India: The Invisible Women of Colonial India's Textile Industry

Tuesday 16 November 2021, by KUMAR V. Arun, LANZILLO Amanda (Date first published: 9 November 2021).

The experiences of women working in colonial India's textile industry inform the discussion on the discrimination, sexualisation and the wage gap which women in the workplace are faced with today.

This article is the third in a series on the history of labour in India. The first part dealt with carpenters and the second with tailors in colonial India.

We live in an age of a widening gender pay gap. Recent surveys show that employers pay women less than men and the pandemic has worsened the gender pay gap in many countries. The pay gap persists because fewer women are appointed to top positions with high salaries and because women employees dominate industries that pay less. But there are even more insidious and cruel reasons for the gender pay gap. Historically, because women's work has been undervalued, men and women have been paid unequally for similar jobs. While this practice is slowly becoming less common, it persists. It impacts all sectors of the economy, but is especially pronounced in the informal economy, limiting the earnings of women in artisanal and small-scale industrial sectors.

Women's labour, though critical to the survival of the industrial and Indian economy, has long been invisibilised in writings, undercounted in statistics and underpaid in salary registers. However, recent writings of feminist and labour historians show that women workers were central to the functioning of the colonial Indian economy; from farming to mining, sewing to sex work, the leather industry to the tea plantations.

Following our essays on carpenters and tailors, the focus of this piece is on the women workers of India's thread and textiles industries, which include spinning, weaving, embroidery, block-printing and cotton ginning. Across the spectrum of production sites, including the home, small workshops, mills and industrial training institutes, women textile workers have historically faced extreme economic marginalisation and a perception that their work is 'unskilled'.

Before factories and workshops began to dominate textile production in late nineteenth and twentieth-century urban India, the site of textile production was mostly the home. While women and children of working families played key roles in the production of yarn and cloth, the male patriarch, also usually a weaver, took the dominant position within home-based production. The role of young women and minor girls was often framed as that of assistance to the men in subsidiary processes while male children learned the craft and helped the father. Simultaneously, as remains the case across many societies today, women took on the bulk of domestic labour and caretaking work.

George Grierson, a colonial official, linguist and observer of Indian culture, recorded the division of labour on the axis of gender during the process of spinning and weaving. Writing about the Madhubani region in 1879, Grierson noted that once cotton was collected from fields and dried under the sun, it was cleaned by 'old women' for 2 to 3 days.

While the process of spinning was usually done by women of the family, weaving was usually carried out by men. Although women's economic roles were framed as supportive – rather than primary – their crucial labour was embedded in the final product and the price it fetched. Spinning and weaving cut across class and religious lines but, across communities, it was usually organised under a male patriarch.

By the mid-nineteenth century, Indian textiles were undermined by the import of manufactured clothes from English mills. Many weavers migrated to cities where factories, textile mills, railways, printing presses, mechanical establishments and the urban economy provided job opportunities. As men – including ex-weavers, other artisans and peasants –moved to cities and off-shore plantation colonies in search of work, many women were left behind in both villages and former urban centres of artisanship.

This economic dislocation as a result of colonial policy contributed to the sharpening of the ideology of the 'male breadwinner'. Historian Samita Sen argues that male wages became sacrosanct, while women's labour was devalued and their earnings classed as 'supplementary income'. Moreover, as industrial capitalism emerged as a dominant system of production in the 19th century, women's labour became an employer's tool to depress wages or declare work 'unskilled'.

The logic that women were physically weaker, less productive and had 'natural' duties of household management were used to justify lower pay. For instance, both men and women worked in the mechanised ginning industry, through which cotton fibres were separated from seeds, but they were paid differently. An early 20th century report from Punjab noted that the expansion and mechanisation of ginning factories increased production and the demand for labour. But women often earned only about half of what men earned for the same amount of work and in several contexts, ginning became devalued and underpaid as 'women's work'.

Lucknow city, a hub of weaving until the early parts of the 19th century, was one city that saw a mid-19th century out-migration of male weavers. As the spinning and weaving industry declined, many poor and working class women shifted to low-paid *chikan* (embroidery) work. Though largely unknown before the times of Nawabi Lucknow, the chikan industry became a key source of earnings for impoverished women and children from many castes and communities.

