such as electronics. A survey done by AIDWA (All-India Democratic Women's Association), as far back as 1989, in Pune city identified over 150 occupations where women did home-based work that ranged from making flower garlands, folding paper for the book printing industry, supplying chappatis to caterers, making agarbattis, weaving plastic seats for office chairs, de-seeding tamarind, and packing sweets.

Both formal and informal surveys reveal that on an average, unorganised sector workers do not earn more than Rs 30-50 per day. Some may appear to earn more but the work is often seasonal and the total earnings amount to roughly the same. In order to earn more, workers work longer and harder. This is particularly the case for self-employed persons such as vendors, ragpickers, and petty traders, who make their services available from the early hours of the morning to late at night, in all types of inhospitable working conditions.

Parents often take the help of children to supplement their own earnings, and this is a major reason for the widespread prevalence of child labour in the unorganised sector. Women are given low and unequal wages. Sexual harassment is common but unarticulated due to fear of loss of employment. There is no question of paid leave and maternity benefits. The use of cheap labour in the unorganised sector is the major source of profit for employers and contractors who exploit the workers' lack of collective bargaining power and state regulation.

Living in abject poverty, most workers in the unorganised sector barely manage a subsistence existence. There is no question of saving, particularly for times when they are unable to work. Hazardous work conditions often cause accidents, loss of limbs, etc. Such disability is disastrous because there are no other sources of income for these households. More importantly, there is no provision of old age security such as a pension. When AIDWA decided to organise domestic workers into a union in Pune city, the overwhelming response of women to the demand for pensions revealed the huge insecurity they faced.

The lack of savings and support systems also mean that there is no fall-back in other emergencies, especially major illnesses or the death of an earning member in the family. The rising costs of private healthcare and the systematic dismantling of the public health system in these times of liberalisation are a major reason for the huge indebtedness of households in the unorganised sector. There is a pressing need to provide insurance, especially health insurance cover to the workers.

The assurance of the UPA in its Common Minimum Programme (CMP) announced in May 2004, that it would ensure "comprehensive protective legislation" for



agricultural workers and workers in the unorganised sector, raised hopes within this section and the unions that have worked hard in the last few years to organise them. There have been several drafts of the proposed legislation, including one formulated by the Arjun Sengupta Committee. They propose the setting up of tripartite boards with representation of workers, employers and the government that will register the workers, regulate their working conditions and implement social security welfare schemes. Several campaigns, nationally and locally, and struggles launched by the workers themselves have attempted to ensure that the legislation is implemented.

The recent draft approved by the Cabinet therefore comes as a shock to all those looking forward to the passage of the Bill. For one, it lumps together the agricultural sector and the rest of the unorganised sector, when the CMP itself makes a commitment for separate laws. Most importantly, it makes absolutely no mention of the regulation of service conditions, which is the most crucial aspect of the legislation. On welfare aspects, it contains only pious declarations with no specific schemes. It introduces the concept of a Worker Facilitation Centre to be run by "NGOs", thereby negating the important role played by trade unions in articulating and taking up the demands of

this poorest section of workers. Worse, it makes absolutely no mention of the government's budgetary commitment to the process of providing social security. The draft therefore reveals the huge gap between the political rhetoric of the ruling sections in this country and their actual intentions.

However, this is not the first time the government has made a mockery of its own assurances. The first draft of the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act was similarly flawed, but sustained efforts by various organisations have ultimately resulted in a piece of legislation that has the potential to bring about social and economic change in rural India. There is no doubt that the vast unorganised working sections in the country will launch yet another sustained struggle to ensure that their fundamental Constitutional rights are legally actualised.

Kiran Moghe is President of the Pune Zilla Gharkamgar Sanghatana and Maharashtra President of AIDWA (All-India Democratic Women's Association)

Uncovering women's work

A substantial amount of women's time is devoted to unpaid labour. Yet, much of women's work is invisible. The productive contribution of household maintenance, provisioning and reproduction is ignored. As a result, inadequate attention is paid to the conditions of women's work and its economic value

JAYATI GHOSH

WORK DEFINES THE CONDITIONS of human existence in many ways. This may be even more true for women than for men, because the responsibility for social reproduction — which largely devolves upon women in most societies — ensures that the vast majority of women are inevitably involved in some kind of productive and/or reproductive activity. Despite this, in many discussions, the importance of women's work generally receives marginal treatment simply because so much of the work regularly performed is “invisible”, in terms of market criteria or even in terms of socially dominant perceptions of what constitutes “work”. This obviously matters, because it leads to the social underestimation of women's productive contribution. More importantly, as a result, inadequate attention is typically devoted to the conditions of women's work and their implications for the general material conditions and wellbeing of women.

This is particularly the case in developing countries, where patterns of market integration and the relatively high proportion of goods and services that are not marketed have implied that female contributions to productive activity extend well beyond those that are socially recognised, and that the conditions under which many of these contributions are made entail significant pressure on women in a variety of ways. In almost all societies, and particularly in developing countries, there remain essential but usually unpaid activities (such as housework and childcare, and community-based activities), which are seen as the responsibility of the women of the household. This social allocation tends to operate regardless of the other work that women may perform.

For working women in lower income groups, it is particularly difficult to find outside labour to substitute for household-based tasks, which therefore tend to devolve upon young girls and aged women within the household or put further pressure on the workload of the women workers themselves. It is in fact wrong to assume that unpaid tasks by women would continue regardless of the way resources and incomes are allocated. “Gender neutral” economic policies may thus imply possible breaking points within the household or the collapse of women's capacity. Social provision for at least a significant part of such services and tasks, or changes in the gender-wise division of labour with respect to household tasks, therefore become important

considerations when women are otherwise employed.

This makes the consideration of work participation by women a more complex matter than is often recognised. Since most women are actually employed in some kind of productive/reproductive work, whether or not this is recognised and quantified by statistics, the issues relating to female employment are qualitatively different from those of male employment. Thus, the unemployment-poverty link which has been noted for men in developing countries is not so direct and evident for women: many women are fully employed and still remain poor in absolute terms, and adding to their workload will not necessarily improve their material conditions. Nor is the pressing policy concern that of simply increasing the volume of explicit female employment, since simply adding on recognised “jobs” may in fact lead to a double burden upon women whose household obligations still have to be fulfilled. Instead, concern has to be focused upon the quality, the recognition and the remuneration of women's work in developing countries, as well as the conditions facilitating it, such as alternative arrangements for household work and childcare. All of these are critically affected by broader economic policies as well as by government interventions at micro and meso levels. And these together determine whether or not increased labour market activity by women is associated with genuine improvements in their economic circumstances.

The relative invisibility of much of women's work is now more widely recognised. Since many of the activities associated with household maintenance, provisioning and reproduction — which are typically performed by women or female children — are not subject to explicit market relations, there is an inherent tendency to ignore the actual productive contribution of these activities. Similarly, social norms, values and perceptions also operate to render most household-based activity “invisible”. This invisibility gets directly transferred to data inadequacies, making officially generated data in most countries (and particularly in developing countries) very rough and imprecise indicators of the actual productive contribution of women.

All this means that data on the labour force participation of women is notoriously inaccurate. Not only are the problems of undercounting and invisibility rife, but there are often substantial variations in data across countries which may



not reflect actual differences but simply distinct methods of estimation. Further, even statistics over time for the same country may alter dramatically, as a result of changed definitions of what constitutes “economically active” or because of more probing questions put to women, or simply due to greater sensitivity on the part of the investigators.

The impact of social structures is reflected not merely in the data, but in the actual determination of explicit labour market participation by women. Thus, in certain regions of India social norms determine the choice between participation in production and involvement in reproduction, and consequently inhibit the freedom of women to participate in the job market or engage in other forms of overt self-employment. The limitations on such freedom can take many forms. While the explicit social rules of some societies limit women's access to many areas of public life, the implicit pressures of other supposedly more emancipated societies may operate no less forcefully to direct women into certain prescribed occupational channels.

It is also true that since the activities of reproduction and child nurture put so many and varied demands upon women's labour and time, combining these activities with other forms of productive work is only possible when other members of society (whether within the household or outside it) share the burden at least partially. The issue of

social responsibility for such activities is therefore critical. Certainly, involving women in other forms of work without ensuring the sharing of tasks and responsibilities associated with child-rearing and household work puts tremendous pressure on both mothers and children.

Obviously, given the nature of women's participation in economic activities, which involves a substantial amount of unpaid labour, overt participation in the labour market or in what is declared to be “economic activity” does not capture the full extent of women's work. The major Indian sources of data in this matter, the Census of India and the National Sample Surveys (NSS), have increased their attempts to recognise women's work by asking probing questions that seek to establish women's involvement in economic activity. However, this is still defined to include only participation in work for the household farm or enterprise, and does not include housework, childcare, care of the sick and elderly, and related activities associated with social reproduction. It also does not include related work necessary for provisioning for the household, whether it is fuel wood collection in rural areas, or attempts to obtain access to clean water in urban areas, activities that are typically the responsibility of the women of the household.

Recently there have been attempts to capture some of the evidence on unpaid work by women, through time-use

surveys. These in general show not only that a very substantial amount of women's time is devoted to unpaid labour, often at the cost of leisure and rest, but also that such unpaid labour may actually have been increasing over time, especially in the past decade.

There are several reasons for this. The structural adjustment policies which have squeezed various types of government expenditure have in effect meant a reduction in access to a range of public goods and services for ordinary citizens, which tend to affect women especially adversely as the additional burden typically falls on them. Cutbacks in per capita health expenditure and the increase in user charges for such services typically reduce the extent to which the poor especially use such facilities. Quite apart from reducing their own access to health facilities, this in turn increases the burden of labour on women in poor households, as the responsibility of caring for the sick who cannot be hospitalised typically falls on them. Worsening of urban infrastructure conditions, such as drinking water and sanitation, implies greater time spent in ensuring minimally clean water supply for the household. Inadequate access to

fuel for cooking requires more time spent collecting firewood, or going in for more time-consuming and labour-intensive forms of cooking. And so on.

Sometimes the increase in women's unpaid labour results not from cutbacks in public expenditure so much as from the attempt to fulfil other social objectives. A case in point is the nationwide attempt to conserve and regenerate forest resources through decentralised village-level joint forest management committees (usually with one representative from each household) which set aside areas to be developed as forest, prohibiting any encroachment, including for minor fuel wood collection (which still remains the dominant source of cooking fuel across rural India). A study by Bina Agarwal shows how this has led to very major increases in the time spent collecting fuel wood, as the women now have to travel much further away from their homes to access even minor amounts of such resources.

In turn, such increases in the unpaid labour time of mothers often imply that other household tasks have to be shared, typically among older girl-children. There are numerous micro studies that indicate this tendency,

Raaj Dayal



in both rural and urban areas.

In addition, even the 2004-05 NSS found that 52% of rural females and 63% of urban females (15 years or older) dominantly engaged in domestic work. This was not simply because they were not working outside and therefore described themselves as working within the home. Rather, the dominant proportion of girls and women who were engaged in domestic duties were constrained to spend most of their days in this way, whether as a sole occupation or in addition to other economic activities. According to this survey, 45% of rural women and 56% of urban women dominantly engaged in household work had no choice but to spend their time in this way — mostly because there was no other member to fulfil these tasks and they could not afford hired help.

Predictably, these proportions were particularly high for women in the age-group 30-59 years, but they are close to half even for younger women. Even for women older than 60 years, around one-third was still constrained to perform unpaid domestic labour. The higher ratios of unpaid (and largely unrecognised) domestic labour were higher for urban women across all age-groups.

Incidentally, this excludes those who are engaged in unpaid household labour in a subsidiary capacity, which would include a large part of women otherwise employed. The NSS finds that 16% of rural women and 25% of urban women who are dominantly engaged in household work also engage in some other “economic activity” on a subsidiary basis. Similarly, of those women involved in recognised economic activity most also have to perform domestic duties. This implies a “double burden” of work for such women.

Many of the unpaid household-based activities of such women are not simply those related to social reproduction but are very clearly economic in nature. Some are activities that continue and have become even more significant because of the invisibility of and social lack of attention to the unpaid labour of women. For example, NSS 2004-05 showed that of those involved in unpaid domestic work, 57% of rural women and 19% of urban women were engaged in the free collection of fuel wood for household consumption. Activities related to food processing, such as husking and grinding grain, were engaged in by around 15% of women. Other unpaid activities such as maintaining kitchen gardens and looking after livestock and poultry also occupied a majority of women — 60% in rural areas and 24% in urban areas. These are all economic activities which in developed societies are typically recognised as such because they are increasingly delegated by women and performed through paid contracts.

Unpaid labour is rarely something to be celebrated, and as far as possible there should be not only social recognition of it but also some attempt by society to reward or compensate those who perform it. Thus, unpaid workers

should be given the same social concern that motivates the public policies for pension and insurance schemes for workers in general. Similarly, other changes that reduce the amount of time spent in unpaid labour should also be encouraged. It should be noted that certain changes in technology can have significant effects on the time spent and the drudgery involved in unpaid labour. Thus, some innovations involving basic cooking technology (for example, smokeless *chulhas*) have reduced discomfort during the cooking process, while other changes such as access to safe water supply can dramatically reduce the time taken to procure water for drinking and other household uses.

However, the converse is also unfortunately true: slower rates of labour-saving technological change in precisely such activities also mean that unpaid labour continues to account for a large proportion of women's time, and that such work remains arduous and tedious despite development in other areas. Similarly, certain public policy measures often have the unfortunate (and unintended) effect of increasing women's unpaid work. This is true of many apparently “gender-blind” policies that end up increasing unpaid labour time, whether they are afforestation policies that increase the time spent on collecting fuel wood, or sanitation policies that require large amounts of time to be spent collecting water for household use, or health policies that put the basic burden of care of the sick upon household members.

One of the more disturbing features of the way in which labour is organised and performed in India is the extent to which it devolves upon girl-children. The latest information on the usual activities of girl-children (from the NSS once again) suggests that, despite the increase in school enrolment of girls, a significant proportion of girls are still forced to engage in unpaid work, either as part of the household enterprise or in domestic duties or in miscellaneous activities. In rural areas, around one-fourth of girls are not in school but are working as part of their usual activities, and in urban areas around 12% of girls are so engaged. Even among girls who attend school as their principal activity, a significant proportion also engage in unpaid labour, usually in the home. And more than 75% of such girls say that they are forced to do this because of the absence of others to do the work.

So it appears that young girls are still put to work — in domestic duties, as workers in household enterprises and in a range of miscellaneous activities. And the dominant proportion of this work is unpaid. Yet this phenomenon remains little recognised; even women's activists have devoted relatively less attention to this issue. Until society as a whole is more able to recognise and appreciate the extremely necessary but continuously undervalued and unpaid labour of women, this is likely to continue.

Jayati Ghosh is Professor of Economics at Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi. Some parts of this article recently appeared in her column in Frontline

A lawless sector

With the growing fragmentation of the labour force in India, employment without security has become the norm. Even as organised sector workers struggle to use whatever is left of labour laws and social security schemes, workers in the unorganised sector have very little legal protection in terms of job security, wages, or working conditions

SUSAN ABRAHAM

IN 2005, the Confederation of Indian Industries (CII) commissioned a study titled 'Understanding the levels of women's empowerment in the workplace'. The report revealed a number of startling facts, including this: women constitute only 6% of the total workforce in corporate houses. At the time, Anu Aga, then director of Thermax, was the CII's chairperson of the National Committee on Women's Empowerment. While releasing the report, Aga deplored the fact that despite being nearly half of the country's population, the percentage of women in leading managerial positions is abysmally low.

For the vast majority of women workers in India though, the problem is not one of scarcity of numbers but of having to work in extremely exploitative conditions. The Report of the Working Group on Social Security, submitted in June 2006 to the Planning Commission for the Eleventh Five-Year Plan, shows that a total of 39.7 crore workers are employed in the organised and unorganised sectors in India.

Only 7% of this huge labour force is in the organised sector, which includes workers on regular salaries in registered companies and firms. The remaining 93% work in the unorganised or informal sector. Almost 96% of women workers, an estimated 12.39 crore, work in the unorganised sector. Of these, 10.6 crore are in rural areas and the remaining women work in urban areas. The female work participation rate is reported to have increased from 19.7% in 1981 to 25.7% in 2000. This is one of the reasons for the theory that globalisation has brought about greater "feminisation" of the labour force.

Look at the areas where women workers are concentrated and the picture loses its shine. The policies of liberalisation have in fact had a deteriorating effect on women's employment. This is largely because women are being forced to take up jobs that offer very poor wages and little social security, in response to the employers' need for a more flexible labour force. Women's weaker bargaining power, vis—vis employers as well as male co-workers, is generally regarded as a prime reason for the employment of women in such large numbers in this sector.

Whether in export processing zones or in the garments industry, where more than 60% of workers are estimated to be women, most of the jobs for women have been created mainly at the lower end of the value chain. Women

constitute the ranks of low-skilled labour, are generally paid lower wages than men, and are not unionised at all. Exceptions are few, such as call centres and BPO operations which pay higher wages.

The labour scenario has changed in drastic and sweeping ways after 1991, not just in India but the world over. The production process is now dispersed to small-sized enterprises. Outsourcing has spread so much that millions of workers are either employed in dispersed units of the main production centre or they are made to bring their work home to continue production for the factories. If 50 years ago production had become so mechanised that workers became cogs in a giant wheel, today they are caught in smaller wheels that have no visible linkage to the centres of production. With this fragmentation of the labour force has come the whittling down of labour law protection and social security benefits. When it comes to women, this means next to no protection.

It is strange that the very first change in labour laws to affect women workers, introduced by the UPA government in 2005, was an amendment to the Factories Act of 1948, which prohibits women from doing night shift. This was done purportedly to bring equality for women at the workplace, though other long-awaited reforms have remained on the backburner. While the law has been introduced essentially as a matter of making choice available to women workers, it could easily become a mandatory service condition for women. The first set of people to welcome this amendment was garment manufacturers, particularly export-oriented units. They welcomed it as being in line with their demands for greater relaxation in contract labour rules! The only safety stipulation in the amendment is that women working on night shift will get transportation to their residence. No provisions have been made for medical facilities, maternity benefits or protection from sexual harassment.

One of the things the 2005 CII study on levels of women's empowerment revealed is that none of the specific benefits meant for women, such as maternity leave or crèche facilities for working mothers, are actually available. Nor have women employees been able to benefit from the policy against sexual harassment because, often, the perpetrator of the harassment is in the line of authority that

she has to complain to.

Employment without security has become the order of the day rather than the exception. While organised workers try to remain on their feet by attempting to use whatever is left of protective labour laws and social security schemes, they are getting weaker in strength and numbers. As for workers in the unorganised sector, they do not get protection in terms of job security, wages, working conditions and welfare due to various factors. These include casual and seasonal employment, scattered places of work, poor working conditions, lack of a concrete employer-employee relationship, irregular working hours, and a complete lack of legal protection or government support.

For women workers, the picture is bleaker. While the number of women in the unorganised sector and child workers has increased rapidly, their working hours have become “flexible”, and labour laws or any form of protective legislation have gone further out of their reach. Even when employed in the organised sector, job security for many women was tenuous and most benefits remained on paper. Now, full-time, regular employment for many has been replaced by part-time, temporary, and precarious work.

Existing labour laws provide scant protection for the vast majority of women workers in the country. The Factories Act of 1948 covers working conditions, health and safety, basic amenities like toilets, crèches, working hours, etc, but does not apply to workplaces with fewer than 10 workers using power-driven machinery or to those with less than 20 workers, without power. The Employees State Insurance Act, 1948, meant to provide for sickness, accident and maternity benefits, has not been extended to the vast majority of women workers from the unorganised sector.

Ever since the enactment of the Contract Labour Act, 1971, employers have found it a convenient means to deprive workers of benefits, because by sub-contracting production or by dividing it into small units employers are able to evade all the existing laws. The government happens to be the biggest employer of contract workers and it also turns out to be the biggest violator of all contractor-labour rules. It would be no exaggeration to say that the Contract Labour Act has been the biggest cause of the dwindling numbers of workers in the organised sector in general, and in pushing women workers out of the social security safety net in particular.

India has a plethora of labour laws, but laws which specifically relate to women can be counted on the fingers of one hand: the Maternity Benefit Act, the Equal Remuneration for Equal Work Act, or the recently enacted Protection from Sexual Harassment Act. Despite ILO guidelines, these are the least implemented of all the labour laws in the country.

The problems of women workers revolve around issues such as unequal wages, lack of maternity benefits and childcare facilities and discrimination at the workplace. Barring a few,

erstwhile trade unions were disinclined to take up issues concerning women union members in the days when they had sizeable strength. Today, there are few women workers left to mobilise into unions.

Other methods of organising have been tried in different parts of the country, through associations of self-employed women such as SEWA in Gujarat or organisations formed by women workers themselves, such as anganwadi workers or domestic workers in Maharashtra, and construction workers in Tamil Nadu. Women in these groups have even taken their demands to Parliament.

Great hopes have been pinned on the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA) enacted on August 23, 2005. The Act is meant to guarantee employment for a minimum of 100 days a year to one member of a BPL (below the poverty line) family, who has to be paid a third of the minimum wage. Its predecessor in Maharashtra was the Employment Guarantee Act, under which the Employment Guarantee Scheme (EGS) has been a source of rural employment. It was possible for rural women workers to benefit from its provisions because rural-based parties and unions made a point of organising them for this purpose. In the post-liberalisation scenario, not many efforts are being made to organise rural women. It is not going to be easy to bring the large number of rural women workers under the cover of the NREGA, and it remains to be seen when and how they will benefit from this legislation.

It is important to recognise that women workers who are forced to work in the unorganised sector are often from the poorest sections. Poverty traps them into working in the least protected and most low paid jobs. Maternity benefits and childcare, which are crucial for their mental and physical wellbeing, are denied, because of which they often lose their jobs. Pension and a minimum insurance cover for unorganised sector workers remain pipedreams. The real challenge is to ensure that the labour laws and social security schemes that exist (on paper) for the diminishing number of workers in the organised sector are extended to the 90% of workers in the unorganised sector — and then actually implemented. We urgently need social policy to protect the rights of women workers in the newer as well as older forms of work in the unorganised sector.

Susan Abraham is a practising lawyer and writer who has worked extensively for workers' rights, particularly in the unorganised sector

It's been a hard day's night

In a process of reverse migration, hundreds of women in Maharashtra's Gondia district travel from small towns to the villages, staying away from home for 20 hours a day, to earn a daily wage of Rs 30. The beedi industry has closed down in their hometowns and there are no jobs

P SAINATH

REVANTABAI KAMBLE has not spoken to her six-year-old son for months. They live in the same house in Tiroda, of course. It's the same with Buribai Nagpure — though she might sometimes see her older boy if he's awake. Both women are among hundreds in this part of Maharashtra's Gondia district who spend just four hours a day at home, and travel over 1,000 km each week — to earn Rs 30 daily.

It's 6 am when we accompany the women from their homes to the railway station. Most have been up for two hours already. "I've finished the cooking, washing, sweeping and cleaning," says Buribai cheerfully. "So now we can talk." No other member of her household is awake when we arrive. "Poor things," she says, "they're tired out." Isn't Buribai tired out too? "Yes, but what to do? We have no options."

At the station there are many other women without options. They are also unusual in one sense: these are not migrants from village to city. They are footloose workers from an urban setting seeking work in the villages. This search takes them from mofussil towns — Tiroda is a tehsil headquarters — to toil as agricultural labour in the villages, almost every day of their lives. They spend up to 20 hours away from home every day. There are no weekends off and no jobs in Tiroda. "After the beedi industry went," says Mahendra Walde, "it is impossible for them to find work here." Walde is district secretary of the Kisan Sabha in Gondia.

Many of the women live five or more kilometres from the railway station. "So we have to be up by 4 am," says Buribai. "We finish all our work and walk to the station by seven." That's when the train comes in and we clamber on with the group that will go to Salwa in rural Nagpur. The 76 km journey takes two hours. On the platform and in the train are more women, weary-eyed, hungry, half asleep. Most sit on the floor of the crowded train, leaning against the carriage wall, trying to snatch some sleep before their station arrives.

"We will reach home at 11 pm," says Revantabai. "We sleep by midnight. And start all over again at 4 am the next morning. I have not seen my six-year-old awake in a long time." Then she laughs: "Some of the much younger children may not recognise their mothers when they do see them." Their children have either dropped out of school because they cannot afford it, or they perform poorly there. "There is no one at home to watch or help," points out Buribai. And some of the youngsters are

themselves doing any work they can find.

"Naturally, they do badly at school," says Lata Papankar, a teacher based in Tiroda. "Who can blame them?" It appears the government of Maharashtra can. The performance of these children is held against the schools, which could lose funds. And against teachers trying to help them, who might be penalised for poor results. An approach that will further erode their chances of going to school.

Seated on the rocking floor of the train, Shakuntalabai Agashe says she has been doing this for 15 years. The only breaks come during festivals or the monsoon. "For some kinds of work," she says, "we may be paid Rs 50. But that's rare. Mostly it's Rs 25-30." There are no jobs in their towns, say the women.

The money there has flown to the cities. The industries that existed have closed down. The mofussil towns are in decay. Almost all these women found work with the beedi industry in the past. "When that went, we were finished," says Buribai. "Beedi is a footloose industry, ever in search of cheaper labour," says K Nagaraj of the Madras Institute of Development Studies who has worked on the sector. "It shifts base quite quickly. The human consequences of such shifts are devastating. And have gone up these past 15 years." A lot of beedi work "has gone off from Gondia to Uttar Pradesh and Chhattisgarh," says Pradeep Papankar of the Kisan Sabha.

"Of course, we do not buy tickets to travel on the train," the women say. "A round ticket would cost more than the Rs 30 we earn. Our system is simple: if we get caught, we pay the checker a bribe of Rs 5." Ticket revenue has been privatised. "They extort it from us knowing we can't afford it."

"My older boy drops me at the station on his cycle sometimes," says Buribai. "Then he stays there looking for any work, whatever the pay. My daughter cooks at home. And my second boy takes the meal to his brother." In short, says Walde, "three people are working for the wage of one." But all five family members together, including her husband, often make much less than Rs 100 a day. Some days, just two of them may have earned anything at all. They do not have a BPL (below the poverty line) ration card.

At stations along the way are labour contractors, waiting to pick up workers on the cheap.

P. Sainath



Unusual migrants: women from an urban area on their way to work in the villages

Reaching Salwa around 9 am, we set out a kilometre to the village and a further 3 km into the fields. Buribai does that last stretch with a huge vessel of water perched on her head, yet outpaces all of us.

Those on whose fields they labour for a pittance are also in trouble. The agrarian crisis has hit landowner Prabhakar Vanjare badly. He owns three acres and has taken 10 on lease. "Prices are terrible, we earn almost nothing," he complains. And resident labour in the village has migrated elsewhere in despair. Hence, the coming of these women.

This is eastern Vidarbha, away from the troubled cotton belt. Vanjare grows paddy, chillies, and other items. Right now, he just requires the women for weeding work. They work till about 5.30 pm and get back to the station an hour later.

"But the train only comes in by 8 pm," Buribai points out. "So we will reach Tiroda only around 10 pm." Their families are asleep when the women get home. And asleep when they leave in the mornings. "What family life can there be," asks Revantabai.

By the time they get home, they have travelled over 170 km. And will do that every day of the week — to earn Rs 30. "We'll be home by 11 pm," says Buribai, "to eat and sleep." Until four hours later, when they have to get up and do it all over again.

Courtesy: The Hindu

P Sainath, who recently won the Magsaysay award, is the author of Everybody Loves a Good Drought, and is Rural Affairs Editor of The Hindu

'We pay for the work with our dignity'

Women of the Kol community on the MP-UP border carry 30 kg of wood every day across several kilometres and return home with Rs 15. Others survive by working long crushing hours in quarries or on farms. They are sexually exploited by landowners, upper caste groups, and government officials. "If we put up a resistance," one woman says, "we will starve to death"

APARNA PALLAVI

PARASIA DEVI ADWASI's day starts at 3 am, when she and her group of eight women from Lakhanpur village on the Uttar Pradesh-Madhya Pradesh border start off for Manikpur railway station, each carrying headloads of about 30 kg of firewood. They have to hurry, because they must reach the station by 6 am, covering a distance of 14 km. Once they reach the station, they have to take their chances at getting into any train going towards Satna, along with their loads of firewood. Without tickets, of course, because the Rs 40 fare for a one-way journey is more than what each woman hopes to earn during the day.

An hour's journey later, they are out in the markets of Satna. If they are lucky, their regular customers will buy all the firewood. Or they will have to wander in the bylanes looking for buyers until the last load is sold. Each bundle of between 10-15 kg of firewood sells for Rs 10-15. When Parasia Devi gets back on the train, at most she will be carrying Rs 30.

The money will have substantially dwindled by the time she is back home, because the railway police and guards have to be bribed for letting the women travel without tickets. By evening, when she has collected two more bundles of firewood for the next morning from the forests near her village, with the 'permission' of the forest guards, she will be lucky to have Rs 15 left for her family.

In the same village lives Lakhmi Devi Adwasi, who is fortunate because her family owns two bighas (slightly less than an acre) of land. Due to continued drought, no one in the village has been able to cultivate their land for four years. Lakhmi Devi and her family of seven survive by quarrying the granite rock from their land and selling it to contractors. For one truck full of stone, the family is paid Rs 1,200-1,500. This includes the cost of the stone and the labour involved in quarrying, breaking the stone, sorting it into pieces of a specified size, and finally loading it onto the trucks. It takes Lakhmi Devi, her husband, father-in-law, and two grown-up sons eight to 10 days to fill one truck.

"I don't know how long we can keep doing this," Lakhmi Devi's husband Sipahilal says. "The land is sinking lower, we are losing soil. Soon it will become totally unfit for cultivation." About 60 families of Kol adivasis in the village survive by selling rock from their land.

In Gadhwa village, about 20 km into Madhya Pradesh, the Kol do not own any land. Only two options are open to

them — to work for *paanch-paua majoori* (a daily wage of 1.25 kg of grain) on the farms of upper caste people, or work in the illegal stone quarries owned by the same people for a wage of Rs 50 a day, for men, and Rs 35 a day for women. In both cases, the workday is over 12 hours long.

"I don't know which is better," Sohan Devi says. "The *paanch paua* is not a survival wage — I have six children to feed. The stone quarries offer a better wage but the wages are not regular. The babus do not pay us for 10-15 days at a time, and then when they do pay, they cut off a few days' pay and threaten to sack us if we protest."

The Kol, who form a majority of the population in the Rewa and Sidhi districts of Madhya Pradesh, and also in adjacent parts of Uttar Pradesh, have been landless for generations. In Madhya Pradesh the Kol have tribal status, whereas in Uttar Pradesh they are included in the scheduled castes.

Whatever their legal status, their economic condition is the same. Exploitation is a way of life, given the near-absolute power that the economically powerful upper caste groups wield. This power equation has gender ramifications — the men are required by 'custom' to perform unpaid labour at the time of sowing and harvest, while the women are sexually exploited, as they have been in these areas for generations. Violence against both men and women at the slightest pretext is common.

"It is well known around here," says Ram Bahadur Singh, who works with a local political party. "In popular parlance, it is said that quarry owners do not let women touch the hammer without touching them first. It is a pre-condition to being allowed to work at all. It is the same in agricultural work and selling firewood."

The women themselves speak openly about this exploitation. Parbata Mai, an elderly resident of village Biharia in Madhya Pradesh, who is part of a group that sells firewood, says bitterly: "No one ever gives anything for free to a Kol. Our men can't work in the firewood trade, because if they do they will never bring anything back home. Instead, they might be arrested or beaten up, apart from being robbed." She says, in searing words, that the women are forced to use sex and sexuality not just as a 'work permit' but also as a shield to protect their men against violence.

"What can we do," asks Semaria Devi of the same village.



Women wait at Manikpur railway station with bundles of firewood

“Our mothers and grandmothers have had to put up with the same situation. Our men know it is happening to us and can do nothing to stop it. We have no land. The lands, the quarries, the forests, all are owned by the thakur-bamans (powerful, upper caste people). If we put up a resistance we will starve to death.”

It is not as if there are no legal provisions to protect people like the Kol from such exploitation. Constitutional provisions speak of land distribution to the landless, the right to livelihood, and a sexual harassment-free workplace. The Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest-Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act 2006 was recently enacted to rectify some of the historical injustices against adivasis and dalits. But most of these provisions remain on paper.

The reasons are not difficult to understand. Ramesh Shukla of the Patha Dalit-Adivasi Sabha, an organisation working for the rights of oppressed communities in this area, says: “The revenue and forest departments of both Uttar Pradesh and Madhya Pradesh have a strong nexus with the powerful upper caste groups, and the two together block all the benefits of these laws from reaching the people. The revenue department has not initiated land reforms, so these people

remain landless while hundreds of landlords continue to own hundreds of acres of land each. The forest department looks the other way when the powerful people start quarries on forestland, but persecute and exploit poor women for collecting firewood, which is their right.”

And so, as another day is about to dawn, Parasia Devi prepares to begin another long arduous journey to Satna with her crushing headload of firewood. Unlike Parasia Devi, who will return with only a few rupees, her young daughter-in-law Shyamkali will bring back most of her monetary earnings, having paid off the men along the way in other ways. The young woman says: “We need work, so they give us work. We need food to live, so they let us have just enough to stay alive. But we have to pay for that work and food with every ounce of our dignity and humanity.”

Carriers of the dregs of humanity

Scavenging, or lifting human excreta, is the only work available to many women of the Halalkhor and Dom communities of Mau in Uttar Pradesh. They occupy the lowest rung amongst people who must work at the very bottom of a caste-determined occupational order. They are exposed to health risks, education for their children is almost unheard of, and the communities are socially isolated

FRENY
MANECKSHA

WHEN FATIMA KANEEZ's mother died it was a foregone conclusion in Nadwasarai village in Mau district of Uttar Pradesh that she would have to start doing what her mother and grandmother had done for many years: lift human excreta from dry latrines, using only a small broom and tin plate. Fatima, who is from a community of scavengers called Halalkhor, recalls: "The thought of such work was repulsive, but when I hesitated the villagers put pressure on me. They said my husband was unemployed, I had small children to support, and this was, after all, my family's hereditary occupation." In a perverse twist of logic, the villagers even argued that Fatima's daughters' chances of marriage would be enhanced if she worked as a scavenger because this would imply that there was a steady flow of income into the household.

In Uttar Pradesh, according to the government's own estimate, about 40,000 manual scavengers still work in urban and rural areas. The Purvanchal Gramin Vikas Evam Prashikshan Sansthan (PGVS), an organisation working with dalits and the disadvantaged, places the figure at 60,000 — 85% of whom are women.

One such woman is Suchitra, who like other Dom resides in a makeshift home of mud and scraps of plastic in the Munshipara mohalla of Mau town. Although some families have been living on this bit of government land for decades, they still have no access to a handpump or drainage. Like the others, Suchitra walks to the railway station more than a kilometre away to get drinking water. The women are employed on a daily wage to pick up human waste from along the railway tracks or to clean drains and stagnant tanks. Their monthly income ranges from Rs 1,800 to Rs 3,000.

In the monsoons, when work is scarce, they often take loans from the rich Mahajan community and become *begaar* (forced/unpaid) labourers. Suchitra is often summoned to Mahajan households to pick up and clean their pet dogs' excreta. She is paid Rs 10 per visit. Her name, like others from her community, figures on the voters' list but not on the BPL (below the poverty line) list. Her children do not go to school and cannot have the midday meal there. Her work leaves her and other scavengers prone to skin infections, respiratory ailments and gastro-intestinal diseases.

The scavenger communities of Mehtar, Bhangi, Lalbegi,

Halalkhor, Dom and others stand at the very bottom of the social ladder. Hierarchical occupations and rigid caste rules with notions of 'purity' and 'pollution' continue to have such a pernicious grip in many parts of India that occupational mobility is nearly impossible for people from these communities.

In 1993, Parliament passed the Employment of Manual Scavengers and Construction of Dry Latrines (Prohibition) Bill, but in the absence of any social and political willingness to implement the law, little has changed for the scavenging communities. In fact, while hearing a public interest litigation filed by the Safai Karamchari Andolan, the Supreme Court was informed that the number of manual scavengers had increased from 5.88 lakh in 1992 to 7.87 lakh in 2006 (report in *Combat Law*, Volume 5, Issue 4).

Martin Macwan of the Navsarjan Trust, an anti-scavenging group started in Gujarat in 1989, says: "The sheer volume of human waste in India is staggering, considering that 80% of the population has no access to sanitation. Every year you have more and more trains adding to this human waste." The Indian Railways, in response to a petition filed in the Supreme Court, has admitted that 30,000 coaches have open discharge toilets. New avenues for scavenging jobs also keep opening up, with more hospitals and testing laboratories being set up where people from scavenging communities are employed to handle stool and urine samples.

"In all these jobs," Macwan says, "the caste hierarchy is evident. The women scavengers enter first, then the other dalit sub-castes, the Muslims, and, finally, the Thakurs. Even today in Gujarat, if a new house is to be constructed any mason will fit the toilet in the house, but in a house where the toilet has been used only masons from the scavenging communities will do the work. This is the extent of caste dominance and exclusion of scavengers from other jobs."

Shamsunissa and a few others of the Halalkhor community live in the railway quarters of Mau. They pay about Rs 1,000 every month as rent. Shamsunissa's husband is a low-paid schoolteacher, and she too has to work to sustain her six children. She says she cleans toilets because she has no choice, because "people do not want us to do any other work". She leaves home at 7 am and works till 11 am, lifting human excreta from dry latrines, carrying it in a basket to

Freny Manecksha



Shamsunissa has no other work option but to clean the latrines of Mau town

the stinking dumpyard. She makes the demeaning trip for about 25 homes and is paid Rs 20 per household, per month. Sometimes, she gets a 'bonus' of old or new clothes, once a year.

Farida Banu, who now works with the Garima Abhiyan, a resettlement programme for manual scavengers undertaken by the Purvanchal Rural Development and Training Institute (PRDTI) in the three blocks of Badrow, Kopaganj and Ratanpura (Ghazipur district), and aided by the Poorest Areas Civil Society Programme, remembers how they took and wore with pride any old clothes given by the wife of a doctor or an engineer: "We and our children never got the benefits of education but we clung to the hope that the clothes would give us some status."

Sayina has repeatedly asked the civic authorities for a job as a sweeper. Her anger is palpable when she says: "I am throwing their dirt because that is the only way I can earn something." She spends lavishly on *paan* — it is the only way she can get rid of the foul odour that stays even after the work has been completed. Among the Dom it is the women who are more prone to alcoholism; they often drink heavily to numb their sensibilities. Sayina also speaks of the sexual harassment faced by women scavengers: "Middlemen approach us promising us work but demand sexual favours in lonely gullies or take us to their shops."

Shakeel Ahmed, an activist with PGVS, whose grandmother was a manual scavenger, speaks of the taboos that prevailed in her days and how the stigma exists even today. "We are Muslims so technically there is no untouchability," he says. "But it exists, maybe with a *meethapan* (sugar coating). The word *halal* (good) is used with reference to our work, but when my grandmother went to Mecca there were sniggers where we live that a *mehtarani* was going on Haj. People won't visit us or eat with us. Even today people are surprised

that I send my son to school."

Shaheedan, his grandmother, recalls how in the homes where she worked she was unable to even look up at the *sahib*. "We were given two stale *rotis* per day," she says. Sometimes the payment was eight kilos of rice or wheat for six months. After a festive occasion or community feast the Halalkhor would have to go around calling aloud for *baina* or leftovers.

The stigma and insecurity make resettlement a challenging task. Usha Yadav, who coordinates the Garima Abhiyan, explains: "We are working amid a very feudal society in which there is very little sympathy or sensitivity on the part of the government officials. The education levels of the scavenging communities are abysmal. Out of 100 persons there may be at most 10 who have studied up to the eighth standard. So the men remain unemployed and the women are pressured to do this work. The men have no objection to a woman trudging four kilometres to work, but object if she wants to attend one of our meetings."

Government schemes under SUDA (State Urban Development Authority) and DUDA (District Urban Development Authority) for sanitation projects and resettlement of workers are oriented towards men, with training in cycle or machine maintenance. "In the rural areas there have been very few instances of the government awarding land to these communities. Alternative means of livelihood need to be carefully thought out. If a woman wants to sell eggs, will anyone buy from her," asks Usha.

Keeping these factors in mind, the resettlement programme encourages the women to understand and oppose social and gender biases. They are given the opportunity to pursue another means of livelihood while giving up scavenging work in some households. This gives the women the space and time to build up confidence. Some of them build on skills traditionally associated with the community. For example, the Halalkhor are highly musical, and adept at making *chattais* or *sups* (winnowing baskets). So Fatima Kaneez was encouraged to play the *dholak* in a band. Women have started selling bangles and *bindis*. Loans are disbursed to some to begin an occupation like cattle-rearing or selling fruit. The women under the programme have not yet been able to return the loans but are confident they can. At least 48 girls in the community have started going to school.

Slowly, perhaps, new pathways are opening up for these women who are at the very bottom of India's occupational order.

Freny Manecksha is an independent journalist based in Mumbai. She researched this subject for empowerpoor.org

Disquiet in Gudalur valley

Change is rushing into the adivasi communities of the Gudalur valley of Tamil Nadu's Nilgiris district. The imposition of land deeds, the arrest of adivasis if they collect forest produce, their dependence on work on tea and coffee plantations, and 'eco tourism' are introducing a new gender divide and affecting women's work

MARI MARCEL
THEKAEKARA

IN GUDALUR VALLEY, in Tamil Nadu's Nilgiris district where I live, adivasi women of the Paniya, Bettakurumba, Mullukurumba, Kattunaicken and Irula tribes are, in some ways, better off than women from other communities and religions. In other ways though, they are much more vulnerable.

The male-female ratio of many tribes in India is better than the national average of 927 girls for every 1,000 boys. Female foeticide does not exist among the adivasis of the Nilgiris. Starting from birth, there is still no hankering for the boy-child; baby girls are welcomed with equal joy. The practice of "bride price" and the matriarchal system of inheritance in some tribes ensure that girls have equal (and sometimes greater) value in the community. Both men and women cook and fetch firewood and water — that is, they share chores that are "unpaid" labour. Among hunter-gatherer communities, women traditionally went fishing and gathered wild mushrooms, tubers, roots and other food, while the men hunted or trapped wild boar, deer, rabbits, birds, etc.

This has changed in the last few decades, with the forest department arresting tribals found gathering food or collecting minor forest produce.

Change is rushing rapidly into what was once pristine adivasi territory. In 1985, I had observed that Paniya men cooked, cleaned and massaged their pregnant wives' feet with great tenderness and concern. At that time, the tribes lived in isolated hamlets away from their non-adivasi neighbours. Now, the adivasi team members of ACCORD, an NGO in Gudalur, and the Adivasi Munnetra Sangam (AMS), the local adivasi movement started in 1988 to protect the community from exploitation, say that their new non-adivasi neighbours often mock and deride adivasi men who are seen fetching water, firewood, cooking or doing any activity deemed to be "women's work". This interaction with non-adivasis is bringing about an indelible change in adivasi gender equations in the Gudalur valley.

Adivasis in the valley have always treated land, air and water as communal property, owned by no one and everyone. Individual ownership of property was an alien concept. Adivasis rarely, if ever, had land documents. However, the imposition of *patta* or title deeds, land documents and ownership by the outside world of officialdom is bringing

about a virtual colonisation of the adivasis' land.

Land documents were introduced by the British but became necessary in the Nilgiris in the 1960s, when settlers, mainly from neighbouring Kerala, came to the area encouraged by the government's "grow more food" policy. The settlers were allowed to stake a claim on any land, both revenue and forest, to grow food. This was when massive deforestation in the area and a systematic usurpation of adivasi lands began.

The question of ownership has brought into existence the question of inheritance. Will men inherit the earth, as they do in most parts of the world, or will adivasi women enjoy a different status from other women? This unsettled question will definitely influence the status of women, the nature of women's work, and the way adivasi women are viewed in the not-too-distant future. In areas such as Jharkhand, women's groups have raised these issues; in Gudalur, a dialogue initiated by AMS has just begun within the community. It focuses on sorting out land disputes without resorting to the legal or police departments which only bring discord within adivasi villages.

When adivasi women go for coolie work outside the community, their status is the same as other local women. Wages are paid according to the rules of the Plantation Act, which prescribes a minimum wage of Rs 60.50 per day for both men and women. However, men almost always receive higher wages than women by virtue of the fact that their jobs — spraying fertiliser and pesticides, clearing land, etc — are deemed more difficult. Women are never promoted from the labourers' category. The job of supervisor, guard, or other senior positions is reserved for men. These jobs receive higher wages than the minimum.

However, jobs like tea picking are reserved solely for women on some estates because women are considered faster and better pickers than men. When women pick leaves during the flush season they are paid according to the weight of the leaves, instead of daily fixed wages, and consequently they may earn more. For the rest of the year, their wages are lower than the wages of their male co-workers. Over the last few years, many workers have not been paid for months, even years, because of a supposed slump in the tea industry. This has forced them to live on borrowed money, while paying interest to moneylenders. I was part of a study group

Non-adivasi neighbours often mock and deride adivasi men who are seen fetching water, firewood, cooking or doing any activity deemed to be “women's work”. This interaction with non-adivasis is bringing about an indelible change in adivasi gender equations in the Gudalur valley

formed by ActionAid UK that confronted Unilever on this issue. The workers were starving, but the shareholders were getting their dividends.

Women on small farms, and on small tea, coffee or food gardens, often get paid lower wages than regular plantation workers. There are flush and lean seasons. So when there is no work, both men and women sometimes work for less than the minimum wage and remain unemployed for some months of the year.