William Hoey, the tax collector of Lucknow, wrote in 1880, "Little girls, five and six years of age may be seen sitting at the doors of houses near Chob Mandi busily moving their tiny figures, over a piece of *tanzeb* (muslin) and working *butas* (flowers)". According to Hoey, these young women, many of whom were supposed to have been minors, earned 'only one *paisa* for 100 butas'. However, smaller numbers of male workers in the chikan industry received higher wages and were popularly viewed as performing the most complex embroidery. The chikan trade continues to be an important source of income for women and, until a few years ago, for children.

Across industrial and industrialising economies, women's low-paid work in factories also threatened the authority of male workers. In Britain, male-dominated trade unions tried to protect male workers' interests and wages. Similar conflicts occurred in colonial Bombay where women came to form almost 20% of the labour force in the textile industry until the third decade of the 20th century and were sometimes perceived to threaten the wages of male workers.

One way in which men addressed this threat was through the patriarchal ideology of domesticity which tied women to the home and motherhood, though members of different classes and social groups used this ideology differently. Radha Kumar shows that for capitalists, the figure of the working woman was marked as the figure of the mother who produced new generations of healthy workers.

At the same time, Samita Sen and Charu Gupta show that women who laboured in public – many of whom belonged to the lowest castes – were classed as sexually available and deviant in middle-class and upper-caste literature. These strategic applications of patriarchal ideologies by employers, the state and male workers have long afterlives, lingering in our contemporary societies. The struggle to create labouring spaces within which working-class women are not sexualised or subject to harassment remains unfinished.

Women did not silently acquiesce to colonial ideologies of domesticity, respectability and the patriarchal limitations on their labour and earnings. Petitions of women textile workers to the Royal Commission of Labour (1929-31) show that sexual harassment of women workers by male jobbers and managers was prevalent. Women protested this harassment and devised ways to increase their safety at work, which included labouring under female jobbers. Likewise, Chitra Joshi shows that women created their own narratives and codes about respectable versus demeaning labour.

Moreover, in colonial India, women's work was not just devalued through ideologies of domesticity, the collective power of male trade unions or the economic logic of employers. It was sometimes also devalued through emerging narratives of elite female education. Elite educational debates focused on how socially well-off Indian women should be educated, often assuming the question was irrelevant to working-class women. But these debates may have also contributed to the diminishment, in the popular understanding, of the economic value of women's labour.

A periodical aimed primarily at elite North Indian Muslim women, titled *Ismat* (Honour) and published in the early 20th century, featured a series of articles on 'women's handicrafts'. These articles portrayed handicrafts as objects of interest to a female 'homemaker' rather than as economically productive for working-class women. Across religious communities, upper-class advice literature intersected with colonial Victorian morality, reinforcing patriarchal beliefs that respectable women belonged within domestic space and that their work held limited economic relevance.

Moreover, while most industrial and technical institutes did not admit or prioritise female students, orphanages and charitable organisations, some run by Christian missionaries and others by Hindu and Muslim associations, ran training programs for poor women. Charitable training usually focused on crafts that were deemed, by their elite funders and teachers, to be appropriately feminine, especially those that could be done within the home. They aimed to create forms of economic uplift for poor women, widows and orphan girls, but they also sought to teach women forms of social respectability and middle-class comportment.

Ultimately, even when work conducted in the home required immense time and skill, it was not seen by colonial administrators and regional capitalists as a primary form of family income. Throughout the colonial period, women artisans and labourers were 'invisibilised,' sexualised and prevented from securing sufficient wages by colonial patriarchal ideologies and policies. Even as elite women and men began to debate and challenge some aspects of patriarchy in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the experiences of artisan and labouring women remained overlooked, their skills undervalued and their work underpaid.

Understanding and addressing the modern day wage gap requires that we pay attention to its historical origins. The afterlives of colonial-era patriarchal work culture, including the assumption that women's work is less skilled or less valuable than that of men and that labouring in public lacks respectability, continue to haunt the lives of women artisans and industrial workers.

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