Adivasis are not usually considered ideal employees or given preference in hiring on big plantations because they tend to lead less routine lives, are more independent and less amenable to control than workers used to timetables and attendance rosters. On plantations, workers are expected to be at work on time, when the attendance muster is called. If you are absent, you will not get work that day. Adivasis tend to get less employment here and are therefore more vulnerable. Still, they try to hurry to get to the big plantations because they have been banned from the forests and forced to abandon their hunter-gatherer work. This, in spite of new forest laws and the Common Minimum Programme (CMP) that state that forest-dwellers' rights should be protected.

Due to factors such as these, many adivasis, mostly men but some women too, go to work as coolie labour on coffee plantations in nearby Coorg, where they then encounter many of the problems of migrant workers. Almost all of them have no savings when they return because of usury or miscalculations by contractors. Away from their families, men

often form temporary liaisons, which break up their primary relationships with partners, leading to instability, distrust, alcoholic violence and domestic crises.

One of the most vulnerable areas for adivasi women is the sphere of sexual exploitation. Adivasi women all over India have always been targeted for sexual exploitation by non-tribal men. Traditionally, many tribal societies allow women and men equal sexual freedom. Studies of adivasi communities (in Jharkhand, Chhattisgarh and Uttaranchal) have observed that the influx of outsiders has disturbed the adivasi social system, making the women vulnerable to HIV and other infections. In the Gudalur adivasi hospital, it is known that there are almost no sexually-transmitted diseases or HIV/AIDS among the adivasis of the valley. Only one case has been reported from the tourist-infested sanctuary area of Masinagudi.

“Eco-tourism”, which the government is now aggressively pushing, is a disastrous invasion not merely of the environment but also of adivasi privacy, and a destruction of their way of life. At times, tourists who enter sanctuary areas in Bandipur (Karnataka), Mudumalai (Tamil Nadu) and Muthanga (Kerala) offer money to adivasi women. With no prospects for employment in these sanctuary areas, and with the forest department having taken away the people's ancient rights to fish, hunt, and gather food, some women accept the money.

In Wayanadu, which neighbours Gudalur, a number of unmarried young adivasi women — some of whom come here to work as domestic help — are sexually exploited by their employers. Nothing has been done to protect these women. Estate supervisors on small farms also extract sexual favours from adivasi women workers; others are paid for sex. In many instances, the sexual exploitation cannot be classified as rape. But women's groups and anthropologists have discussed this brutalising of a socially and culturally different people, together with the need to protect adivasis from exploitative outside influences. If they become pregnant in such encounters, in most cases the women do not push for maintenance for the child. There is disapproval but no long-lasting stigma attached to unwed mothers among the Gudalur tribes. The women look after their children as best they can, with support from their families. The SC/ST Prevention of Atrocities Act could be used in such cases. The Act specifies that sexual exploitation of vulnerable employees is an offence punishable by law.

At the time of Independence, Nehru remarked that development did not mean making the once-proud, independent adivasis cheap pale imitations of the dominant sections of Indian society. Sixty years after Independence, however, India's adivasis are a colonised, exploited and vulnerable people.

Mari Marcel Thekaekara is co-founder of ACCORD, an organisation working with adivasis in the Gudalur valley, Nilgiris, and Just Change, a cooperative of producers and consumers. She has been writing on social issues since 1980 and contributes regularly to The Hindu, the New Internationalist and other papers

The domestic workers of silicon city

The struggle of domestic workers in Karnataka for decent wages and work conditions is two decades old. But even at the prescribed minimum wage, the domestic worker's wages are insufficient even to cover the food needs of the average family, let alone other needs, forcing women and girls to work seven days a week in multiple homes

KATHYAYINI
CHAMARAJ

A CONVERSATION BETWEEN two women techies overheard in the dining hall of a software company in Bangalore: "Good heavens, why are you paying your maid Rs 1,000 per month? I pay mine only Rs 300." This, in a city where couples in the software industry often earn upwards of Rs 1 lakh per month. The divide between the two Indias is sharply evident at this intimate interface between the haves and the have-nots, between employer and employee within a home.

Domestic workers in India usually work seven days a week, 365 days a year. In most cases, leave, if any, is granted grudgingly and is usually unpaid. "We are not given even a Sunday off. They never give us any annual leave either and say that we are absenting ourselves if we take even a day off now and then to attend to our work," Savithri, who works in a well-to-do home, says. Shakuntala, also a domestic worker, says: "They don't give us even one day's paid leave when we are ill or tired and need a break." "Several days before and on festivals we have to work extra hard to enable these families to celebrate the festival in style. But they never think that we too have extra work in our homes during festivals," Lizzy says.

Others speak of how wages are fixed for a certain amount of work, but employers keep adding to the tasks. When the workers protest, they retort: "Aren't we giving you tea and coffee even though it was not agreed upon?" One worker says: "When they have parties, we stay late and wash the vessels until the last one is done, for which they never pay extra. But when we ask for a day's leave because we have a function in our house, they cut our wages." Saroja of Ragigudda slum says: "They eat fine food kept in the fridge but give us food that has been left outside uncovered, which turns stale before we reach home. They drink fresh tea and coffee but give us tea and coffee made by re-boiling used leaves and dregs." Geeta says: "They spend more on the colas they drink than they give us to run our whole family. God has given them so much, but still they would rather exchange their old clothes for a steel vessel than give them to us."

Many workers speak of the separate plate and tumbler kept for them; how they are not allowed to touch the vessels in which the employers' food is kept; how some women employers wash all the vessels washed by the maids once more with tamarind to 'purify' them; how the maids are not supposed to enter the kitchen or *puja* room. Caste prejudices

remain as strong as ever. Hamsavalli says: "We clean all their dirt, but they don't want to be touched by us." Manjula adds: "Our employers don't trust us even after we have worked 10 years for them. If we were really thieves, we could have robbed their houses long ago."

Domestic workers need to be recognised as workers and treated in a humane and dignified manner, insists Sister Celia, who started the Domestic Workers' Trade Union. The major demand of the workers of this Union and of the Stree Jagruthi Samiti (SJS), both in Bangalore, is higher wages. Rukminiamma, now 53, began working 43 years ago for Rs 25 per month. She reached the princely wage of Rs 300 per month only recently. Working in one home does not pay enough, and many domestic workers are caught in a daily whirl trying to work in four-five homes to make ends meet.

The arduous struggle of domestic workers in Karnataka for decent wages and working conditions is now 20 years old. Domestic work was included in Karnataka under the Schedule of the Minimum Wages Act in 1992 and then slyly removed in 1993. Fresh struggles ensured its inclusion once more in 2001 and, in a pioneering measure in India, wages were fixed in March 2004. But a study done by the SJS finds that the wages are unnecessarily complex, confusing and inadequate. The minimum wage notification specifies the following for a six-day week: any one task for 45 minutes per day should receive Rs 249, one-hour tasks, Rs 299, and an eight-hour day Rs 1,699 (all per month); 10% more for families larger than four persons, and overtime at double the rate.

The study found that the assumptions of 45 minutes per task and a six-day week were incorrect. Due to the varying rates prescribed, it was possible for the employer to calculate the wages in three different ways and arrive at Rs 1,006, Rs 805 and Rs 572 per month as wages for the same two hours of work a day! The SJS study recommends that the minimum wage should be easy to understand, time-based and adequate, and it makes the case for an hourly wage to simplify the calculation. The study also demands social security and a tripartite board of representatives of the government, employers and workers.

The most damning finding of the study is that the current minimum wage has thrown to the winds the criterion enunciated by the 15th Indian Labour Conference (ILC) and

A survey found that an employer earning Rs 30,000 per month got away by paying just 1% of his/her earnings for domestic help. Despite this, many employers refuse to pay minimum wages by saying that they cannot afford to pay such 'high' wages to their maids

the Supreme Court — that a minimum wage for eight hours of work should be high enough to cover all the basic needs of the worker, her/his spouse and two children. The minimum wage of Rs 1,600 (Rs 53 per day) fixed by the Karnataka government was insufficient even to cover the food needs of the average family, let alone other needs.

The SJS study says that the average monthly expenditure of a domestic worker's family living in a slum in Bangalore is Rs 5,189, out of which Rs 1,959 is spent on food, Rs 817 on loan repayments, Rs 555 as rent, and the rest for other needs. Geeta Menon of the SJS says: "The wages paid are not high enough to cover food, housing, medical expenses and educational needs."

The earnings of a domestic worker, however, even after working for eight hours a day every day, with no day off, no holidays, and no sick pay, could bring in just over a third of average family expenditure, if she was paid according to the current minimum wage notification. Because even this is mostly not paid, the domestic worker's earnings cover just one-quarter of the expenditure needs of the family, the SJS study found. Two-thirds of families had three or more earners, including children, to support the family's basic needs. In over two-thirds of cases, a loan had been taken. The average income of the entire family was still only Rs 4,267 per month, a shortfall of Rs 900, which was probably met through more loans.

The survey found that an employer earning Rs 30,000 per month got away by paying just 1% of his/her earnings for domestic help. Despite this, many employers refuse to pay

minimum wages by saying that they cannot afford to pay such 'high' wages to their maids. Others claim that such levels of wages may apply to the West, where labour-saving devices are cheap. Still others maintain that the government should not intervene by fixing a minimum wage in what is a mutually beneficial private relationship between the employer and the domestic worker — after all, they say, the maid is taking up the job at a rate acceptable to her. Fixing a minimum wage, they say, will stop many from employing maids and will make many maids lose even the little that they are earning.

But the Supreme Court has shot down such arguments in various cases on minimum wages by ruling that minimum wages apply to all alike, and have to be paid irrespective of the kind of establishment, capacity to pay and availability of worker at lower wages, that the "employer has no right to conduct his enterprise if he cannot pay his employee a minimum subsistence wage," and that non-payment of minimum wages is forced labour under Article 23 of the Constitution. Studies have shown that the availability of employment does not depend on the level of wages and that lowering wages does not necessarily lead to a higher employment rate.

Though the Supreme Court had endorsed the 15th ILC recommendation that a single earner should be able to support a family comprising spouse and two children, the domestic workers of Stree Jagruthi Samiti are currently only demanding an increase in the minimum wage, from Rs 1,600 to Rs 2,600 per month (50% of actual need). The 'silicon plateau' that is Bangalore needs to do much better for its domestic workers, who, as the earlier quoted study estimates, contribute at least Rs 467 million per month to the economy.

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On a slim scaffolding

Standards laid down for women workers under the Factories Act, like handling limits of 20 kg, rarely apply to construction workers. All norms remain negotiable in the construction industry and labourers and their organisations must give in to the demands of contractors and builders. In such conditions, women workers are especially vulnerable

RAKESH GANGULI

THE TREMENDOUS GROWTH in the IT sector in Pune has boosted the construction industry in the city. Huge investments and speculation are fuelling the boom. Builders are cashing in on the soaring demand for residential, commercial and industrial spaces. Rates per prime square foot are becoming astronomical.

This growth means a greater demand for labour. Workers from Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand, Bihar, Rajasthan and Orissa have been coming to Pune to work on its many construction sites.

Kunwariyabai and her husband, adivasis from Khaira village in Chhattisgarh, were brought by a *thekedar* to Pune three years ago to work on a construction site. Like thousands of others, although Kunwariyabai and her husband literally 'construct' Pune's boom they themselves barely manage to scrape a living. Making ends meet in a city devoid of support systems is an everyday battle. Contractors, though, prefer migrant labourers because they do not have 'connections'; local workers are relatively better networked.

Gangubai came to Pune from Raichur district in Karnataka. She belongs to the Laman community. Her family owns two acres of agricultural land, but lack of irrigation forces them to look for work. Wages for agricultural work in the village are as low as Rs 10 a day for women and Rs 20 for men. With four daughters and a loan of Rs 20,000 taken for her sister-in-law's marriage, Gangubai and her husband were left with no choice but to migrate a year ago. Her husband drinks heavily and is violent, which makes things even more difficult for the family.

Laxmi, from Akkalkot in Maharashtra, works on a construction site just outside Pune. Her family owns several acres of agricultural land in Dudhne village, but frequent drought makes agriculture unviable. With no work and no money, Laxmi and her husband were forced to migrate nine years ago. Laxmi has been working for daily wages since she was 10; she was married at the age of 13. Laxmi though feels 'privileged' to have a water tap close to her home, as well as electricity.

The construction industry in Pune has grown in inverse proportion to the wellbeing of the workers. The workplace is unsafe, the workers have no social security in terms of compensation, insurance, shelter, food security, access to

drinking water, education, or healthcare. Women construction workers in the city face the dual burden of having to do gruelling household tasks and finding remunerative work.

Women working on construction sites in Pune have to negotiate with contractors and others for access to water in the vicinity and are often forced to walk long distances to fetch water — at times making six trips that can take up to 30 minutes per trip. If the labour camp does have a tap, filling water still involves long lines and squabbles. Most of the workers, because they migrate, don't possess ration cards and are forced to buy foodgrain at higher market prices. The women must also buy kerosene or firewood for cooking. They are forced to bathe and defecate out in the open. Healthcare at public hospitals is indifferent or comes at a cost, and many women are forced to visit private clinics, especially during pregnancy.

On the site, women are paid Rs 60-70 a day while men are paid Rs 100-175. Masons earn up to Rs 175-250 a day. Wages are paid weekly. The division of labour is gendered. Masonry is a male-dominated skill as are carpentry and other skilled jobs. Women carry headloads of brick, sand, stone, cement and water to the masons, and also sift sand.

The labour is also divided along regional lines. Labourers from Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh are skilled in digging and masonry; labourers from Rajasthan are skilled in carpentry and marble work; and others are hired as general labour. Most of the migrants belong to scheduled castes and tribes, and OBC (other backward classes) groups.

The women's working day, combining housework and work at the site, often stretches to 14 hours. When doing slab work, which fetches more money, it can extend to 16 hours. Young women at the sites are required to climb the scaffolding at times. Other than the one-hour lunch break, rest hours for unwell or pregnant women are left to the discretion of the contractor. Women are 'allowed' to breast-feed infants, but the contractor can revoke these 'liberties' at any time. Crèches are a rare feature at construction sites.

Standards laid down for women labourers under the Factories Act, like handling limits of 20 kg, rarely apply to construction workers. Despite laws, such norms remain negotiable in the construction industry and labourers and

their organisations must give in to the demands of contractors and builders. The absence of written contracts and manipulated work records (if maintained) diminish the merit of their pleas in the labour courts. Very few cases actually reach the labour courts; even if they do, the legal procedures are too cumbersome for the migrant workers. The labour office, the municipal corporation and the courts are unfriendly places for migrant workers.

Veteran activist Baba Adhav says: "The lives of migrant construction labourers seem to be of no value to anyone. One labourer dies in the city every day on an average, but no one seems to be bothered. The chain of exploitation starts from their own villages. A local *thekedar* supplies workers to the contractor in the city. Both get cuts out of the wages paid to the labourers. There is no direct transaction between the builder and the labourers. The big fish remain safe this way, come what may."

Laws like the Construction Workers Act (1996) are brazenly flouted, Adhav says. "No safety gear is offered to workers or precautionary measures taken for hazardous work like blasting. The condition of women is worse. They are often subjected to sexual harassment. Alcoholism among men and wife battering are common. We have also noticed a high incidence of infant mortality in these communities."

A number of existing laws, if implemented, would help to protect the rights of the unorganised labour force, which forms over 90% of the 300 million workers in India. The Interstate Migrant Workmen Act (1979), the Contract Labour System (Regulation and Abolition Act) (1970), the Bonded Labour System (Abolition) Act (1975), the Equal Remuneration Act (1976), the Factories Act, the Trade Union Act (1926), cooperative laws, and India's ratification of the ILO's convention on child labour all aim to protect workers. "The laws exist. The problem is their weak or non-implementation. This propels the exploitation to unimaginable limits," Adhav says.

The Environmental Status Report of the Pune Municipal Corporation (PMC) estimated that migration would increase from 43,900 people (recorded) in 2001 to 88,200 in 2006. The city's population has gone up from 25,40,936 in 2001 to 31,87,800 in 2006. According to the census, a person is a 'migrant' if the place listed for that person during the census is different from his or her place of birth. However, a person may have migrated more than once, and the census does not take into account the true nature of migration in India.

"It is a great challenge to organise migrant construction workers in Pune," Adhav says. "Who do they complain against and what do they do if thrown out of this city? The multiple and high vulnerabilities that besiege the lives of migrant construction labourers leave organisations willing to take up their cause with hardly any alternatives to engage with such a huge labour force. This is nothing but a new form of bonded labour."

The Pune Bandhkam Mazdoor Sabha (BMS), an organisation

of construction workers, is struggling to make group insurance for construction labourers mandatory, apart from the safety and security of workers. It is in dialogue with the PMC, which gives permission for various processes at different stages of construction, to ensure that labour laws are implemented before granting permission. The BMS is also in dialogue with the Promoters and Builders Association of Pune (PBAP), demanding fair standards for construction labourers. The PBAP has included labour welfare in a four-point programme to be implemented over the next two years. It has set up a labour welfare committee to outline plans to improve the conditions of the labour force and set appropriate targets, with an emphasis on health, education and safety.

Kunwariyabai's and Gangubai's children attend the balwadi and the non-formal education centre in the labour camp where the family lives, run by Doorstep School. "Sustaining our balwadis and non-formal education centres at construction sites in and around Pune has been a challenge amid the great uncertainty that construction labourers live in," says Rajani Paranjpe, president of Doorstep School. "Sometimes, migrant families have vanished overnight, and we don't know if they have fled the exploitative work and living conditions or moved to another site. Our attempts to organise the mothers of our students have failed. The double burden of household and remunerative work is strenuous and leaves the women with no space for participating in initiatives like ours. Their migratory nature has been the biggest hurdle for any development project to engage with them."

Most of the women construction workers have never been to school and some cannot calculate their wages accurately. Some long to return to their villages if they could find sustainable livelihoods, but others are now too used to the city. None of them have heard of the National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme. Kunwariyabai's biggest concern at the moment is the fate of her unborn child. Many of the women are apprehensive about the monsoon. Two children were swept away in the floods three years ago, and the homes of many of the construction workers were flooded. Most of all, the women hope for a better future for their children — one of them speaks of her dream of a job for her son where he will get paid even if he takes leave, and which will provide him with an old-age pension.

Rakesh Ganguli is a trained social worker. He works on organising communities, especially women and youth, on issues related to gender, human rights and cultural diversity

Seeds of change

Devastating changes in agriculture have sidelined the skills of many women farmers in Vidarbha. Commercial seeds in packets have made traditional sorting and storing practices obsolete, machines have taken the place of sowing work, and gas cylinders have replaced cowdung cakes. The women of a village of adivasis talk about how their work has 'disappeared'

APARNA PALLAVI

“THERE IS QUITE A DIFFERENCE between our *payili* (a traditional measure of about 1.25 kg) and their kilogram,” exclaims Lakshmibai Tekam. She is trying to explain how agriculture has changed, especially for women, in the last few years.

The tiny adivasi village of Nimni in Yavatmal district in Vidarbha may look like the unchanging rural location of legends — aesthetic houses built of natural materials, spacious courtyards, pumpkin vines going up walls, and the smiling faces of the adivasis. But farmer Laloo Dhadanje did commit suicide in this village.

As it turns out, things really have changed. The changes in agricultural policy (manifest, for example, in low minimum support prices for cotton) and practices of the last decade, in this region of Maharashtra, have irrevocably changed the lives of the women whose skills sustained agriculture.

“We women have less work now,” Lakshmibai says. “Seeds come in *thailis* (bags)... but god, I wonder what makes them so expensive! When I was younger, we used to give away a few *payilis* of seeds to anyone without so much as thinking!” She is referring to the new, often genetically modified seeds of multinational as well as national corporations that have now flooded the market, and which many farmers are forced or beguiled into buying.

In village Kawthai in Washim district, elderly Shantabai Mashidkar is more explicit: “You see, modern agriculture has taken away women's work. The biggest change is in seeds. Seeds used to be the woman's domain. When I was young, selecting and storing seeds were women's jobs. We used to select the best seeds, mix them with ash and store them in special small *kangis* (covered bamboo baskets) plastered over with cowdung and mud. Once packed, the seeds would remain in a perfect state of preservation till the next sowing season. The men would ask women for seeds when the sowing season came. Now, seeds come in packets. So women no longer have the work of selecting seeds. Now we women are only labourers — weeding and harvesting. We make no decisions.”

The changes in agriculture do not translate into an easy-to-define experience for women. On the one hand there is talk of the 'feminisation' of agriculture as more and more men migrate looking for work, or commit suicide, leaving the



A girl in Washim district holds up a bunch of corn. Farming no longer seems like a viable livelihood option for the young women in this region

Aparna Pallavi

women to manage the land and shoulder several burdens. On the other hand, women are finding their traditional agricultural knowledge and practices being fast rendered obsolete, replaced by readymade commercial alternatives.

Dorli, a village in Wardha district, put itself up for 'sale' in December 2005 to protest against the condition of farming communities. One of the villagers' demands at the time of the agitation was work for the women rendered jobless by the pressures of commercial agriculture. Nothing came of the agitation because officials and politicians ignored the demands. Almost two years later, the situation is much the same — the women of the village remain unemployed.

The village's only woman panchayat member, Sujata Halule, says: “Our women are now employed only for a few months of the year during the harvest season. One of the main sources of livelihood for the women of our village was our livestock — cows, goats and other animals. But due to heavy debt and the rising cost of fodder we have been forced to sell off a majority of our animals, over the years.”

The elderly women are the most vocal about the changes in agriculture. Durga Jarunde, who belongs to a farming family but works as a farm labourer when she can get work, says: “There used to be so much work on the farm. At the

time of sowing, we would be busy with the sowing work. Now there are seeders for sowing. When we went to the farm for weeding work, we would keep an eye on the crop, to see which seeds to store for the next season. At harvest time we would make bamboo, mud and dung compartments for storing grain. And there was the 'milk work' (making butter and ghee) all the year round."

"Months before the harvest season came around," says elderly Sukumabai, mother of a farmer, now bent and gaunt with age, "actually as soon as the rains were over and the sun was good, we would start preparing *gobaris* (cowdung cakes). The ash from the cakes was mixed with the grain as a preservative. And the grain would stay free of pests for the whole year. But now there are no cows, and no cowdung."

"Seeds used to be the woman's domain," Shantabai says. "When I was young... we used to select the best seeds, mix them with ash and store them in special small *kangis* (covered bamboo baskets) plastered over with cowdung and mud. Once packed, the seeds would remain in a perfect state of preservation till the next sowing season. Now, seeds come in packets. Now we women are only labourers — weeding and harvesting. We make no decisions"



Aparna Pallavi

A group of women in Dorli village discuss the changes in their work patterns

"As children we would go collecting *biba* to put in the grain," says Sunita Pandit (*biba* is a local fruit used as a pest repellent in grain). But now, say the women, preserving grain is a thing of the past. "The jowar that we harvest from certified seeds catches pests in barely four months, no matter how much 'powder' (chemical pest repellents) we add," Anita Halule says. "We try to sell off most of our grain as soon as possible, keeping only enough for food. But even that gets spoilt sometimes, and then we have to buy grain at higher prices."

Many other intricate links to the farming economy have also been disturbed. For example, gas cylinders have replaced cowdung cakes as fuel for cooking fires. Shobha Jarunde says: "Now we have to regularly buy cylinders. In my mother-in-law's time most of our cooking was done on cowdung cakes. If we ran out, we would buy some wood." Shobha's family now has just two bullocks and a buffalo. Fifteen years ago, they had 20-25 cattle. The cylinders have reduced the women's work burden of making cowdung cakes, but added to the family's expenses and dependence on commodities bought from the market.

Some of the younger women of the village say they would like to start self-help (micro-credit) groups and small-scale businesses, such as tailoring or making washing powder. In the face of redundancy, the women of this community, repositories of invaluable skills, are likely to increasingly turn to such alternative livelihood options. The dispossession, the distancing of a community and of its women from their land, knowledge, traditional livelihoods, and critical status in the agricultural cycle, continues.

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Displacing Godavari's women

The Polavaram dam will irrevocably alter the local adivasi economy of cultivation and collection of forest produce. It will also displace 85,000 agricultural workers in Andhra Pradesh, 62% of whom are women. The women recognise one basic principle that State policy ignores: the Godavari's flows are linked to their lives and livelihoods. But when it comes to compensation for this incalculable loss, women do not figure in the calculations

R UMA
MAHESHWARI

"FOR FOUR MONTHS in a year Godavari feeds us, for three months the agricultural fields feed us, and the rest of the months these hills and forests feed us."

— Kunchaiah Varalakshmi, mandal president, Pydipaka panchayat, West Godavari district

The coming of the Godavari is very crucial for the Mala, a dalit community in villages like Pydipaka in Andhra Pradesh, which is nearest to Polavaram. When the Godavari swells up and lashes through these lands, the Mala men gather the teak and bamboo logs that the Godavari brings along in her rage. They go to the upper reaches during the floods and, with the help of a log to navigate, gather the logs and tie them with a rope. The destroyed trees they thus collect are sold for Rs 100 to Rs 5,000 depending on the amount collected. This is one way in which the Godavari "feeds" them.

"We look forward to Godavari coming. She sustains our crops, our lives. Our agriculture occurs in the three months after her coming. The rest of the months we make a living by daily wage labour on the prawn farms (of upper caste Kammass and Kapus). Or we go out to work in other places. If Godavari did not come, our agriculture will not be... The rain and Godavari give us our crops. Only when floods come we get some good water. If the Polavaram dam is built we will not get that water; Godavari will not come as she does now," says Vijayalakshmi, a dalit from East Godavari district.

The dalits here grow pulses and paddy on their plots of one to three acres of land. The village is by the mangrove forests, close to the Godavari estuary. When they are not cultivating, women work as wage earners. Vijayalakshmi says: "When the dam is built we will only have saline water, not the floodwaters, which our crops need."

This village of 150 Mala families has nothing directly to do with the Polavaram dam — on the records they do not come within the submergence zone. But the dam will irrevocably impact their livelihood patterns. The women here recognise the one basic principle that State policy usually ignores: the economics of the Godavari's flows, which is linked to their lives and livelihoods. This economics is different from the crude mathematics that informs statistical tables. It is rooted in their everyday concerns and lives. It is an economics based on the perspectives of the women living in villages by the banks of the Godavari, in nine mandals of East, West

Godavari and Khammam districts in Andhra Pradesh, which are threatened by submergence by the proposed Indira Sagar Polavaram dam.

This perspective is rooted in a socio-economic and cultural context where the Godavari never floods: she "comes" (1) ("*vacchinappudu*"), "stays" for a week or more (the last time she stayed for two days) or "goes". The Godavari's flood pattern has never been referred to as "*varadalu*" (Telugu for floods) by the people, unlike in official parlance.

In the statistical shadow of the Polavaram dam

The Rs 8,000 crore Polavaram project will transfer 80 tmc of water to the Krishna basin via a 174 km long right canal, and to Vishakhapatnam district via a 181.53 km long left canal. The project proposes to generate 960 MW of electricity. It will submerge more than 276 villages.

The total area under submergence is 38,186 hectares, which includes 22,882 hectares of un-irrigated agricultural land, 12,081 hectares of *poramboke* ('government' or 'wasteland'), and 3,223 hectares of forestland (2). This directly affects the food security of over 300,000 people. The forests include 69,225 productive trees valued at Rs 21.82 crore, besides miscellaneous wildlife, including the endangered golden gecko (3) in the Papikonda sanctuary spread over 360 sq km of East, West, and Khammam districts. The tribal communities of Koya, Koya Dora, Konda Reddi and a few Kammara predominantly inhabit the areas contiguous with the forests.

The Resettlement and Rehabilitation package (4) for the "project affected" families will be Rs 40,000 for a house, Rs 3,000 for a cattle shed, Rs 5,000 for transporting material, 625 "man-days" (wages) for labourers, and 500 "man-days" for tribal people. For "project displaced" persons, an extra "subsistence allowance" of 240 "man-days" will be given. If a landowner become landless: wages for 750 "man-days"; if the landowner becomes a marginal farmer: wages for 500 "man-days"; and if a landowner becomes a small farmer: wages for 375 "man-days". Women are absent in these calculations.

However, in the population that will be dispossessed/ displaced, women outnumber men. Of the approximately 85,000 agricultural workers that stand to be displaced by the project, nearly 62% are women, according to B Venkat,



Koya women of Kathanapally in East Godavari district

state general secretary, All-India Agricultural Workers Union, Andhra Pradesh chapter. The total population of project affected villages was 236,834 according to the 2001 census. The number of males was 117,321, and females 119,513, indicating a sex ratio of 1,019 females for every 1,000 males (5).

In terms of workdays, women will lose out in larger numbers over men in the farming context. The AP Rythu Sangham and AP State Agricultural Workers Union estimate crop-wise distinctions for wages and person-days of work. For instance, cotton is grown on over 10,000 acres and gives an average of 150 person-days of work per year (Rs 32 per day as wages); paddy is grown on 10,000 acres and each acre gives 75 person-days of work per year (Rs 30 per day); tobacco is grown on 6,000 acres and gives 250 person-days of work per acre per year (Rs 60 per day). Thus, a loss of Rs 5 crore per year for cotton, Rs 3 crore for paddy, and Rs 8 crore for tobacco is hardly being compensated by the government's R&R (rehabilitation and resettlement) package.

Women seem to have little or no place in the discourse both for and against the project. The discourse has been one of numbers, the expanse of the area, compensation (to be given to men), the design, the technicalities. Women may just belong in there as statistics — but as yet there is no systematic enumeration of the number of women, barring a few unofficial surveys by departments that produce varying

figures. None of the women's organisations based in Hyderabad have made a public statement on the dam or on its impact on women.

Last year, two books were released on the Polavaram issue (6), but neither of these reflects a gender perspective nor do they state the impact of the dam on women. While women and their work have not been part of the estimates for the R&R package, the forest department has been quick to evaluate the economic value of certain kinds of timber from the forests. There seems to be no economic value for trees the tribal people consider sacred. Much of their flora and fauna will not have economic value in government records.

'Our land reaps gold'

Vidya of Kathanapally, a village in the Papikondalu sanctuary, says: "This project is not for our benefit. We do not know what they are making, but people are telling us it is for the moneyed. We have also understood that. Government people came for a survey, but they never talked to us or our elders. They did not seek our opinion. Here we have the forest and the Godavari to fetch fruits, nuts, fish, and we have our agricultural land. We have never gone hungry in this village. There is always enough food to eat. If we moved out of this village, we will have to buy food from the shops. Here we have it in our homesteads. We also store grain in the *palaasa* (a collective grain storage system). Each family gives a share from the produce to the *palaasa*. Any family or individual in need can take grain from here. Tell me, will we get all these things in that place? Even our hamlets will be broken if they move us out from here."

Vidya also asks about lack of access to basic essentials for women: "Since 30 years we have been requesting a hospital. They have not given us one. What they have not given for so many years, what is the guarantee they will give it if we leave this place? At least here we have other tribal people around." Women in these parts do not have a maternity care centre or a government midwife. For deliveries they have to trek hours to the boat (available only at fixed times) and go to Devipatnam after another hour or two on the river. Sometimes, babies have been delivered midway.

But they have access to one of the most essential elements: food. And they see this as their asset. Reva, from the same village, says: "We bring things from the forest. Will we get all these anywhere else? We do *konda podu* (shift cultivation), we eat what we get." Appayamma says: "We will be economically affected. The soil there (wherever the government settles them) will be different. Our land reaps gold. Our forests give us other things. We get pulses, have *konda podu*. If we leave our village we will lose all."

Many do not consider tribal communities as farmers. But in these parts, in the East, West Godavari and Khammam districts, tribal communities cultivate lands and have lived on the food they grow, supplemented by forest produce. Their lives are intricately linked to the forests, the land, the

seasonal floods. After the floods, the silt gives the most abundant crop. This is the season when the land is covered with diverse crops — chillies, *jonna* (maize), pulses, lentils. Tribal farmers cultivate paddy in small pockets. Non-tribals have brought in tobacco cultivation (used to make the local *chutta* and the more posh cigarettes).

I met Sakkubai, a Koya woman from Chegondapally, when the spillway construction was going on despite a Supreme Court stay on work on the dam. The loss suffered by this village even before all clearances were given to the dam will never be compensated. She had said then: “The project is a loss for us. They are dumping rubble on our fields. We sought help from the revenue officials many times. There is no compensation for us farmers who have lost cultivable land due to this dumping.”

Muchika Suramma, a vociferous opponent of the dam, had said: “Now they sweet talk, the moment we ask them questions they will put us in a vehicle and take us away.” Today, Suramma is in the Women’s Cell in Rajahmundry under various charges including Sections 341 (“wrongfully restraining any person/official on duty”), 153 (A) (“promoting enmity between classes in places of worship”) and 124 A (“sedition”)! Suramma and her prison mates had questioned the revenue officials and joint collector when the spillway work was underway.

Women of all social groups, who will be losing their lands to the dam across the three districts, invariably spoke of the environment. The men, except some Konda Reddi and Koya Dora, while not wanting to leave their homes, still addressed the R&R package. Even in opposition to the dam the differences in perspective were clear.

There was another perceptible difference — the non-tribal upper caste women (mainly small and medium landholders) almost always let their men do the talking. Most non-tribal upper caste landlords were the first to accept the government’s package, though they too acknowledged that this environment would be hard to access anywhere else. They were well aware of previous projects that had usurped tribal lands and given nothing in compensation.

Can these losses even be calculated?

Women hold an important position in many of these villages, and they understand they will lose this position when they become part of the many displaced in an alien land. Their burden of making a living will increase and they will have to constantly seek work as labourers on fields or elsewhere.

Many tribal people will become landless since many do not hold *pattas* on their land. These districts have a history of alienation of tribal lands and illegal usurpation of lands by non-tribal upper castes from the coastal plains. Yet, some of them continue to cultivate small fields, which on record belong to absentee landlords. The “land to land” compensation that the government talks about will actually be denied to tribal farmers.

So, while tribal women are equal partners in cultivation and in the overall tribal economy of farming and collecting forest produce, in the R&R colonies they will be severely constrained since most of them will have houses but no fields or access to forests. For their home needs, apart from the agricultural produce, they have the forests nearby from where they get fruits and nuts and tubers (some of which they sell) and in lean seasons they have the river to catch fish for supper.

Tribal socio-cultural systems are connected to their economy. Each ritual is related to the agricultural pattern and rhythms of the seasons. They celebrate festivals like Samakotta (in the monsoons, celebrating the crops) where they offer *samalu*, *gongura*, *pottalu*, *totakura* (green and leafy vegetables), the Kondajonnakottalu festival to celebrate the harvest of the hill maize, and Mavidikai panduga, or the mango festival. Each of their gods/goddesses (Polam rajulu, Chikati rajulu, Gamutyalamma, Sayilamma) has an associated tree. Those trees are never cut down. The gods are not human-made icons/forms. Just a ‘concept’ placed under a tree and propitiated. For that festival, that occasion, in that moment. These will never figure in the economics of displacement.

So Seetamahalakshmi wonders about the loss of these facets of their lifestyle. The government’s package may give them sites for houses and some land but can these other aspects be recreated? She asks: “Will we get our mango trees there?”

The rhythms of the river

The Godavari as a river, too, does not figure in the dominant discourse. It is time the river was brought in. It is rooted in the very basics of everyday living in these parts. This region has a history of colonial intervention, whereby some of the forests and some of the Godavari were mapped out of access for many of the people. Colonial interventions created regional disparities within what is now Andhra Pradesh (the erstwhile Nizam’s Dominions and Madras Presidency). The creation of the Agency Areas and the construction of the Godavari anicut at Dowlaiswaram, by Arthur Cotton, are crucial to understanding the question of access to natural resources, and the imbalance caused between the delta region and Telangana, for instance. The Polavaram dam will accentuate and consolidate these disparities.

Mydu Satya Rao, headman of a fishing community hamlet in Kobbarichettupeta Tallarevu mandal in East Godavari district, brings home the point when he says: “Godavari must go to the sea, that is the law of nature. Sir Cotton built the anicut at Dowlaiswaram but the Godavari still flows and the floods are bigger than earlier. How much water will you hold? What has to flow into the sea will do so.”

One cannot at the same time romanticise the river and its flow and the havoc caused due to regular flooding. But the flooding patterns are fairly regular and systematic enough

for the itinerant and seasonal fishing communities settled along its banks to be able to tell when the Godavari will rise and what will be its impact during that particular season.

The dalits and tribal communities also observe the Godavari's temperament and levels. However, despite having the river flowing by their villages, many of these communities do not have the wherewithal to access the water for their agriculture or for drinking. Some with resources have managed to route water from the river with pumps and motors; others depend solely on the rain.

Every community living by the river observes and respects the movement of the river, and has formulated its own survival strategies. But the pathos of these ad hoc strategies also highlights the government's lack of engagement with the dalit and tribal communities, which don't have access to education, health or employment and are now threatened by displacement. At most, there is neo-colonial talk of 'civilising' the tribal people and settling them amidst the devices of modern living. As a project officer said to me: "It is time to get them out of these forests and develop them."

Alienating dalit and adivasi communities

The dalits were brought here over the years mostly by upper caste landowners to cultivate tribal land. They are not even mentioned in the R&R reports. They may get a meagre one-time monetary settlement as landless agricultural workers. Even that is not guaranteed for those who have no ration cards to prove their identity. Some dalits managed to take lands on lease from non-tribal absentee landlords years ago, but these landowners are returning to claim the compensation benefits.

An agitated and angry Sarojinamma, 70, of Marrigudem village in Khammam district says: "Where will we go? Drown in the Godavari? What do we eat there? These packages will kill people like us, who have no land. Will your government be happy then? The landlords will get their land. What about us? Maybe the Polavaram project will be happy if small workers like us die. We can just cry holding on to these trees."

Varalakshmi, sarpanch of Pydipaka, says: "We are asking for a colony specifically for the SCs (in the R&R package). We also need three acres of land because the dalits, who will be displaced by the Polavaram dam, will become landless. At least here we own small pieces of land. Where else will we get this kind of environment? We know we will lose out. But if we must leave, at least the government can make sure the dalits do not suffer. While all others (tribal communities) are getting Rs 40,000 (for the houses), we are getting only Rs 20,000."

Most of the beneficiaries of the Polavaram dam's R&R package are the non-tribal upper caste landlords. Despite many cases pending in the high court against them, they have managed to sell their lands and leave thousands of tribal communities and dalits in the lurch.

A Koya Dora farmer, Kosi Radha's land was part of the tribal community's land (in Pedabhimpally in East Godavari district) taken over by revenue officials for the Polavaram R&R colony. Compensation for the land, however, went to absentee landlords in the plains. Radha says: "For 15 years we have been cultivating on these lands. The RDO told us they have bought this land and we have no right to enter here. When we questioned him he sent us a notice... We used to grow millets, paddy, brinjal and cotton. We also go for agricultural labour or other kinds of wage labour. We sometimes go to pick cashew nuts from the forests. We survive on our lands for six months and the rest we work as daily wage labourers."

Some of the Koya Dora men from here are in jail on charges of criminal trespass and sedition. The R&R colony is built on 22 acres of land that is disputed in the high court. A Koya Dora woman, Nagamani, has set up a tea shack next to the R&R colony in Pedabhimpally. Ironically, it is her land that houses the colony for tribal people from the submergence zone villages. Compensation for this land also went to non-tribal absentee (Kapu) landlords. She awaits justice for her case pending with the high court.

On one of my visits to Kathanapally, the Koya women were dancing. They moved in circles, each placing her hand over the other's shoulder. The dance looked like a metaphor for how bound the people here are to each other, to the land, to the Godavari. The Polavaram dam will break these bonds which will never be understood by the economics of 'multi-purpose' big dams.

R Uma Maheshwari is a freelance journalist based in Hyderabad. A part of her research and writing on the Polavaram issue was done with the support of the Prem Bhatia Memorial Trust scholarship 2006-07, for her project titled 'Taming Rivers, Damning Hopes. The Polavaram Project: Irrigation or the Deluge of Contracts'. Versions of this extended article have been published in the Telugu and English media during the last year

Endnotes

- 1 For the metaphor I am indebted to Surakka and Muttu Rama Rao of the fishing community on the banks of the Godavari, in Warangal district, who first introduced me to the terminology
- 2 Note on the Polavaram dam prepared by the I&CAD (Irrigation and Command Area Development) Department, Office of the Chief Engineer, Indira Sagar Polavaram Dam, Government of AP
- 3 According to information provided at WWF India, AP state office
- 4 Note on the Polavaram dam prepared by the I&CAD
- 5 Source: Project Affected Persons Economic Rehabilitation Plan (PAPERP) of the Indira Sagar (Polavaram) project, prepared by Agricultural Finance Corporation Limited, Hyderabad, September 2005, p 35
- 6 'Perspectives on Polavaram', brought out by WWF International (Academic Foundation) and 'India's Dam Shame' by Gramya Resource Centre for Women

Bitter harvest

Every year for decades, an army of half-a-million rural poor has been undertaking a desperate migration for work that ends in India's largest swathe of sugar country, feeding the high-profit sugar factories of Maharashtra. The abysmal living conditions of the workers are matched by the exploitative terms of work, and women and girls carry the burden of additional tasks

CHITRANGADA
CHOUDHURY

RUKHMINI SHINGTE, a lean sugarcane cutter in her mid-40s, bends double to enter the cramped enclosure of sugarcane stalks that has been home to her four-member family since November when they left their village. Like the thousand other homes in this colony of sugarcane cutters outside the Mula Sugar Cooperative in central Maharashtra's Ahmednagar district, her home only contains a battered tin case of clothes and a bunch of worn vessels.

Over 500 km away in south Gujarat, outside Bardoli Cooperative, one of the state's largest and earliest sugar cooperatives, a ragged army of more than a thousand harvesters feeds a continuous supply of cane to the factories, relocating from field to field every few weeks. The 'koytas', literally 'sickle' but factory-speak here for 'cutters', are the rural poor from a slew of districts in Maharashtra, from Nandurbar and Nashik to Pune and Jalgaon.

Each year, when the monsoon begins its retreat from the villages of central Maharashtra's arid Marathwada belt, up to half-a-million of its rural poor begin a desperate migration for work that ends in India's largest swathe of sugar country.

The great expanse of sugarcane fields begins in the diamond industry city of Surat in southern Gujarat, sprawls across prosperous western Maharashtra, and tapers into Belgaum in north Karnataka. The harvest season typically runs from November to April, and in particularly good seasons like this year, even longer, until May. The cutters have harvested a record crop of 81 lakh tonnes this year.

The annual migration is over four decades old; its routes are well established. The employers — more than 200 sugar cooperative factories across the three-state swathe — and employees — landless or subsistence farmers — are also constant. But sugarcane profits keep spiralling: an estimated Rs 15,000 crore this year, according to Prakash Naiknavare, managing director of the Maharashtra State Sugar Cooperative Factories Federation (MSSCFF). The profits grow even as the migrants remain impoverished.

Two-thirds of Maharashtra's sugar factories are in the hands of some of the state's leading and wealthiest politicians, including Chief Minister Vilasrao Deshmukh of the Congress party, and leader of the Opposition, the Bharatiya Janata Party's Gopinath Munde. The koytas are mostly from Maharashtra's historically disadvantaged castes and tribes. Little of their sub-marginal land is irrigated, forcing them to

abandon their villages at the end of the rain-fed agricultural season. In contrast, their destination is a lush expanse of the water-intensive sugarcane crop, serviced by a large network of dams.

There's a big advantage to having an army of labourers working round-the-clock to feed Maharashtra's 172 factories in these days of record harvests and competitive economic growth. "Unlike other states like Uttar Pradesh, here cutters, not farmers, cut the cane, ensuring it is at the factory and crushed within 24 hours," says Naiknavare. "That ensures Maharashtra has a higher recovery rate of sugar from the sugarcane — 11.5%, as opposed to the national average of 10%."

Living on the edge

The sugarcane economy is emblematic of a boom for some and little hope for many others. Each winter, as the migration begins, large refugee camp-like colonies take shape outside factory gates. The colonies' inhabitants make do without running water or electricity. In such circumstances, women and girls who migrate for work, face additional hardships. They have to collect water from a communal source for the entire family, and they are forced to bathe in the open.

In the darkness of the night, between 2 and 3 am, cutter couples of husband and wife, often accompanied by their older children, leave for the sugarcane fields, returning by the end of the afternoon to join a long line of cane-laden bullock carts at the factory gates, feeding an uninterrupted supply of cane that keeps the factories humming 24/7.

During the day, the settlements' only inhabitants are the aged and little children. Smoke rises from the burning cowdung cakes that young girls, some of them less than 10 years old, cook on. Household work, including cleaning, cooking and taking care of any cattle, gets delegated to the girls. The ICDS (Integrated Child Development Services) does not take into account the needs of rural Indians on the move, and thus ignores the children in these colonies.

Because they migrate, families also lose other welfare entitlements like foodgrain under the public distribution system. Food must be procured from different sources. In Bardoli, over the sickly sweet stench of the molasses, women cook the coarse, low-quality jowar that the factory gives them as part payment. Some migrants' colonies have



Sheetal Munde, who stays in the cutters' colony outside the factory, cuts cane and also cooks, cleans, looks after livestock and bundles sugarcane tops to sell in the village as fodder

grain shops, like the one outside the Nevasa factory.

There are no public health services that the migrant workers can access; the factories have a doctor to deal with injuries or fever — more to keep the cutters fit for work than concern for their health. The work is physically draining, and the workers have learned to live with body aches and ailments.

School is a sugar-coated dream

An empty dusty godown is the factory-run *sakhar shala* (sugar school) in Beed. It is housed in the Vajinath Sugar Cooperative run by Gopinath Munde. It has no water or toilets, desks or benches. You will also not find any children from the sprawling colony of cane cutters, only a register with over 200 names that shows near universal attendance. When asked about the empty school in his factory, BJP leader and former deputy chief minister Munde said: “*Sakhar shalas* might not be running, but at least they have been set up. Is that not a great improvement from before?”

In the colony outside, children wander unattended. Sheetal Munde, who should be in the school, is among them, collecting water for the day's use. She was once in school,

but the annual migration slowly weaned her out. “I missed school for six months and then failed. Then I left,” she says. Sheetal cuts cane and is also assigned the work of cooking, cleaning and taking care of the livestock. Like several children in the colony, she makes bundles of the tops of sugarcane stalks that can be sold (Rs 30 for 100 bundles of 20 stalks each) to the village as fodder to contribute to the family's income.

Multiply Sheetal's story by 1.7 lakh to see the effects on education of the distress migration. That is the figure thrown up by a survey done through village schoolteachers for the ongoing school year, by the state's Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA). In Uppalkheda, for example, by November 2006, more than 100 families left for the sugarcane fields of Surat. “The classrooms are emptied of 60-70% of students,” says teacher K S Rathod.

Government officials claim they are addressing the fallout of this annual six-month migration. “Half the children, or about 70,000, have been kept back in village hostels that we began this year, and have not migrated with their parents,” said Narendra Kawde, director of the SSA. “All the others are being covered by *sakhar shalas* run

by the sugar factories.”

The education department puts the burden of educating migrant children on the mills, providing them with annual grants. According to SSA Directorate statistics, 643 schools — more than four at every sugar factory — are ensuring that migrating children get an education. On the ground, many factories have no schools. In others, like Munde's Vaijanath factory, the schools do not function.

The SSA or 'Education for All', the Centre's six-year-old flagship programme, was aimed at ensuring that all children complete five years of school education by 2007. But it has not managed to ensure this for one of the most vulnerable groups of children, in transit for half the year. Thousands of children continue to fall through the cracks, despite the *sakhar shalas* at the factory and resident hostels in the village.

A state survey in Latur indicated that only 550 children have been migrating. But at Vilasrao Deshmukh's Manjara cooperative sugar factory in Latur — just one of 10 in the district — a survey by local schoolteacher Purushottam Gilda, in December 2006, showed over 200 children of school-going age living outside the factory. “It is especially hard to ensure that parents send the girls to school,” Gilda says, “since they are needed to do the housework when the parents work in the fields.”

Profiteering from distress

In addition to living in extremely difficult conditions, the work terms are deeply exploitative, violating all existing labour legislation and pinning the workers down in a never-ending cycle of privation.

Factories hire the cutters in couples through an obscure but efficient network of labour brokers or *mukadams*, who thrive on the seasonal distress. A few thousand rupees, advanced in the monsoon, allow the family to subsist. This amount must be paid back through labour in the harvest season. Whole families, adults and children, then get pulled into the work. Madhuri Kapse from Child Rights and You says: “Before a new season can start, many adolescent girls are married off because of this crippling system of advances and debts, to ensure that families have an extra hand to work.”

In the darkness of the night, after a day's harvesting in the fields, Rukhmini shows us a heap of crumpled *parchis* (chits) that record the amount of cane her family has cut over the past few weeks. With no formal education, like most other women cutters she can neither read the figures nor will they bring her family any direct wages. They are guides for the factory to fix the *mukadam's* commission, which ranges from 10-30%.

Naiknavare, managing director of the MSSCF since 1999, sees little wrong in the work terms of the migrant cutters, who feed his federation's 172 sugar factories with an uninterrupted supply of cane in the threshing season. He

argues: “The 9 lakh cutters do not fit in the proper definition of labour since they are neither my (the factory's) direct employees, nor the *mukadam's*. They are therefore not labourers in the formal sense.”

Neeraj Hatekar, economist at Mumbai University, explains the lopsidedness: “Migrants from Marathwada have no stake in the cooperative set-up. Factories, headed by politicians, are unwilling to incur any costs on them. So political parties will agitate for a better price for sugarcane but never any basic rights for the cutters... they continue to remain at the very margins.”

Dutch anthropologist Jan Breman, who began studying the condition of the cane cutters in 1976 in Surat, says he has seen little change in three decades. “In the new economy of India, labour at large gets a raw deal and migrants even more so. At the bottom of the labour market the supply is much higher than the demand and this explains the weak bargaining position of seasonal migrants such as sugarcane harvesters. It is a feature of a labour regime which is thoroughly informalised.”

The state of the sugarcane cutters exemplifies the worst trends of India's poorly regulated informal sector, which employs over 300 million, or 90% of India's workforce. Unorganised labourers like cane cutters were high on the agenda of the UPA government, which set up the National Commission for Enterprises in the Unorganised Sector as a watchdog and advisor. A draft Unorganised Workers Social Security Bill, prepared by the Commission, has been with the Prime Minister's Office since May 2005. Now, the Commission has put out a draft of yet another proposed legislation, the Unorganised Agricultural Sector Workers (Conditions of Work and Livelihood Promotion) Bill, for feedback from state governments and civil society agencies.

The National Rural Employment Guarantee (NREG) programme was meant to arrest distress migration by giving rural households 100 days of assured work every year after the monsoon. At least half of those on such rural works, the law says, must be women. But in several villages from where cane cutters migrate, the programme does not exist. In Uppalkheda village, full of empty houses, the reason is evident. The sarpanch is a key implementer under the NREG programme. Devidas Pawar, the sarpanch of this village of Vanjarias in northern Aurangabad, doubles as the *mukadam*: he, and before him his father, has been sending villagers to Surat's sugar factories for four decades.

The crop has been good this year, the profits high. The *mukadams*, the politicians, they are all riding the boom. The exhausted workers have returned to their villages with meagre earnings, now to carve out a living from arid bits of land. The stench of the molasses is still strong.

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On the 'Ladies Special'

The women-only compartments on Mumbai's locals and 'Ladies Special' trains are unique social spaces for the city's working women, who have converted the benefits of this reservation to even greater effect. For many, the compartment itself is transformed into a workplace to sell anything from shelled peas to lingerie, or to finish household tasks

LINA MATHIAS

NEITHER HALLMARK CARDS nor Archie's have scheduled a day for 'Train Friends' or come out with sentimental cards to mark such a day. But for many of Mumbai's 5 million daily train commuters, this category of friendship provides a strong antidote to the unbearable stress of commuting, and the effects it has on their lives.

'Train friends' travel by the same local at the beginning of the working day and often on the return journey too, share family news, gossip, food, vacation and wedding photographs, and even sing together to the entertainment/chagrin of other commuters. More than men (the only group activity they seem to engage in on trains is playing cards), it is women who take this form of friendship to a different dimension altogether.

These are women who travel long arduous hours every day on the local trains of Mumbai to and from work; women who often use the train itself as a workspace, either to sell food items and other products or to complete household tasks such as cutting vegetables; women who have transformed a daunting daily commute into a social sphere of comfort and sharing.

Local trains in Mumbai, as any commuter would know, have compartments only for women, as well as scheduled 'Ladies Special' trains. While the women-only compartments have existed for decades, Western Railways introduced the Specials in 1992. On May 5 that year, the first 'Ladies Special' left Virar station at 7.39 am for Churchgate. The return Churchgate-Virar journey started at 6.13 pm. Central Railways started its own train only for women on July 1 of the same year. It leaves at 8.15 am from Kalyan for CST, and from CST in the evenings at 6.05. Western Railways now has another north-south 'Ladies Special' from Bhayander to Churchgate, and one in the evening between Churchgate and Borivali.

The benefits of such reservations are immense, but even with the reservations the local Mumbai train is an intensely crowded space. The women-only compartments and trains are the location of harassed squabbling for the 'fourth seat' (the edge of a three-seat bench, which accommodates an extra person), crying children (who invariably accompany the female relative), an unending stream of hawkers and beggars, catcalls and lewd remarks called out by male passengers from passing trains or platforms, occasional stones hurled by miscreants, and a recent series of attacks by

drug-users. All of this can ensure that many women commuters are in a state of irritation and anxiety when they reach their workplace and return home in the evenings or at night.

Over the years, women commuters have converted the benefit of having reserved spaces to even greater effect. The women-only compartments and 'Ladies Special' have become a microcosm of the socio-economic patterns of the world outside. So vibrant is the 'Ladies Special', with its multiplicity of activities, that it has been the subject of more than one documentary film. Women-only compartments and trains are not just spaces where some of the irritants recede, but sources of positive work and play that relieve some of the stress of commuting.

The camaraderie and banter between women 'train friends' may seem spontaneous to an onlooker, but it is usually the eventual outcome of tentative beginnings. Mira Madhavan's group of 'train friends' also began slowly. Mira, a former nurse who works as a teacher trainer, would travel with a friend who boarded the train at Thane, rushed to her favourite window seat and promptly went to sleep until their destination at Dadar. So when Mira heard two young strangers, Shilpa and Phalguni, animatedly talking about health and children's education, she joined the discussion. Soon, another passenger, Karen, also fond of going off to sleep, began joining in the conversations, at a time when she was upset with her son's school and teachers. At Bhandup, Bindu and Chandra would join the group (the two were acquaintances of Shilpa and Phalguni). They began bringing *batata wadas* from a well-known stall for the group's breakfast on the train, while Mira made ribbon sandwiches. After a while, Chitra and Pooja also joined the group. Chitra's mother-in-law made crochet pieces and the others in the group began asking her to make gift items for their family and friends. Soon they began celebrating birthdays, anniversaries, husbands' and children's birthdays, all on the train. A high point of this friendship came when one of the group members, a bank employee, played matchmaker to one of the single women in the group. Today, the match-made couple has a two-year-old daughter.

"We are still in touch," Mira says, "but the group split because two of us changed jobs, one had a baby and decided to work from home, and another's husband got a job offer in Dubai and she accompanied him there. None of

us has forgotten the good times on the train — the eating, the laughter, the few dinners we went to, a day picnic to Karjat. But more importantly, the journey put us in an excellent frame of mind to face the working day and the commute. My 'train friends' were wonderful.”

No study in India has specifically measured the effect of the stress of commuting on work and productivity. However, psychologists Richard Wener and Gary Evans at Cornell University in the US have studied how travelling by mass transit can affect the stress level of commuters. When compared with men, they found, women with children are more susceptible to commuter stress and are more likely to carry that stress into the workplace. Women commuters, they write, experienced more stress in the workplace and that stress was exacerbated by the commute; if the women had children at home, they had the equivalent of a second job and hence additional stress.

The European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions has studied the impact of commuting on the health and safety of workers. People who travelled for more than 45 minutes from home to work (as do most of Mumbai's train commuters) reported higher psychological stress scores, more health complaints (essentially psychosomatic), and greater absenteeism from work due to sickness. Women commuters bore the brunt and had more family difficulties, more travelling complaints, and higher absenteeism.

The Wener-Evans study also found that women benefited the most when transport services improved, which directly resulted in less stress at the workplace. For example, because women commuters in Japan faced extensive sexual harassment, railroad companies started sections only for women in 2000. Some years ago women-only subway cars were started in Rio de Janeiro as part of a scheme to curtail sexual harassment. Buses for women were introduced in Karachi to reduce harassment, which was affecting women's academic and job performance.

The importance of reserving compartments only for women and having exclusive 'Ladies Special' trains in Mumbai thus cannot be over-emphasised. This system of reservation, which Indian women rail commuters have had for decades, remains uncommon in other countries. When the bulk of the transport is in private hands, this is not a right that can be demanded. Mumbai might in fact be the only city in the world that reserves an entire 12-coach train for women during peak hours.

To return to our 'train friends' on Mumbai's locals, like the crochet gifts that the group members bought from Chitra's mother-in-law, many women commuters tap into each other's contacts and hobbies to ease their familial and social obligations and to form supportive networks. The other day, in the Kalyan-VT 'Ladies Special' a woman realised that her friend's 'train friend', hastily introduced, was a children's counsellor. A visiting card was hurriedly thrust out; her neighbour was worried about the erratic behaviour of her

child and this commuter wanted to help.

A *jatra*-like atmosphere prevails in the women's second class as well as first class compartments in the 'Ladies Special' trains. It is a marketplace — and thereby a workplace — for many women and children, who sell hairpins, flowers, *gajras*, cheap Chinese pens that double as torches, toys, colouring books with crayons, magazines, cosmetics, and even lingerie — the list is inexhaustible. Others sell *vaatas* (shares) of vegetables like bhindi, beans, shelled peas (these vendors only travel in the evenings), fruits and homemade snacks. Often, the women who sell small packets of dry snacks, uniformly priced at Rs 5, give away a packet or two for the children of some of the regular women commuters. Many women commuters prefer to complete their purchases on the train, which enables them to straightaway dash to the bus or autorickshaw queue to get home without wasting precious time.

Asha Sarangi, who travels by the 'Ladies Special' from Mira Road in the morning, often buys *idli-chatni* or *mini medu wadas* from a woman who makes them at home and sells them on the train. “They are hot and fresh and tasty. And the price is very reasonable. Her stuff simply vanishes within minutes,” she says. This vendor, like many others, services ladies' compartments in other trains too, and, along with her husband who looks after the purchase of the raw material and the packaging, depends on the sales for her livelihood. She also takes 'orders' during festivals for special snacks for women who do not have the luxury of time to make these snacks.

Deepali Bhalerao, who travels to Thane in the 'Ladies Special' from CST in the evening, sometimes likes to travel in the luggage compartment. “Most of the women here have finished selling their wares and have bought vegetables to make for dinner,” she says. “They keep their baskets close by, sit on the floor of the compartment in companionable circles and clean and cut while talking and laughing all the time.”

Deepali treasures the experience of travelling on the Kalyan-bound 'Ladies Special' a few months ago. A group of 12 women were composing *ukhane* (couplets that Maharashtrian brides playfully put together with the husband's name in one of the lines). Each woman was given a small note with one word on it and she had to compose an *ukhane* on the spot that would include this word and her husband's name. It got so exciting, says Deepali, that other commuters joined in and women from the first class compartment next door, who usually do not give the second class commuters a second glance, began prompting words and phrases. “I would have even forgotten to get off at Thane if it was not such an ingrained habit,” she laughed.

Women and work takes on a new colour altogether on Mumbai's locals. Here, the 'train friends' go on from day to day, from track to track, easing each other's journey as women have been doing down the centuries.

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In search of water

SEEMA KULKARNI

The crisis of drinking water is a crisis in the lives of poor and marginalised women. The impact of drought and scarcity is felt most severely by women due to their gender-defined roles in collecting and utilising water for the survival of their households. Often, the other side of improved productivity due to irrigation also means increased labour for women

ALL OVER THE WORLD women share a special relationship with water, as a life-sustaining resource, as a means of production, and as a cultural idiom. The landscape of women and water in India is no exception. In rural India, women head-load water over miles in the scorching heat of the semi-arid plains or along narrow dangerous paths up in the foothills. Denied land rights, most rural women find it difficult to access water for irrigation or to participate in making decisions in the newly established water user associations. Giving women a voice in articulating their water priorities requires an enabling environment which recognises that the right to water is embedded in the larger canvas of gender rights, livelihood sustainability and human security.

The water sector is going through a crisis in terms of management of the resource as well as in terms of scarcity. In Maharashtra, the number of drought-prone talukas is increasing rapidly. Despite huge investments in building dams, the irrigated area has not gone beyond 15% of total cropped area. It is estimated that if all the potential were exploited, this area would not exceed 30%. However, how much irrigation is expanded is less crucial than how much of it reaches the poor, and women.

Almost 60% of the irrigated area in Maharashtra is cornered by 2% of the land, which is largely under sugarcane. The highly subsidised expansion of irrigation in the last few decades has created pockets of prosperity but left a large section of the poor deprived of water. The question of assured water for livelihoods for a large section of the population remains unresolved. Issues of distributional justice were, in fact, never on the irrigation agenda.

Apart from the tremendous gaps in equity, the irrigation sector is beset with problems like inadequate financial recoveries from users, stagnating performance, poorly maintained irrigation systems, displacement of people, resultant conflicts between those affected by the project and its beneficiaries, and the irreparable damage that it has caused to the ecosystem (Vaidyanathan; Ballabh).

In terms of drinking water, according to government of Maharashtra statistics, between 1978 and 1980, 12,753 villages had inadequate drinking water. To resolve this crisis the government introduced 15,085 tubewells and then claimed that almost 11,000 were successful. In 1986, the number of villages with inadequate drinking water increased

to 14,000. In 1999, 5,163 villages and 3,193 *vadis* were being provided water through tankers. Between 1997 and 2002, the state government claimed that it had solved the problem for 30,741 villages. However, at the end of 2002, there were about 22,870 villages with a severe drinking water crisis — which most severely affects the poor and women.

According to the central government, 94% of rural habitations in early 2004 had access to water, ostensibly showing that India was well on target to meeting the Millennium Development Goals. However, such data is based on systems in place and does not account for the sustainability of the source or the system. Nor does it question who has access to how much water and when.

Women and drinking water

“It is estimated that over 10 million person-years are spent by women and female children carrying water from distant sources every year.” (Johannesburg Summit 2002 cited in WaterAid/WSSCC)

Who collects water for households?

According to a study commissioned by UNICEF and done by the Rajiv Gandhi National Drinking Water Mission, 1990, the principal collectors of water in Indian households are women, usually between the ages of 15-35 years. They collect about 192 litres of water a day for an average household of seven members. Women's role in water collection varies with age as follows:

- Women (15-35 years): Collect 63.6% of household water
- Women (36-50 years): 16.2%
- Women (51+ years): 2.0%
- Women (< 15 years): 4.0%
- Men: 14.0%

Source: Venkateswaran

The crisis of drinking water is a crisis in the lives of poor and marginalised women. The impact of drought and scarcity is felt most severely by women due to their gender-defined roles in collecting and utilising water for the survival of their households. A study in the Konkan region of Maharashtra found that in every household, on an average, women spend about 79%, men about 7%, and children about 14% of their time in meeting the household's domestic water needs (as cited in Joy and Paranjape).

This impacts women's health, time and energy spent in collecting water, income-earning opportunities, childrearing capacities, and social status. These impacts have the combined effect of weakening the capabilities of women and their livelihood outcomes.

While women normally spend a significant proportion of their time in meeting basic household needs for water, fodder and fuel even in normal times, during a drought they have to invest even more time and labour to collect less and less — both quantitatively and qualitatively — water, fodder and fuel. They have to hire out more of their labour for a smaller than usual wage. This leaves them with very little time to engage in any productive activity outside the house, and forces women to remain in subsistence.

Women from Kalmadi village in Nandurbar district, north Maharashtra, say: “Forget about safe drinking water from wells, we spend most of our time locating streams and springs that can quench our thirst. Almost half a day is spent in locating water.” Indutai Patil, now 60, says: “Since I came to this village as a young bride I have been facing this problem of water scarcity. My hair has gone white but the search for water has not ended. As I age the distance to the water source also increases.”

In Sindkheda taluka in Dhule district there are several dams like the Jamphal and Sulawade on the river Tapi, but they are all completely dry. This is a high rainfall area (1,200-1,500 mm) but most of the rivers flow only in the monsoons and go dry immediately afterwards. At any time of the day it is common to see women here walking with pots on their heads, in search of water. The government took over two wells to resolve the drinking water problem, but erratic electricity makes it difficult to pump out water.

For women agricultural labourers this scarcity has meant loss of income. They say: “We cannot afford to spend our entire day looking for water. We have to go for wage-earning. But then we have to buy water for drinking. We earn about Rs 30 a day and spend about Rs 15-20 just on getting some kind of water to quench our thirst. How do we live and what can we eat?” While this is the story in most parts of Maharashtra, in Wada in Thane district, Coca-Cola was given an unlimited permit to extract water.

Health impact studies have shown how lack of water means that women have to cut down on the number of meals cooked, or manage with raw or partially cooked food. Wood is the main source of fuel in rural areas. Fuel becomes inadequate during a drought, and this also changes consumption patterns. All this affects the nutritional quality of the food, and women and girls are the worst affected in the process. Studies have shown that in such situations it is the women who cut down their intake first (Agarwal, as cited in Kulkarni and Rao).

Apart from the nutritional deficiencies, women's health is affected due to waterborne diseases. Mortality and morbidity due to increased workloads have been observed across the

region. Studies have also shown an increased incidence of anaemia during drought years. Instances of abortion and ailments related to the reproductive organs have also been observed. In Pune district, MASUM, an organisation working on women's health issues, observed that menstrual cycles were affected and many women reported that they had not menstruated for over a year due to physical exertion.

Water scarcity also means that young girls are forced to stay out of school to collect water. Women find little time for social interaction with each other, and, as water becomes scarcer, once-stabilising community relationships turn sour due to increasing conflicts over the resource. Permanent and seasonal migration of men to cities and irrigated areas leads to an apparent increase in “women-headed” households.

Long-term and widespread drought has had a long-standing impact on natural resources. Ecological degradation, contributing to drought, has led to the erosion of livelihoods. Degradation of forests and land and dropping watertables impact women in the same way as drought. Added to this is a lack of opportunities in the non-farm sector, which forces migration to urban areas. Schemes and programmes to address these issues lack an understanding of the causes that brought about the depletion of the resource, as well as gender-defined tasks and roles.

Women and irrigation

There is little documentation of the traditional rights of women over water sources. Formal rights are often vested in men as farmers and as heads of the household. Women therefore have little or no access to irrigation in their own capacity, and access is usually mediated through a male member of the household. Few women use water as individual farmers to irrigate crops on individually owned land. Most women draw canal water for homestead plots or for domestic use in informal arrangements — that is, the water is used for purposes other than irrigation: for drinking, domestic use, for small vegetable gardens, for livestock and micro-enterprises such as fisheries.

Women's use of irrigation water is thus seen in uses other than irrigating the 'main' crops. However, in conventional analyses of irrigation efficiency, this distraction from irrigating the main crops would be seen as wastage.

Only women using water as individual farmers receive some attention in the present irrigation paradigm. Most of the others fall in the informal arena, with no rights. A more explicit recognition and formalisation of 'other' categories of users is needed. This will bring about a better assessment of water use and distribution, and improve the security of these users (Meinzen-Dick and Zwartveen).

Few studies document how women would use water differently if given access. In our work, we have noticed that gender differences in irrigation are manifested in the choice of crops, preference over water timings, and labour inputs. These are internal to the household and never really emerge as open conflicts.

Some studies show how women participate in irrigation-related activities. A study in Gujarat shows that women spend an average of 5.3 hours in rearing livestock. Fetching water for livestock takes about 5 hours daily. The detailed study on women's multiple uses of water showed that there were only a few activities in agricultural production in which women were not actively involved. Women were involved in irrigation, chemical spraying, fertiliser application and land preparation, along with men. The Gujarat study also shows that although women are significantly involved in irrigated agriculture, the revenue generated from agriculture is entirely controlled by men and so are decisions around water. This is true also of production from women's fields and household gardens (Upadhyay).

Irrigation brings prosperity and hope but often at the cost of women and other resource-poor. There is a lot of documentation of the ill effects of irrigated agriculture on women. Apart from the increased workload and resultant health hazards, changed cropping patterns due to irrigated agriculture affects the extent and nature of women's meaningful participation in agriculture. Some studies in Sangli district in Maharashtra indicate an increase in the incidence of desertion and violence against women in the district's irrigated belt.

In most cases, the other side of improved productivity and irrigation efficiency is increased labour for women. This is evident in many irrigated areas. Although improved labour opportunities have a positive side, women's work increases without a substantial improvement in their status and without them being relieved of their domestic workloads (SOPPECOM; Vasavada; Zwartveen).

However, in some instances, there are positive outcomes. Sara Ahmed's study on the lift cooperatives in eastern Gujarat point to the fact that enhanced participation of women in irrigation does lead to positive outcomes. She outlines the significant potential such participation holds in changing gender relations and responsibilities (Ahmed).

We argue for women's presence in irrigation management and independent access to water for two reasons. First, because women's contribution in terms of time and energy in subsistence agriculture has been proven to be very significant. Improving their access to water and decisions related to water is critical for better livelihood outcomes. Second, such changes have the potential to challenge the existing property regime as well as its gender-specific tasks. It is assumed that because most women do not own land, they will not use water entitlements if given any. However, if access to water is given, women may either demand land, trade that water, or use it for micro-enterprises.

People working in the water sector are grappling with a range of challenges related to gender equity. The arguments have ranged from gender participation on grounds of poverty, efficiency, welfare and equity (Razavi; Agarwal; Jackson). Many of these arguments are shaped by larger concerns in the water sector and link gender equity to more "legitimate" concerns such as better management of water, improved efficiency, cost recovery, etc.

The economics of water

Policies are being introduced that treat water as an economic good. Debates on water pricing and full cost recovery are growing. The irrigation sector has been

Sudharak Olwe



recognised as a loss-making sector and the State wants to rid itself of the responsibility of managing it. One of the solutions for recovering costs is seen in the “user pays” principle. In plain terms, this implies that only those who are willing to pay and have the ability to pay will have access to water. No distinction is made in pricing policies between water for livelihoods and for other requirements.

This has two implications: first, the priority given to industrial water use over irrigation. If water is allocated wherever returns are the highest, water for industry becomes the more favoured option. The second implication relates to which crops are given preference with irrigation water. This can restrict women's access to water for non-marketable produce or survival tasks (Green and Baden). “Paying” crops can get preference over “non-paying” food crops largely cultivated by women. Women often informally use irrigation water for rearing cattle, moulding bricks, growing vegetables. All small-scale activities, but crucial for household consumption. The economic benefits of these enterprises are not visibly high and the new policies may force women out of using irrigation water for these purposes (Cleaver and Elson).

The economic criterion raises critical issues of what is really economically affordable for women. Most studies and experiences indicate that women rarely have control over their own or the household's income. Guarantees of assured supply in many drinking water schemes have prompted women to agree to the “user pays” principle. However, the *willingness* to pay cannot be equated with the *ability* to pay. And how does one calculate what the necessary quantum of water for meeting livelihoods is, and how it can become affordable?

“Cost recovery” is the other principle being seen as critical for bringing in water sector reform — in the drinking water, sanitation as well as irrigation sectors. A recent scheme promises to involve beneficiaries from the stage of development of the resource. The new terminology is Participatory Irrigation Development and Management (PIDM). The scheme is designed in such a way that the beneficiaries themselves will bear a large part (60%) of the distribution cost. This would be done through a combination of contributions in the form of labour, cash and bank loans.

Studies from across the world show that it is largely the women of the household who make the labour input for capital cost recovery and for recovery of operation and maintenance of irrigation schemes. Therefore, this form of cost recovery often means increased labour for women. Thus, the implied cost savings from decentralised management may represent hidden costs for women (Green and Baden).

Any alternative will have to be based on restructuring the water sector on the principles of equity, sustainability and participation. Unless rational, equitable and sustainable use of water does not become a primary concern for

policymakers, women and other resource-poor will never be able to participate in water governance.

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No place for single women

Once, Andhra Pradesh's top leaders queued up at Bandi Lachmamma's home with promises. The debate on farm suicides hit the headlines when her husband took his life. Years later, she works as a coolie in Anantapur, earning much less than the minimum assured by the NREGS. The country's flagship development programme has helped lakhs of families in the state, but it turns away single women

P SAINATH

"THEY DON'T WANT WIDOWS," says Bandi Lachmamma. She's speaking about the National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (NREGS). "I could not find work at those sites for more than a few days. After that, they turn you away if you are single, without a male partner." And she's speaking in Anantapur, Andhra Pradesh, where the NREGS — the nation's flagship development project — was first launched. The scheme itself has benefited lakhs of families in the state. But Lachmamma is among those who have lost out.

"She's quite right about this," says K R Venugopal, a former secretary to the prime minister. "Others like her have had the same experience," he told this correspondent from Hyderabad. Venugopal, who was also special rapporteur to the National Human Rights Commission, has recently done a study on the NREGS. "Single women do indeed lose out for the reasons she gives." A woman who remains in her husband's village after his death is often isolated there. It is not easy to find a male partner for work — something worksite officials demand.

Lachmamma is one of Anantapur's most well-known women. For all the wrong reasons. This is a district that shot to national notoriety for its flood of farmer suicides. And her husband's was the first to capture media attention. When Bandi Narasimhalu killed himself almost seven years ago, it shook Andhra Pradesh and sparked a debate on the agrarian crisis crippling the countryside.

Narasimhalu, a groundnut farmer with five acres of land,

"I could not find work at those sites for more than a few days. After that, they turn you away if you are single, without a male partner"

— Bandi Lachmamma

cracked under a debt of Rs 2 lakh, crop failure, and cultivation costs. As his wife told us in that period: "He came home one day and took his life with the only thing the government had given him: Monocrotophos." (*The Hindu*, April 29, 2001) That pesticide was the one free input handed out to farmers in the state at the time. His death rocked the Andhra Pradesh Assembly. Political leaders queued up at Lachmamma's doorstep in Chiyvedu village. The media descended on her in droves.

Today: "I try to run my farm. But just now I'm mostly working as a coolie in Anantapur town." That is, for Rs 60 a day on a railway construction project handled by a private contractor. Of which, Rs 10 "goes in paying for the auto". The 'auto' is a euphemism for a seven-seat three-wheeler that actually stuffs in up to 20 human beings. She pays Rs 5 each way of the 18 km journey.

"With all those leading figures coming here and making promises," says Dr M Geyanand, a well-known doctor in Anantapur, "this is still how she ends up. Imagine how the others must be faring." Lachmamma says: "Y S Rajasekhara Reddy was one of those who came to my house." He was then an Opposition leader. She accepts that because of his visit the family got Rs 25,000 from the local Congress MLA. "But Rajasekhara Reddy said he would build me a home. With folded hands, he promised me a job. It did not happen. I have not seen him since," she says, without bitterness though.

The Rs 1 lakh compensation the government gave the family has been steadily dwindling. At the farm "the input costs keep going up and we lose money each season. We also have no cattle". Because Narasimhalu sold off their cattle before he died. And because "a bullock we bought after his suicide also died".

At the government worksites: "The field assistants and project officials prefer to deal with groups," says Lachmamma. "If you do not have a male partner, they turn you away assuming you cannot do real physical labour. They don't want widows. They told me: 'To benefit from this scheme, you must be at least a pair of workers.' So I am forced to work as a coolie in Anantapur." That, at much less than the minimum Rs 80 the NREGS would have given her.

A new book *Capturing Imagination of the Stakeholders* confirms her complaint. Written by Dr S Gopal, the book is

P.Sainath



Bandi Lachamma and her son are well known in Anantapur, Andhra Pradesh, for all the wrong reasons. Her husband was the first farmer in the region to commit suicide by consuming pesticide

based on field studies on the NREG Act in operation. It records that over 200 women in Borampalli village of Anantapur district said that “they were not being called for work at all”. It notes that this is because segments of the work are mostly taken up “by two or three families as a unit”. It found that since higher output was seen as “coming only by being family-centric, single women have no place in the NREGA”.

So she wakes up at 5 am each morning. After cooking, fetching water, washing, and other chores, by 7 am she heads for the 'auto' that takes her to Anantapur. Reaching there an hour later, she has the tiny meal she's brought along. She starts work at 9 am and is back home only at 7 pm, when she has to look after her son Gopal and her daughter's son as well. Both stay with her. Gopal has just become a computer operator at a local bank, but only on a casual basis. He will get Rs 1,500 a month as long as he is kept on. The three thus live on about Rs 100 a day “most of which goes in our basic expenses”.

“Remember that when the agricultural season comes along we have to hire labourers at around Rs 100 per head — more than what we ourselves earn daily off-season.

We spend around Rs 3,000 each season on labour.” But she hasn't given up on the farm. She will cultivate it and “if there's a decent crop, we can survive”.

Her big hope is that her 10-year-old grandchild, now in the 5th class, “will have a better life than us”. She has another son “who drives one of those 'autos' of the kind I travel by,” she laughs. But “our timings are very different,” so there are no free rides to Anantapur. “He lives separately with his own family now. They can barely support themselves. So how can he help us,” she says. So who can? “Maybe Rajasekhara Reddy. Now that he is chief minister do you think he might build us that house and give my son a job?”

Postscript: Soon after this story appeared, a section of the district administration, alarmed by the story, shot off a long letter to The Hindu, denying its vital details. Unfortunately for them, Andhra Pradesh Agriculture Minister Raghuvendra Reddy, seeing the same story in Hyderabad, reacted very differently. He allotted Lachamma a house and ordered that she be given a pension. Some officials of the district were also shunted out.

Courtesy: The Hindu

Micro gain, mega hype

Micro-credit may offer some women the initial boost for sustainable self-employment, and in some instances enable them to question gender and caste subordination. But at a time when macro-policies are eroding smaller scale markets and promoting large-scale export-oriented production, the power of micro-enterprises to lift women out of poverty becomes highly exaggerated

LAXMI MURTHY

IF EVER THERE WAS A MANTRA for poverty reduction, women's empowerment, development, and economic growth all rolled into one, micro-credit has been presented as one. So far touted as a one-stop solution to several ills, the glitter on the magic wand may just be dimming, even as the reality of micro-credit can no longer be hidden behind the hype.

Variously referred to as micro-credit, micro-finance or self-help groups (SHGs), the essential principle is the same: extend small loans to women organised into small groups, and make the groups responsible for repayment. Women will use this seed money, it is surmised, and they will find ways to climb out of poverty, or at least make life a little better by investing in their own skills, in small businesses.

Pioneered in 1976 by Muhammed Yunus and his Grameen Bank, the Bangladeshi model soon caught on in India. By the 1980s, millions of households, especially in rural India, were accessing micro-credit, and today thousands of NGOs and branches of over 500 banks are involved in micro-credit.

The major spin-off of the micro-credit movement at the grassroots level has undoubtedly been the fact that women have used this system to enter mainstream activity and public life in rural India. In many areas, particularly where there has been support from NGOs or strong SHGs, women have gained a voice and been able to use this space to emerge from their traditional roles into a more "proactive" male space. In many instances, gender and caste subordination has also been questioned.

Yet, it is difficult to gauge the actual "success" of micro-credit programmes. Despite the spread of micro-credit programmes and their growing popularity with policymakers and NGOs alike, hard data is somewhat lacking.

The main benefits of micro-credit claimed by proponents are a reduction in poverty, an increase in consumption among the poor, and empowerment of women. But there is little standardisation across studies on definitions or measures of "success". The definition of "poverty", and especially "reductions in poverty", tends to vary from study to study. "Women's empowerment" is another very nebulous term. Many terms and processes are redefined on an ad hoc basis in each new study, and a bulk of the literature on micro-credit appears to be in the stage of observation and

anecdotal evidence.

Moreover, much of the 'success' in loan repayment can be attributed to dubious accounting systems. In 2001 itself, long before Yunus received the Nobel Peace Prize, experts in the micro-finance industry expressed their dismay: "Grameen Bank had at best been lax, and more likely, at worst, deceptive in reporting its financial performance," wrote J D von Pischke of the World Bank.

Downside of micro-credit

Though touted as a viable livelihood option for women, one of the most fundamental problems with micro-credit programmes is the difficulty involved in actually turning a profit on the loans. Rather than invest in commercial ventures, numerous field studies have found that the loans are often used to meet daily consumption needs and for emergencies like accidents, ill-health and death. In such a case, far from being the launching pad for entrepreneurial ventures, the SHG merely replaces the exploitative village moneylender.

The chances of a female-headed enterprise succeeding at all are often quite small in situations where women do not have access to, or even less, control of markets. In fact, as micro-credit programmes become more successful and disburse more loans, a greater number of people enter the local marketplace as micro-entrepreneurs, thus increasing the competition in a limited arena with limited absorption capacity or marketing infrastructure. Indeed, micro-enterprises are prey to the same vulnerabilities as the informal sector, being located very much within the framework of unregulated labour and marketplace. The cumulative effect of rising costs, declining demand, and competition from both cheap imports and increased entrants into the sector leads to shrinking profits in informal-sector trade. Typically, small businesses undertaken with micro-loans tend to be traditional "women's work", such as making agarbattis, candles, or papads; or weaving, sewing or poultry farming, which is not seen as fit for men to do. This leads women to rely on their children for supplemental labour, which could have the unintended effect of keeping children, especially girls, out of school so that they can help contribute to the family income and pay off the loan. In fact, a recent World Bank study by S Khandker reports that, "self-employed activity financed by a micro-credit programme may facilitate child employment".

When macro-policies are eroding smaller scale markets, and promoting large-scale export-oriented production, backed by aggressive commercial advertising and corporate financial backing which are out of the reach of rural women, the power of micro-enterprises to lift women out of poverty is highly exaggerated.

One of the most disturbing aspects of micro-credit is cross-borrowing, leading to a spiralling cycle of debt. If the investment does not yield dividends, the money to repay the loan must come from reduced consumption or borrowing from some other source, usually on more stringent terms. Women take loans from village moneylenders at exorbitant rates to pay off loans from SHGs. Once on the treadmill of debt, the women borrowers cannot stop running. This is indeed ironic, in a programme that would like to see itself as a more progressive/respectable alternative to the existing usury arrangements of informal credit which could be exploitative, such as share-cropping, debt bondage, and so on. Reports of women in Andhra Pradesh committing suicide due to stress over repaying a micro-credit loan point to the need to look into this aspect more seriously.

One of the cornerstones of micro-credit — peer-driven loan recovery — hits at the very roots of community living. When group members are forced to put pressure on a defaulting member, lest they be deprived of a loan, the social conflict generated makes marginalised groups even more vulnerable. With “penalties” for default ranging from special boycott to “confiscating” chickens or household items, loan recovery becomes a serious business.

Another problem is capture of loans by male relatives. In some cases, male relatives use female borrowers as fronts to get relatively low-interest loans. These loans may or may not be used to benefit the family, and the female borrowers rarely see any benefit at all. And yet, the women are held responsible for repayment of the loans.

Who benefits?

In the rapturous hype over micro-credit, one crucial question begs to be asked: since a majority of people have neither the skills nor the inclination to be entrepreneurs, why is there a seeming boom in micro-enterprises? It has been clear for decades that the informal sector is a receptacle for the victims of the failure of the formal sector. So one must look at the other side: micro-credit offers brisk business to financial institutions.

For, it is the business aspect of micro-credit that reveals what these programmes are all about: a low-cost, non-threatening substitute for real people’s movements for agrarian reform, and State-sponsored investment in infrastructure, healthcare and education.

It is no coincidence that international financial agencies have expressed an interest and put their stake in micro-credit. It is a profitable business — a fact that must be kept in mind in the midst of platitudes about women’s empowerment, alleviating poverty and other such good intentions.

Moreover, micro-credit interest rates are high, usually at least 20% or higher with commercial banks now into the business. NABARD, back in 1997, declared that it was a “myth” that the poor wanted credit at low interest rates. Claiming that the poor wanted timely and adequate credit, and were willing to pay high interest rates for it, even the public banks allowed the market to determine the rates of interest, which were invariably high.

Loans may be adequate to produce some income, but not to change significantly a family’s environment. The illusion of “development” offered by small improvements in consumption tends to lower people’s expectations of their rights as citizens. With low capital intensity of investment and the resultant low margin of profit, there is no significant savings for borrowers. The treadmill of investment in micro-enterprise, which is all that micro-credit allows, is hardly likely to change the face of poverty, as the votaries of micro-credit claim.

To re-phrase Yunus’ rather presumptuous declaration: “One day our grandchildren will go to museums to see what poverty was like” (quoted in *The Independent*, May 5, 1996), perhaps our children will have to go to a museum to see what social welfare was like.

The tendency to attach programmes of education or healthcare to micro-credit programmes further takes away from people’s fundamental right to healthcare and education. The trend to link micro-credit programmes with the commodity market controlled by multinational companies also reveals the not-so-hidden agenda of increasing market penetration, for instance linking micro-credit loans with purchasing certain seeds or pesticide. It is difficult to suspend scepticism when Muhammed Yunus’ diversification into the cell phone business (Grameen Phone in Bangladesh) seems to have contributed to his winning the Nobel prize for peace. The Nobel bid was reportedly solidly backed by a former senior finance ministry bureaucrat in Norway and top officials of Telenor, Norway’s phone company. It is no coincidence that Telenor owns 62% of Grameen Phone, which controls 60% of Bangladesh’s cell phone market. It is also not surprising that Telenor is today reluctant to sell its stake in the lucrative Grameen Phone, and allow it to be taken over by poor rural women, which Yunus insists was the original vision.

While micro-credit can undoubtedly offer some women entrepreneurs the initial boost required for sustainable self-employment, caution must be exercised in viewing it as a panacea for structural economic and social problems. It cannot substitute social policy and function as the single strategy to end poverty, caste discrimination, gender imbalance, ill-health and illiteracy. Unless movements for social justice ensure women’s entitlement to productive resources, introducing micro-credit programmes alone will bring only micro-gains.

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'Flexi' firms, rigid realities

With liberalisation, many industries relocated, subcontracted and downsized. Many women workers had to retire or were retrenched. In the plastic processing and diamond polishing units in Mumbai, employers have brought in young women as workers for lower-end jobs at lesser wages. When jobs are subcontracted, older women often do the same work in an informal setting on a piece rate system

NANDITA GANDHI

IN THE 1980s, a substantial number of young women were inducted into the readymade garments and electronics industries. By the late 1990s, a growing number of women were being employed in BPOs and ITES, or call centres and back office data entry work. Statistical analysis for 1983, 1987-88, 1993-94, 1999-2000 and 2004-05 shows the work participation rate of women increased to some degree, especially in urban areas (Mitra; Chandrashekhar and Ghosh). About 5% more women, mainly younger women, joined the labour market in 2004-05.

Does this mean that the new policies that came in with globalisation have been beneficial for women workers?

A more 'open' market led by exports was expected to trigger an employment boom. Instead, the new economic policies of liberalisation, privatisation and deregulation have given rise to what has been called 'jobless growth'. The work participation rate of 15.1% for urban women in 1983 dipped to 13.9% in 1999-2000, then increased to 16.6% in 2004-05. The manufacturing sector showed a marginal increase from 26.7% in 1983 to 28.2% in 2004-05.

We need to therefore read between the lines: if more women have reported that they are regularly employed, many have also said that they are self-employed, mostly in home-based work or domestic service.

In 1996, we interviewed 360 women from 94 plastic processing firms and 73 diamond firms. The selection of women workers was based on age, marital status, number of years in employment, religion, and size of the firm. Our interview schedule had 157 questions covering a range of issues including the nature of work, union activity, and household strategies. Our aim was to understand the micro, localised effects of macro-changes at the firm or production level in the context of women's employment.

Through a process of selection, we picked the plastics processing and diamond polishing and jewellery industries. Both employed a substantial number of women, had small, medium and large production units, and had been impacted by liberalisation policies in different ways. The plastics processing industry was severely affected because market protection in the form of subsidies and restrictions were being withdrawn. On the other hand, the diamond industry was favoured for its export performance and had benefited from the lifting of monetary rules and tariffs.

Uncertain work, insecure workers

In profiling women who had been inducted into the plastics processing and diamond polishing and jewellery industries, we found that they were mainly Maharashtrians (Hindus from non-Brahmin castes), living in the working class colonies of Jogeshwari, Borivali, Malad, Dharavi and Dahisar. Some of them were daughters of the early textile workers who had settled in Mumbai after migrating from the Konkan region of Maharashtra. The majority of respondents were young, literate and unmarried. They lived in nuclear households of four to five people, at poverty levels.

For most of the workers we interviewed, 'security' was synonymous with permanent employment. We used employment security, income security and security of organisational representation to arrive at a categorisation of labour status. Only 9% of women had the three basic securities. We have called them the 'secure' workers. The majority, or 52%, were 'insecure' workers. This categorisation helped us understand the nature of work done by the women, and their status in the labour force.

The plastics processing or product industry, often subsumed under plastics, rubber and allied products, is a growing industry but located at the lower end of the Indian industrial spectrum in terms of net value added, output and profits. The diamond polishing and jewellery industry is an export-oriented industry with skilled workers. Both have been differently impacted by the new economic policies. The plastic products industry was adversely affected because cheaper goods from East Asia poured into the Indian market. The diamond industry has benefited from lower duties, import facilities and tax holidays from as far back as the 1960s.

Employers from both industries gave an off-the-cuff estimate of 10% women in the total number of workers. However, in our sample, the ratio of women workers to the total number of workers was much higher. A discrepancy between perception and reality was also evident in the employers' rationale for the induction of women. They projected the women as uneducated, unskilled and suited only for lower-end jobs. In contrast, according to the women workers, they were semi-literate, had the capacity for skilled jobs and did overtime.

In both industries, employers followed the established

Sudharak Olive



practice of giving women 'light' tasks like sorting, finishing, packing, checking, polishing, and supportive tasks. But the workplace is not neutral in terms of gender, caste or region. It, in fact, produces and reproduces prevalent social practices. Our data showed a clear gender, caste and region-wise hierarchy in the workplace, which employers successfully used for the organisation of tasks, hierarchy, and composition of workers.

A 'flexibility' that is limiting

The sweeping changes in Western economies during the 1970s and 1980s, a realignment of international capital, technological innovation, the decline of the manufacturing sector and the success of Japanese production techniques encouraged the return to a more conservative economic model of deregulation and privatisation. These changes were interpreted by academics and policymakers as a crisis in the dominant, post-World War system of mass production or the 'Fordist' model, and the emergence of what came to be called the 'flexi firm' model and the notion of flexibility, or 'the capacity to change'. According to Piore and Sabel, flexibility was introduced by a vertical disintegration of the manufacturing process into a number of individual 'flexibly specialised' firms, which functioned with mutual cooperation as a network, with computer-controlled machines and a skilled labour force.

One of the main purposes of industrial restructuring was numerical and functional flexibility so firms could gear up to

face price and quality competition. Organisational structure flexibility involved decisions on relocation of the firm to subsidised areas or places with cheaper infrastructure costs. Physical shifts, sub-contracting non-core processes, or splitting firms usually left women out by retiring them through schemes, retrenching them, or pushing them out to sub-contracted smaller firms. Either way they were bereft of a job or were relocated to a non-formal sector environment.

Large and medium-sized formal sector firms were more likely to use the new flexibility strategies for the creation of a flexible labour force. This meant that women belonging to the 'secure' category of workers were most likely to be affected by changes such as automation and the clubbing of tasks, relocation of the plant and sub-contracting of production. Medium and small firms intensified their use of labour market flexibilities to push the 'moderately secure' and 'insecure' women to further insecurity. Women continued doing poorly paid jobs and backbreaking overtime as they waited for that fearsome moment of dismissal.

It is common for firm managements to upgrade machinery and technology to improve their products and costs. But the economic reforms had made this an issue of survival. Newer production methods like casting instead of using moulds for jewellery, laser diamond cutting machines, and sophisticated machines that integrated tasks for plastic products were being adopted. Flexible strategies of

production brought together technological changes and re-training of workers, and broke down rigid task and skill divisions between workers.

However, only a few women benefited from the re-training process. The majority were declared redundant when their lower-end, unskilled jobs were merged with men's work. Some of the advantages of 'flexibilisation', as seen by Piore and Sabel, such as skill enhancement, had bypassed women. Our data shows that women have been de-skilled by flexibility strategies especially in large units, except in a few cases in the diamond processing and jewellery industry. The terms 'core' and 'periphery' workers were used by Atkinson to show the bifurcation of workers into a permanent and skilled group, as against the insecure ones. The concept of 'core' and 'periphery' is problematic dualism but it does indicate a process of selection, which leaves behind women.

Labour market flexibility strategies were used also to control the number and wages of workers. In both industries and amongst all firms, the strategy was traditional — using the piece rate and daily wage systems to keep the wages of workers under control. Managements have also been campaigning for amendments to protective labour laws so as to get the right to hire and fire workers according to their production levels.

Manufacturing change

The early readymade garments and electronics industries drew in hundreds of young women but gradually shifted to countries like Sri Lanka and Bangladesh. Today, BPOs and ITES are attractive employment sites but they employ a miniscule number of English-speaking, educated, young women. The large numbers of semi-literate and semi-skilled women are drawn towards the manufacturing sector. More young women (in 1996) were being employed in small and medium-sized factory units.

There is a co-relation between our data, gathered in 1996-97 as the policies of liberalisation were being implemented, the analysis of the five rounds of NSSO (National Sample Survey Organisation) studies, and the conclusions of scholars on women's employment.

NSSO data shows a slight increase in women's employment in the manufacturing sector. But it is not as substantial as projected by the export-oriented, market-led economic model. Our data provides some possible answers.

Multinational corporations quickly took advantage of the opening up of the Indian economy and flooded the market with their goods. Indian industry had to re-structure itself in order to survive and compete. Most industries jettisoned the Fordist model of manufacture for the Japanese variety of 'flexi' firms. Large firms of both the plastics and diamond industries relocated to rural areas or special zones, or split units and sub-contracted some of their products to smaller units. It was impossible for women to relocate because of domestic considerations, so they were the first to be

retrenched from the bigger industries.

Similar to NSSO data, our study showed that employers were bringing in young, 'fresh' women in both industries. Our data showed that employers had a shrewd sense of strategy. They combined gender stereotypes and gave lower-end jobs to women who became a back-up group; this also divided the workforce. New workers worked for lower wages. The women's own limited objectives for employment, lack of skills and their domestic labour to some extent overlapped with their employers' needs. Women not only accepted the tasks allocated to them, but faced changes in the workplace without protest. It was much easier and cheaper to hire, displace and retrench women than men workers.

Medium and small firms also sub-contracted workers to make specific products. Usually, older workers were asked to take over the job. This resulted in a group of women moving to more informal settings but doing the same work under a new and often tougher boss. Labour market flexibility measures included putting workers on a piece rate or daily wage system. This saved the employer monthly wages in the face of low orders and shortage of raw materials. Changes in the production process took place with automation and computerisation. Workers were expected to rotate jobs and be multi-skilled. Women, once again, lost out as they were often reluctant to operate machinery.

NSSO data shows that more women reported regular work as well as self-employment. In the manufacturing sector, the subsidiary as versus the principal category has been steadily increasing since 1987-88 and covers nearly 3% of all urban women workers. The neo-liberal economic model has undoubtedly opened up avenues for women workers in the tiny BPO and IT-related sector. It has given a vision of more and better employment. But in the manufacturing sector, women's hopes have withered as they face voluntary retirement, retrenchment or insecurity as a result of relocation, automation, downsizing and sub-contracting.

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Sick and tired

Women from Mumbai's slum colonies are increasingly working in industrial and sub-contracting units that lack any safety mechanisms or even facilities like separate enclosed toilets. Workplace conditions, an overall deterioration in living conditions in the city, and the load of housework and home-based paid work that often entails handling hazardous material is affecting women's health

PADMA
DEOSTHALI

MAJOR CHANGES IN THE ECONOMY have increased the participation of women in paid employment outside home, in places that are characterised by low wages, poor working conditions, a lack of safety mechanisms, and repetitive work. This is directly causing health problems and contributing to general debility amongst women.

The gradual withdrawal of the State from the social sector has also severely affected women. The overall deterioration in living conditions in the slum colonies of Mumbai has increased their burden of housework, childcare and care for the elderly and sick in the family.

The increased load of paid work and long hours of housework adversely affect women's health. They keep substituting the work hazards of one workplace with another. Consequently, the effects of 'work' (domestic and non-domestic) on women's health are difficult to record separately. Women themselves are unable to pinpoint the exact causes of their ill-health. The tiredness and fatigue they speak of is indicative of the tremendous pressure of their work and living conditions. Many of the women we talked to reported weakness, aches and pains, and anaemia.

It is important to understand that the concept of 'work' has undergone a change in the last two decades due to economic restructuring. Fragmentation of the production process has led to the creation of innumerable small units with a handful of workers in each who are physically separated from each other. Sub-contracting has become the norm in almost all the industries in which women from slum colonies seek employment in Mumbai. For example, garment-making, light metallurgy, consumer goods and food processing. An extension of sub-contracting is giving work on a piece rate basis to women working from home.

Industrial work entails packaging, cleaning, sorting, and cutting threads. Each unit we encountered in our study does only one kind of job, which does not require skilled workers. The units are numerous and in competition to get contracts from large companies. The availability of work is irregular and uncertain. The units provide no protection to the workers in terms of employment benefits or occupational safety.

Almost none of these units have been designed to fulfil the specific needs of women. Only one unit that we visited had

an enclosed toilet. All workers had to use common toilets, which are filthy and in a state of perpetual disrepair. The units did not have a separate eating or resting area. Some women reported that they even had to sweep and clean the units and the adjoining offices. They also had to wash the lunchboxes and utensils of the owners. There was no payment for this work.

Home-based work must be seen as an extension of industrial work. Home-based work is generally found in the finishing and recycling stages of production. The processes which the women we met were engaged in were tailoring, sorting white paper from cardboard paper, pulling out rubber from threads used in tyre manufacturing, attaching rubber tops to medicine droppers, and cutting extra threads from stitched garments. They work continuously for five to eight hours every day after cooking the morning meal. Home-based work is so poorly paid that to earn any significant amount, all the members of the family who are usually at home — the aged, small children and young girls — must contribute to the work.

Childbearing and childcare are the most common reasons for women to stop doing paid work. The work units where a majority of the women we interviewed are employed do not provide any maternity benefits or welfare, which could enable them to not quit work when they are pregnant. The cost of bearing a child is thus borne by the women in two ways: they lose their income from paid work, and they suffer the resultant deprivation during a crucial period of their life.

The period of rest after delivery has also shortened due to the breakdown of the social support structure. The women have to fend for themselves immediately after delivery. Women resume paid work in some other form (home-based, part time, domestic work) as soon as possible. This has serious implications for their health.

There is a pressing need to comprehensively document the impact of women's work, paid and unpaid, on their health. This data would support advocacy for making work and living environments safe and healthy for women.

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The violence of stigmatisation

The “whore” stigma pushes women in prostitution outside the rights framework. Stigmatisation effectively de-limits their option of making money from sex, and discrimination cuts them off from the privileges and entitlements supposedly accorded to all citizens irrespective of what they do for a living

MEENA
SARASWATHI
SESHU

WORKING WITH WOMEN IN PROSTITUTION and sex work has helped address our own double standards and biases when dealing with issues related to sexuality and prostitution. As our involvement with the women we worked with has deepened, our beliefs, ideas and notions about prostitution and women in prostitution have undergone a major change. Our perception of prostitution as “exploitation, victimisation, oppression, loose, immoral, illegal” has been shaken to the core.

It was not merely our beliefs that had to be questioned and reformulated, the very use of language to describe the women had to be transformed. “Whore”, “harlot”, “veshya” have been used as abuses for the “fallen woman” — the subject of much public discourse. We have tried to reclaim some of the terminology and assert the identities with positive meaning. We revised our vocabulary to weed out words that reinforce the stigmatisation of women in prostitution.

We also realised that the terminology used for generations by mainstream society to refer to the “fallen woman” was more often than not derogatory within the moral space of sacredness. The need to reclaim womanhood also became necessary since this sanctified moral space refused to acknowledge the fact that the very identity (of being a woman) was obliterated by the “whore, harlot, veshya” image. Hence, the importance of using such terminology as “women in prostitution” instead of the commonly used term “prostitutes”. Women who practise prostitution use the term “women in business” while referring to themselves. After much discussion among ourselves we adopted the term “people in prostitution and sex-work” (PPS) to include all persons who “make money from sex”.

— From a statement of the Veshya AIDS Muquabla Parishad, 1996

A denial of rights

Stigmatisation/discrimination is the major factor preventing women in prostitution from accessing their rights. This impacts the lives of women in more ways than one. Some of the rights denied women in prostitution are: freedom from physical and mental abuse; the right to education and information; healthcare; housing; social security and welfare services.

The most basic denial is of the right to practise the business of “making money from sex”. “We protest against a society that deems us immoral and illegal mainly because we do not accept its mores, rules and governance. We protest against the various forces of mainstream society that deny us the right to liberty, security, fair administration of justice, respect for our lives, (freedom from) discrimination, freedom of expression and association,” a statement of the Veshya AIDS Muquabla Parishad (VAMP), a collective of women in prostitution from Sangli, says.

It is the *randi* (whore) stigma that pushes women in prostitution outside the rights framework, effectively cutting them off from privileges and rights supposedly accorded to all citizens irrespective of what they do for a living. Women in prostitution and sex work from VAMP state: “As people who experience violence as a part of our daily lives, we are being more and more penalised by increasing violence in a society that is trying to order and control our lifestyles. As women in prostitution we protest against a society that forces on us the violence of a judgmental attitude.”

Denial of healthcare and education

Accessing healthcare is a major concern for women in prostitution and sex work. While the “immoral whore” image makes it very difficult to get good medical treatment, illiteracy, ignorance and fear of the medical establishment render the women open to exploitation and extortion of money and resources.

Reproduced here are responses regarding healthcare by women in prostitution and sex work from West Bengal, Orissa, Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka, Maharashtra, Tamil Nadu, Kerala and the union territories of Goa and Pondicherry, from a report prepared by the National Commission for Women:

- Medical and paramedical staff at government hospitals have a callous, indifferent and often humiliating attitude. Irrelevant and embarrassing questions about sexual positions, etc, are often asked.
- Forced free sex with doctors and social workers is commonplace.
- Doctors often refuse treatment or admission of women to hospital claiming that they are AIDS carriers.

- In many centres doctors make the attendants conduct the physical examination and only then treat the women.

The HIV/AIDS epidemic has unfortunately singled out people in prostitution and sex work as “carriers” and “vectors” of HIV. Apart from the stigma already attached to their work, society has further marginalised them as core transmitters of HIV infection. It fails to recognise that they are but links in the broad networks of transmission of HIV. Women in prostitution and sex work constitute a community that bears and will continue to bear the greatest impact of the HIV epidemic in India, suffering high levels of infection and re-infection.

Propagating the myth that women in prostitution and sex work are core transmitters of HIV reinforces the prejudice that AIDS is an “impure” disease that afflicts immoral and evil persons. The net result is to further target the women, which:

- Increases public and police violence against them.
- Decreases their ability to assert themselves.
- Allows customers to demand and force unsafe sex upon them.
- Increases the rate of HIV among women, customers and the families of customers.
- Denies them access to healthcare services.

The role of women in prostitution and sex work in HIV/AIDS prevention used to be little recognised. Now, however, there is a growing recognition that women in prostitution are the best educators of their male clients.

Being women in prostitution puts the women in a caste-class of their own. This caste-class occupies the lowest rung in the social hierarchy and is structured “outside” the hierarchy as we know it. Mobility therefore is almost impossible and then only through deceit and/or money. The need to protect family members, especially children, from this stigma is an everyday struggle. As Bandawwa Makadwale from VAMP said: “All the money we have earned cannot help us to live in peace. The outside world pushes us out and does not even accept our children who are not in the business of making money out of sex. We are unable to ensure the happiness of our children. Our health and our children suffer the most due to this stigma and discrimination.”

For instance, the initial baseline survey of the community in Sangli in 1992, done by the Sampada Grameen Mahila Sanstha (SANGRAM), showed that less than 2% of the women have ever been to a school of any kind, and less than 50% of this 2% reached high school. Though most of their children are going to school, the baseline shows a very high dropout rate, especially after primary school. Vijay Kamble of Miraj said: “It is very painful to listen to your peers make snide remarks about your own mother. When my own teacher came to the community for sex, I ran and

ran till I was breathless. I was so frightened. I never went back to school.”

There are many reasons for the high dropout rate of children of women in prostitution, ranging from experiencing the educational system as hostile to them, to an inability to pass school examinations. This hostility continues to hound their interactions with the mainstream, whatever the milieu. For example, Renuka who has a master's degree in commerce, left her job in a local bank because the manager took to calling her in to ask questions about her mother and the other women in the community.

Prostitution as experienced by women

The narratives collected by activists of VAMP, a collective of 5,000 women in prostitution and sex work in central India, reveal that women in prostitution feel a sense of economic power as the female heads of the household, with monetary gain, economic stability and security, a feeling of liberation from constricting social norms and anger because they feel powerless against the intolerance of mainstream society and its judgmental attitude.

The narratives also underline that it is the increasing violence of negativity regarding prostitution that criminalises their work/business. “Protection” — the overt armour that prostitution is encased within — becomes a must, and thus the brothel owner/pimp/malak/police/criminal nexus is almost impossible to avoid.

This criminalisation, with the inevitable policing by the State and its law-enforcement machinery, contributes to increasing brutality in prostitution. This is clearly visible, for example, in the differences between Mumbai and its infamous “cages” and Kolkata and its red-light areas on the one hand, and the relaxed atmosphere of small towns like Sangli, Kolhapur, Miraj and Barshi, on the other. Women in towns such as Solapur, Ichalkaranji and Karad, where the crime rate is higher, face more brutalisation and violence, though not at the same drastic level as in Mumbai or Delhi. An increase in criminalisation is proportional to the increase in brutality, violence, abuse, debt-bondage, deception, coercion, and slavery-like practices within prostitution.

Madhuri Sawant, a woman in prostitution who was trafficked to Mumbai from Miraj, relates the horrifying manner in which she was forced to accept conditions of abuse. She was caged in a small room, without ventilation, not allowed to talk to her colleagues, had to service clients that pimps brought to the room, and did not have the choice to deny a client. She felt she had relinquished her life to the trafficker and madam. After her escape she said: “It is because Mumbai is so big and frightening that I felt alone and helpless. I thought that the *dalal* from Mumbai would treat me like a human being, but he was ruthless. So many girls are brought to Miraj but we never treat them with such disrespect. Even a woman like me who had 10 years experience in prostitution could not deal with the *goondas* in Mumbai. What must be happening to new, young girls?”

Legal repression as a direct result of moralistic criminalisation by the State has always been used to control and regulate prostitution. Women in prostitution and sex work are made to believe that they are in an “illegal” business. This interpretation of the law which the police forces on the women allows *goonda* elements to use the site of prostitution and sex work to practise their illegal, criminal activities, depending on the level of vulnerability of the women. This results in an uneasy alliance between the State, criminals and the women.

The increasing demand for and supply of children into prostitution is a direct result of the helplessness experienced by families from the mainstream and communities of women in prostitution, who are lured and exploited by this criminal nexus. Be it through abduction, kidnap, coercion or even willingness of the family to use their young as a financial resource. Children's experiences of abuse, and physical, sexual and mental rape, are evident from the stories that women recount of their own past lives. The helplessness and anger that women in prostitution face as mothers has been recorded in numerous instances. Women react not to “making money from sex” *per se* but to the violence they experience within the institution of prostitution.

Retirement can be voluntary or forced. The age factor is very important in prostitution. As the women grow older they lose their clients to younger girls. Retirement from business gradually becomes a traumatic reality. The *gharwali* (madam) is a result of this process, whereby the woman chooses to remain in business as a manager of a brothel.

Marriage is also a major reason for women to retire. Sometimes this is temporary and they re-enter the business if things do not work out. Some women who live with a man for a short or long term choose to remain in business or retire. Some women who had a chance to leave have chosen to remain, accepting that prostitution as “a way of life” is a better option than the double standards of mainstream society. Some have chosen to leave and re-enter depending on the circumstances that dictated their decision.

Forced “rehabilitation”, raids by the police, violence and social repression also contribute to women leaving the business. Well-meaning social activists abuse the women by using punitive action to “rescue” and “rehabilitate” women and children in prostitution. Punitive action with the help of an abusive and corrupt law-enforcement machinery creates an atmosphere of fear, repression and suppression that helps to drive the process underground. In some cases this leads to retirement from business.

Women have also been known to depart from prostitution by running away and making a life outside prostitution/sex work. Some of them then gain “respectability” by denying their past life, or by being “kept” by a benefactor. Sometimes, grown-up children take over responsibilities, and more often than not health reasons make them

drop out of business totally.

Trafficking and vulnerability to HIV

Trafficking implies the use of coercion, deception, abuse and assault. This could mean that women in trafficked situations might suffer critical health problems. For women who are trafficked into the sex trade, the problem is a very real threat. It is compounded by the inability to access immediate treatment services for STDs or related problems. In situations of abuse, enforcing the use of condoms is not possible.

Women who have been trafficked are undoubtedly more vulnerable than men and more likely to be in a situation where they are unable to control and protect themselves from HIV transmission. As illegal migrants engaged in an illegal trade, they are very often subjected to sexual abuse by authorities, including immigration and police officials, whose systematic involvement in the trafficking trade is well-documented. Forcible detention, lack of access to redress, police corruption and invisibility ensure that women can be violated, controlled and abused. HIV transmission is most efficient in situations of repression and abuse, and women in trafficked situations are thus more vulnerable and at greater risk of contracting HIV.

Small NGOs in many countries in Asia are struggling with the problem of HIV vulnerability in trafficked persons, but these are scattered responses. The perception that it is the trafficked person who is responsible for her own fate contributes to social and political apathy towards issues that affect HIV transmission in this group. It is almost impossible for the trafficked person, who fears repatriation, to access treatment and services for HIV.

NGOs working with trafficked people work in hostile conditions. Building the confidence and trust of trafficked persons is not an easy task. As “stateless” people without papers, many trafficked persons prefer being underground. If they are women, even more so, because prostitution in most countries is illegal. It is almost impossible to access women who are under the “protection” of the criminal nexus and trafficking syndicates. Fear of the police and legal repression is a major reason why women stay away from outreach workers.

Comprehensive documentation of groups working in this field is limited. Many groups work with trafficked women and illegal migrants, but few offer services for HIV/AIDS prevention, care and support. Many women's groups in sending and receiving countries provide services and support to women who are “victims” of trafficking, but HIV/AIDS prevention and education is not on their agenda.

The problem is compounded by the contradictions and lacunae in the management of the HIV/AIDS epidemic. Short, project-oriented interventions with a targeted approach cannot hope to achieve a sustained response to the epidemic. In situations where access to treatment

services for the general population is itself difficult and sporadic, a service for vulnerable groups seems impossible. Most governments in the region resort to such targeted interventions. Programmes that view women in sex work as a means of reaching the sexually active male population rather than the sex worker are doomed from the start. The targeted approach therefore is an alienating process that will continue to blame marginalised communities rather than empower them to combat HIV. In such a situation it is inevitable that the control and implementation of such programmes will remain with the implementing agencies rather than with the communities.

Voices from the other side

One of the most valuable lessons we learned during our work has been to listen to the women in prostitution and respect their wisdom, earned from a life of resistance. As Durga Pujari, an activist of VAMP, said: “Over the years, we have become ‘commercial sex workers’ from common ‘prostitutes’, debates are held about us and we are discussed in documents, covenants and declarations. The problem however is that when we try to inform the arguments our stories are disbelieved and we are treated as if we cannot comprehend our own lives. Thus we are either romanticised, victimised, or worse, and our reality gets buried and distorted.”

The labour/sex work story limits prostitution as a site of work. This is at variance with the communities of women in prostitution who have through the ages lived the life of whores, *veshyas* or *dandhewalis*. Prostitution thus cannot be reduced simply to work, since it depicts a way of life accepted by the communities in a continuum from pre-initiation to retirement. Prostitution, like marriage and family which also control women's sexuality, is not a monolithic institution. The degree of autonomy possible, the extent of abuse and violence and the possibility of accessing rights vary widely according to the situation. Women experience the institution of prostitution in a complex way, negotiating spaces and struggling for survival.

Women in prostitution are survivors with the sharpest insights — be it on the double standards of morality in society, the violent intricate underpinnings of trafficking networks that are brutalising prostitution or even the hollowness of State-sponsored rights which strengthen the violators more than the violated. And it is these insights that will best define the contours of a rights discourse that will help resist the violence in their lives marginalised by the hypocrisies of the “system”. Like all survivors, they have the courage and strength to create a world that has much to offer. A world touched not only by their pain but also their dream for a society and a people who will affirm their “right” to self-worth, dignity and livelihood that no one agency can either give or deny.

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Better ways of working

To change the very concept of work we need a new vision of work

ELA BHATT,
RENANA JHABVALA

The idea of work

A woman who works for over eight hours a day stitching garments or rolling beedis in her home is often not counted as a worker; she is viewed as a housewife doing a little something in her “leisure-time”. A street vendor selling vegetables or cutlery is also not a worker, he is a “nuisance” to be removed by the police as soon as possible. A woman who spends the entire day looking after her cattle, weeding her farm, collecting firewood and caring for the family is a rural “housewife”. Is a worker then only a man working in a factory or an office? What is the idea of work that downgrades most forms of work and only recognises certain limited forms?

These are important questions for a trade union like the Self-Employed Women's Association (SEWA), whose members do not easily fall into defined categories. We have based this paper on our experiences of SEWA, with women who are economically insecure and for whom survival is a struggle. They look forward to the right type of work for themselves and their men and their children — work which will take them out of poverty and vulnerability. However, the laws and policies that these women face are based on attitudes and theories about work that are far from the reality on the ground. Work is seen as labour, or as jobs where there is an “employment relationship”. Only a certain type of work is productive and worthy of investment and credit; most other work is “unproductive”.

Definitions of work

Mainstream economics uses the terms “labour” and “employment” for work. Although there are alternative theories of economics, most notably the Marxian approach, today neo-classical theories have come to dominate the thinking on economics in most countries. In this paper, we will be focusing on the concept of work as it is used in neo-classical economics, which assumes that in modern society a person is only able to live if he/she is connected with the economy through the market. Although economics is about choices, in fact to continue to live a person has to labour — it is something she is forced to do in order to satisfy her multiple wants.

Labour are meant to do heavy, onerous activity... and is derived from the Latin *'trepateiure'*, meaning to torture with a nasty instrument. And the Greek word for labour *'panos'*

signifies pain and effort, and has the same root as the word for poverty, 'penia' (Standing).

Employment is a somewhat broader concept than labour and is used in different ways. It is mainly used to determine the number of people engaged in work through earning an income, engaged in production for the market. Employment became an important measure when "full-employment" was one of the main goals of policies and responsibilities of governments.

The Indian perspective on work

Anthropologists discuss different ways in which cultures view themselves. Louis Dumont defines two ways of self-definition by cultures — individualism and holism. In an individualistic society a person defines himself independent of relationships and based on "impersonal" elements such as abstract rights, attributes, desires, preferences and even professional occupations. In holistic societies an individual defines himself in relation to society as a whole and sees himself as the nexus of a web of relationships.

The meaning that people attach to work varies in individualistic and holistic societies. "Holistic meaning attaches significance to one's work because it is an integral part of a whole which commands the allegiance and assent of a community; individualistic meaning by contrast is a significance that one creates oneself through work. Holistic meaning requires that work be embedded in the cultural fabric, that it be an expression of one's relationship to the cosmos rather than simply a matter of earning one's daily bread. Individualistic meaning requires that one be in control of process and product, without which the very process of creating meaning becomes unthinkable." (Marglin and Marglin: 225)

In the modern economy the idea of work is purely individualistic. The worker is one who enters the market and exchanges her work for money because the only way she can meet her basic needs is as a consumer. The person whose identity is that of a worker and a consumer in a market-dominated society acquires a certain identity and a relationship with her work. The worth of her work is the worth of the income she receives. Often her work may be physically hard, as is generally the case with labour. Often, she may feel bad about her work because she does not feel part of the results or she feels exploited. In these cases she attempts to do as little work as possible for the income she receives. And she compensates the unpleasantness by consuming 'leisure'. Work and social systems are closely interrelated.

In a country like India, attitudes of people towards their work are determined by an interplay of cultures and economic forces. The modern economy brings about a mindset of competition, individualism and a drive towards ever-expanding consumerism. On the other hand, cultural and traditional ways of thinking are often in a different direction. There is a mix of the individual and the holistic. We will try to describe people's thinking and feeling about

their work drawing on our experience with women in SEWA.

Work and social systems

In India, social systems have always been more or less synonymous with the caste system, and social relations were defined by relations within castes and between castes. The caste system has been both extolled for its durability and adaptability and vilified for its hierarchies and its injustices. The role of women in these social systems has been written about extensively. Although women's roles were well defined and led to a certain amount of security, there were definite inequalities within the relationship, which often led to a downgrading of women's work and position.

Although generally descriptions of the caste system identify four major castes, in practice there are thousands of them, all identified with a particular work. The people and their communities identified themselves with their work. They assumed their names from their occupational work. They married amongst their own occupational community. Their social systems were organised around their work. Their occupation was the basis on which they built their lives, culture, communities and institutions. In so many ways, it was their primary means of interaction and participation in society.

The close links between caste, community and work are reflected in many (local) songs. What emerges from them is the way in which work and the creation of a product are closely interlinked with the relationships within a community. Each person's work links her to the ongoing life of the community. The following songs show how a woman links herself to the people in her village, and how all the needs are supplied within the village itself.

*With a tenner coin I went to the carpenters' quarters
of my village*

Make a house cart for Miya

A chariot for Bibi

A carriage for boy

Or return the tenner to me

I went to the potters' quarters

Make a pot for Miya

A jar for Bibi

A lamp for boy

I went to the blacksmiths' quarters

A sword for Miya

A knife for bibi

A scissor for boy

I went to the tailors' quarters

A jacket for Miya

A dress for bibi

A shirt for boy

Or, return the tenner back to me

Work and religion

Religion plays a major part in most people's lives in India,

and work is closely related to religious beliefs. Most skilled workers have a patron god, Vishvakarma. Before starting their daily work, each worker does a small prayer around his tools. This practice has been extended to modern machinery — most machines in factories are worshipped at the start of the day. Women, in particular, are in close contact with the gods through their work. The gods accompany them while they work, and as women work they sing songs together feeling they are one with each other and with their gods. The following song was traditionally sung while grinding grain. Today, in most places, grain-grinding by hand has been replaced by machine, yet this song is still popular.

*My ghanti grinds bajra
My ghanti has two matching stones
My ghanti has been my companion
My ghanti is my life support
Govindji sits in between the stones
Hanumanji sits on my hands
Shivji sits on the handle
Parshottam sits on my fine flour
Happy I am with support of my gods
My bajra flour is blessed by gods*

Work with the community

Work is often done with other people and is seen as a group activity. Working together is a way of sharing and relating to others. Women beedi workers sit together and often talk while they roll their beedis. Filling water from the well tends to become a communal activity as does gathering fodder or firewood. Cattle are a major source of work for most village women. They have to collect the cattle feed, clean out the cattle shed, milk the cattle. They have to rise very early in the morning to tend the cattle and yet, to most women, looking after her cow is a duty of love, so attached is she to her cow. Often she worries more about her cow than about her children. When the cow delivers a calf, a great deal of work is required and yet it is a time of joy and other women in the community come to help. The older mother of that house sings:

*Take up your pots and proceed to the pond
Soon my Shamli (buffalo) is to deliver a baby
Celebrate the joy, joy, joy
Put the big pot on one fire
Pour in the water to boil
Cook my Shamli's feed on the second fire
Serve her the feed with care and love
Take your brooms and clean up the space
Now prepare the bajro
Add ghee and jaggery
And make big balls
She will need to eat for two
Oh, her time is up
Move away from her, all of you
She needs peace and space
I now hear her coming, loud and clear
Welcome, my friends*

*Welcome my little Shamli
Get up, go and run, announce
My Shamli has delivered another little Shamli*

Work and development of the individual

Work occupies the better part of the day for most people. Partly through actually doing work and partly through learning from others, a worker develops his skills, and a person with more and superior skills is better respected in the community. When people value themselves and their work they feel a pride in themselves, and a dignity about what they do. Even work that is generally seen as unpleasant can be converted into a skill, something to be proud of. The making of a manure pit (*ukardo*) is sung about as an individual achievement:

*Your ukardo
Not messy, not smelly
Not too wide nor too narrow
All admire your ukardo
Your ukardo has no weeds
Your cowdung is not wet
Your ukardo brings the highest bid
No one haggles to pay your price
Your ukardo will make you rich*

Caste, religion and the family in today's system

It used to be believed that with the advent of western economic and political systems the caste system would weaken and the identification of people socially, politically and economically with their castes, would decrease. In fact, the opposite has happened. The democratic political system has encouraged greater caste solidarity. Castes which vote as a bloc have acquired political influence. The struggle for power in the political system reflects the changing relations of castes, and a struggle to change the hierarchy between the castes.

Caste which developed on the basis of work is also reflected in the changing economic system. In a system where resources are scarce, it is caste solidarity which enables individuals to gain economic access. Castes with land have not only acquired more land but have made their way into other trades such as real estate. The growth of the IT economy is mainly among castes with a tradition of learning, while trade still remains firmly in the hands of the trading castes. The weaker castes are also in those types of work which are less paying and insecure, and the majority of agricultural labourers and casual workers come from what used to be the lowest castes.

Work and the individual

The existence of the individual, as an individual, and the work she does, are part of a larger meaning of life. Perhaps the one piece of philosophical writing that is most pervasive in the Indian (Hindu) ethos is the teachings from the *Bhagvad Gita*. It also has a clear exposition on work as a way to self-discovery and the meaning of life and gives a

message of salvation through the principle of action, which is equivalent to work. This is because it is not possible for us to abstain from action. "Nature is ever at work and we are deluded if we fancy that its processes can be held up. Nor is cessation from work desirable because inertia is not freedom." (Radhakrishnan: 67) However, work or action is not merely for its own sake but is part of a larger purpose and we need to know the meaning of life before we engage in action.

How does this philosophy translate into an attitude towards work? Mainly it is through the ideal of unselfish work, or non-attachment. Good work is that which is done not only for oneself but for others. Of course, one has to do work in order to live and satisfy one's needs. But those needs should be kept to the minimum. Furthermore, non-attachment requires that one should not be attached to, desirous of, the fruits of one's work.

Work of an individual is related to the cosmos through 'yagna' or sacrifice. Whatever we consume is taken from the world and so something has to be put back into it. This can be seen in a number of ways. In relation to the natural, to the environment, the world of the inanimate, animals and plants, it is interpreted as the need to conserve and the need to replenish. In relation to social interaction it is seen as the need to give for the growth and development of others.

These concepts are at odds with the idea of economic man which dominates our economic system. Firstly, minimum needs is the opposite of the multiplication of wants and the growth of a consumer society. Secondly, unselfish work is the opposite of economic man whose only aim is to pursue his selfish ends.

Different forms of work

The aim of this paper is to explore a different concept of work, without making a dichotomy between an "eastern" and "western" concept. There are alternative approaches in the European tradition, notably the Marxian approach, seeing work through the relations of production and distribution, and examining surplus rather than scarcities. There is also the institutional approach, which focuses on rules governing the labour relations and the relative bargaining power of individuals and social classes, and there is the anthropological approach, which emphasises agency. However, much of this diversity has been overtaken by neo-classical economics — the dominant sub-category of economic thinking and the concept of work described here refers to the way that work is used in neo-classical economics.

We would like to describe a small example of 'better work' developing in one of the most exploitative and harsh conditions, through the efforts of the poorest and yet skilled women.

Embroidery — a particular form of women's work

Many women all over the world do various types of stitching

and embroidery, and have traditionally done so. Some of this embroidery has entered markets locally and women are now doing embroidery for traders; some have entered international markets and women are embroidering for garments they could never imagine. In many cases, embroidery is being replaced by the market — hand-work by embroidery machines and embroidery itself by other types of designs.

Banaskantha is a dry desert district in Gujarat where water is scarce, land is unproductive, earnings are low and life is a hard struggle for survival. The landscape is bleak and grey, yet the people are colourful in their embroidered garments. In this land, women work hard at many activities to survive, yet they have time and energy to embroider. As markets expanded, their embroidery began to link them with the rest of the world through the traders who came to buy their pieces and gave them orders. In more recent times they have, with the help of SEWA, formed their own associations and directly reached markets in the cities and international markets. Their skills have linked them to a larger world.

We talk to the women of the Ahir caste who are mainly cattle breeders. The Ahir women are very proud of their embroidery. Every young girl learns embroidering from the age of five. She learns to handle needle and thread on a small, smooth cloth given to her by her mother who teaches her the chain stitch first. They say: "We never wear a garment that is not embroidered. Our heart does not feel good wearing a plain colourless garment. We love to spread the dowry of our daughter in the chowk, invite relatives and friends to come and see and show off our skills. And when they carefully look and admire our hand-work we feel satisfied deep in our heart."

Embroidery is done for traders too, but this work tends to be sporadic and exploitative. In times of drought and difficult conditions, traders from the cities come to these villages and buy old pieces of embroidery at throwaway prices. They also get orders and pay women by the piece rate. However these piece rates are extremely low, much lower than what the women would get for digging earth. Embroidery is certainly work, whether it is done for the trader, for their own association, for their daughters' dowry or for themselves. Yet, the women do not see it as 'toil' or 'labour'. They have a close relationship with this work.

They like to embroider because to them it is creating beauty: "We are lovers of beauty and nature, we like to decorate and beautify everything with art and colour. We are poor and so cannot spend money on gold and jewellery, so the embroidery is our jewellery; see how the little mirrors shine like diamonds." Sometimes they feel compelled to create: "Needle and thread have to be in my hand as soon as I am sitting free. A pressure builds up in me when I see a new design anywhere, and I have to embroider it on a cloth, mine or anybody's. My husband knows how I feel and when he wants to punish me, he bans me from embroidering. At such times I tattoo on myself." And indeed, there were tiny,

green leaves and flowers all over her arms and legs — intricate and beautiful tattoos.

Embroidering is an activity by which the women refresh themselves, replenish their physical and emotional energies: "Embroidering by itself has its own significance. When alone, we talk with our soul inside. It is like yoga for me. I can see the past and future of the world. I can talk with the sky and sands of the desert. I do not like to be disturbed when I am embroidering. I am then not in a hurry to finish my work. It is a loved activity and a discipline too."

Embroidery, a traditional activity, has also begun earning money for them. How do they feel about it? "I feel happy that my skills can bring money into the house. I feel proud. But sometimes I feel exploited. I do not feel exploited when I am embroidering for our daughter. But now I also work for the trader, the market. The trader would cheat us but we did not know it earlier. When I realised it, I felt agitated, my heart burnt inside when I sold a good piece for a throwaway price to a trader. Those days I would not feel like eating or sleeping. But when we are embroidering for our own association, we go to the market and know what the real prices are. Then we do not feel exploited but happy that we are earning. Now with our organised collective strength there are hardly any middlemen. Now we design, we embroider, market to big cities here and abroad..."

Embroidery is a support to them, in good times and bad. "When we are happy, we embroider. But in difficult times we embroider too. When we were hit by the earthquake, we were homeless, we did not have enough to eat, we were living under the open sky, with cold winter winds blowing. I embroidered a skirt, and I felt soothed and distracted from my worries. The skirt sold for Rs 10,000 and I got Rs 6,000, which I used to rebuild my house."

Better ways of working

In the embroidery of the women of Banaskantha we have described an example of work which combines elements of positive work and a better type of work in one of the harshest and poorest regions in the country. Our experience in SEWA has shown that better ways of working are indeed possible, and here we would like to try and define some of the elements which constitute better work, that is, work which gives self-respect and dignity to the worker, in which the worker and her work are integrated as part of a larger community, even of a larger cosmos, and work which, while fulfilling the needs of the individual, is in many ways 'unselfish' or selfless.

However, a better way of working can only come about when the structures of work and the relationships of work embody these values. The question that then arises is what should the structures of production and distribution be in order to have better work. This question cannot be approached in the abstract, in an idealised or distant past or future society, but must be placed in the context of the structures and relationships and the economy that exists

today. The main features of such an economy would be to build structures that place the needs of the most vulnerable at the centre, that have more cooperative and decentralised methods of production and distribution.

The most vulnerable at the centre

One of the most disturbing aspects of today's economy is the extreme poverty and the large and growing inequalities that exist in society. Being poor in our society means meeting one's survival needs through work which is physically hard, demanding, often debilitating and usually underpaid. Often, even this kind of work is not available, and both men and women spend their days in a humiliating search for work. Most families earn their living working on their own fields or as agricultural workers on other's fields. However, since the climate is dry and desert-like, most fields are quite unproductive and so they have to do a variety of difficult tasks, like breaking stone and mining salt in order to survive. Often even this work is not available and they have to uproot themselves and migrate in search of work. In such harsh circumstances embroidery is a work that soothes, brings colour and gives a sense of worth, and when embroidery can also be made into an activity which earns an income, it is 'better' work.

The first principle of a society which provides better work is to ensure that the poorest and the most vulnerable are provided with their basic needs. We are arguing not only for individual sympathy for the weak and disadvantaged, but for a social system which systematically focuses on the vulnerable and where the social structures, and more especially the economic structures and work structures, are designed to meet the needs of the most vulnerable groups. In India, a coherent concept of a 'good' society was developed during the era of the freedom struggle.

This concept of Swaraj or self-governance was seen not merely as a political system managed by and for Indians, but as the basis for a better society. "The word Swaraj is a sacred word, a Vedic word, meaning self-rule and self-restraint." (M K Gandhi: 3) And this concept would be the basis of a better society. "If Swaraj was not meant to civilise us and to purify and stabilise our civilisation it would be worth nothing. The very essence of civilisation is that we give a paramount place to morality in all our affairs, public and private." (*ibid*: 5) The success of the freedom movement was the involvement of the masses, and this was possible because Swaraj had the message not only of political freedom but, more important, that of economic freedom especially for the poorest.

"Working for economic equality means abolishing the eternal conflict between capital and labour. It means the levelling down of the few rich in whose hands is concentrated the bulk of the nation's wealth, on the one hand, and a levelling up of the semi-starved, naked millions, on the other. A non-violent system of government is clearly an impossibility as long as the wide gulf between the rich

and the hungry millions persists. The contrast between the rich and the poor today is a painful sight. The poor villagers are exploited by the foreign government and also by their own countrymen — the city-dwellers. They produce the food and go hungry. They produce milk and their children have to go without it. It is disgraceful. Everyone must have a balanced diet, a decent house to live in, facilities for the education of one's children and adequate medical relief." (Harijan: 63-64)

In SEWA we have seen that working for others, and especially working for the most vulnerable, creates a force and energy that builds a movement. Most of the leaders of SEWA who are elected from among the members gain their leadership positions and acceptance by identifying the most vulnerable members and bringing them into SEWA. These most vulnerable women are also the ones who become loyal and active members and who later become the life-force of the movement.

Although the importance of focusing on poverty and the poor is emphasised in macro-economic policy it is generally not seen as the driving principle of economic life. In fact the poor are seen as marginal to economic life as a whole and to be taken care of through special schemes and safety nets. We are proposing that the economic structure be such that deprivation cannot exist, that is, every person must get his or her minimum needs. It requires a moral society to focus on the poorest. But it also requires structures which would identify these poorest and which would then have a system of social production where the minimum needs are satisfied. This leads us into our next criteria for a structure for better work — decentralised forms of production.

Economic decentralisation

Arguing for economic decentralisation is a difficult task. Although it is accepted today that political decentralisation is required for a vibrant and active democracy, centralisation of production, of skills and of ownership of resources is seen as leading to a more efficient economy. Here we would like to put forward some arguments to suggest the need for more decentralisation of production and distribution of goods and services as well as decentralisation of ownership of resources.

Our first argument for economic decentralisation follows from the last point of focusing on the most vulnerable. Identification of the most vulnerable is a major exercise, where a number of criteria have to be accepted and the people fitting those criteria identified. Reaching the poorest is a major administrative exercise if conducted centrally, a more efficient administrative system would be one where food, clothing and other minimum requirements are distributed locally. It would be even more efficient if much of the required needs are locally produced and only a certain amount imported. This does not argue that local areas are unconnected with mainstream markets, but merely that a certain minimum amount of produce needs to

be grown and distributed locally. New technologies and inputs could boost this local production and linking with the market would encourage production of surplus as well as import of products which cannot be produced locally.

The second argument is related to justice and equality. Within most countries and also across nations, the distribution and ownership of wealth tends to be concentrated in certain areas, and generally the wealthier areas attract more resources and the poorer areas lose them. Economic decentralisation is one way (although not necessarily the only way) of distribution of resources.

The third argument is connected with 'holistic work'. We have seen that in many societies and especially among women, work is satisfying and creative if it is part of the individual, community and social life. Decentralised production and services for local use mean that part of the production can be for own use and part for exchange, as we saw in the case of the embroidery workers.

Furthermore, this type of production is linked to local cultures and local designs and leads to far greater control of people over what they should produce, and how it is to be used. It has been found that where local communities have a greater control over these resources they preserve and regenerate the resource.

Local production and distribution especially strengthens the economic role of women. Much of women's work is non-monetary and meant for use within the family; a great deal of community work, especially those that involve maintaining social relationships, is usually done by women. Economic decentralisation would lead to two separate trends, both of which would be beneficial to women. First, it would strengthen local markets and local skills and make the markets more accessible to women. Second, it would raise the value of non-monetary work, as work acquires a more holistic meaning and comes to include work done for maintenance of a larger society including all forms of community and service work.

There has been very little thought or action in recent years on issues of economic decentralisation, while political decentralisation has proceeded fast. Economic decentralisation is often criticised on the grounds that it shuts local communities off from the skills, knowledge, resources and opportunities available outside the community, and makes them inward-turning. What is being argued here is not a cutting off from larger opportunities but a redressal of the balance. Just as political decentralisation does not mean that national and state governments disappear when local government is empowered, so also local production can and should link into larger systems of production, local markets can and do link into national and international ones, and local ownership of resources link into larger systems of ownership. SEWA Bank is a good example of this dynamic between the local and national. Poor women control their capital, but use the capital for employment-generation

which links into larger markets. At the same time SEWA Bank is linked into the larger banking system both through the financial and regulatory system of the Reserve Bank of India as well as financial dealings with other banking institutions.

Cooperative economic systems

Selfless or unselfish work as discussed in the specific Indian cultural context is an attitude towards work, rather than a particular type of work. People work for the physical and social maintenance of themselves, their families and their communities, and it is necessary that they do such work, if life is to go on. However, an 'unselfish attitude' requires firstly, that along with maintenance of individual selves, there should also be a constant awareness of maintenance of the cosmos as part of the work; and secondly, the self should not be 'attached' to the results of the work. This attitude towards work requires a constant awareness of others, of working for and serving a larger community; at the same time a minimising of one's own needs and desires.

Cooperative forms of work systems, where people work together to produce results which are beneficial for all, tend to be more conducive to unselfish work than forms which are individualistic and competitive. There are many such forms in existence today. They vary from small self-help groups being promoted in India, to traditional roscas, to mutual-help groups found in many African countries, to community grain banks and community social protection systems, to large formal cooperative societies.

Cooperative forms of work are also more likely to be adopted by the poor or by those who have less resources. Cooperation is one way of pooling resources and hence increasing control; it is also a way of increasing the bargaining power of those who are weak. It can be seen as the best form to meet the minimum needs of every individual.

Cooperative forms of work are also often questioned because the dominant mode today is of individuals interacting with the market and often competing. Is cooperation really feasible, and if it is why do we not see it working today? In fact, if one examines the reality, cooperative forms of production exist today far more than is realised. The European Union's social economy is estimated to consist of 900,000 enterprises and represents 10% of GDP and employment. Formal registered cooperatives too exist worldwide. Ranging from small-scale to multi-million-dollar businesses across the globe, cooperatives are estimated to employ more than 100 million women and men and have more than 800 million individual members. They operate mainly in agricultural marketing and supply, finance, wholesale and retailing, healthcare, housing and insurance, but are venturing into new fields such as information and

communications technology, tourism and cultural industries. Cooperative enterprises, organisations and groups are abundant in the informal economy, especially in developing countries, although so far there has been no attempt to measure these.

Our experience in SEWA has shown that cooperative economic organisations are not only feasible for poor women but that they bring about better work in a number of different ways. First, organisation gives women who are the most vulnerable a new identity through their work, an identity where they are respected because of their work, and the contribution of their work is acknowledged by society and by their own families.

Second, cooperation allows them to build an enterprise and reach markets directly instead of being at the mercy of traders and others who exploit their lack of access to markets. Third, they are able to pool their resources — their capital, their knowledge and their skills. Fourth, they are able to avail of government schemes and programmes, which is difficult for them to do individually. Finally, their coming together into a viable organisation increases their voice and bargaining power in society and in the market.

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