

# **HOMEBASED WORK IN 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY INDIA**

**Indrani Mazumdar**

**Occasional Paper No.64**

(May 2018)



**CENTRE FOR WOMEN'S DEVELOPMENT STUDIES**

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# **HOMEBASED WORK IN 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY INDIA**

*Indrani Mazumdar*

## ***A Perspective view on approaches to Homebased Work in India***

Any review study on homebased work in India today must necessarily be located in the context of several advances in understanding developments in homebased work that have taken place across the two decades preceding the adoption of the ILO Convention on Home Work (1996) and the two decades since then. Through this period which spans almost half a century, substantive and wide ranging research has generated a fairly detailed picture of the varied nature and forms of homebased work, and the conditions of piece rated home workers in particular. Considerable progress has been made towards bringing homebased workers 'out of the shadows' through mobilization/organization/lobbying at national and international levels. Advances have been made in defining and including them in macro-level employment surveys and counting them, as also in documentation of a range of experiences through micro-studies. Theorizing around the role of homebased work in global production networks and in women's employment have also contributed to widening the field, and global networking among scholars and organizations involved with women homebased workers has additionally facilitated solidarities across several countries.

At the same time, there are concerns that some social questions have receded along the way in favour of a more purely economic orientation. Strongly articulated social critiques of patriarchy formed the ideological underpinnings of the initial scholarly and organizational focus on women homebased workers. Yet, the theoretical implications of the home as the workplace for women with respect to the broader structures of patriarchy has not sustained research or action agendas. It could be argued that this absence has been one of the factors in the continued neglect, or mere token acknowledgement of unpaid labour with reference to homebased manufacturing, even as the relationship between paid and unpaid work is receiving far greater international attention than ever before with reference to care work.

Developments in relation to scholarly, organizational, and institutional perceptions of homebased work are of course intrinsically grounded in the mounting recognition of the predominance of informal forms of work. Whether conceived of as an informal sector, informal economy or informal labour relations

in general, informal work has indeed moved to a position of centrality in studies on labour. Nevertheless, there is a concern that the assertively redistributive and democratizing force of working class politics that emerged from more longstanding labour movements may be becoming marginalized by the acceptance of the low wage/income regime, and limited rights associated with 'labour flexibility', that are inherent to an identity around informality alone. This is most evident in legislation for unorganized workers, which in India, has gone in the direction of a few 'poor relief' style schemes rather than being based on dignity of labour and worker rights and entitlements.<sup>1</sup> The varying histories of different segments and sub-categories of informal workers including homebased workers, or the actual diversity and/or differences in the perspectives and histories of workers' organizations who represent them, also do not appear to have received the critical comparative attention they deserve. In the dominant discourses, they only emerge in an assumed relationship between greater informalisation of labour and new forms of organization or in the debate on 'old trade unionism versus new trade unionism'. Perhaps more appropriate differentiating nomenclatures are called for now as the practice and politics of the 'new' (that is now no longer so new), requires to be subjected to as critical a scrutiny as more longstanding modes of organization.

A perspective view of the vastly expanded range of contemporary studies and writing on homebased workers suggests an increasing concern with the interlinkages between homebased workers and markets, and particularly international markets. In a sense, this preoccupation has tied in with the observed tendency towards decentralised production systems and global supply chains that has been a hallmark of capitalism in the period of globalisation. The benefits to transnational corporations of the practice of using global systems of trading and sub-contracting involving the cheap labour of women workers in developing countries is, of course, well documented. It was theorized through the development of the idea of a new international division of labour (NIDL), the thesis of global feminization through flexibilisation and informalisation of labour, and then the framework of global commodity/value chains, in all of which, piece rated home work by women was seen to be an integral part. To those looking for spaces to bring out issues of homebased workers, it may have seemed that integration with international markets and globalization indeed offered the opportunities for home workers to move from the margins to the centre stage.<sup>2</sup> Where outsourcing and

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<sup>1</sup> K.P. Kannan has commented that social security, for the working poor is construed as a measure of charity by the power elite in the country. See Kannan (2010), 'The challenge of Universal Coverage for the Working Poor in India', Hivos Knowledge Programme, Paper 2.

<sup>2</sup> See Renana Jhabvala, 'Informal Workers & the Economy', *Indian Journal of Industrial Relations*, Vol. 48 No. 3 January 2013 for an account of such an approach.

fragmented/dispersed production units were seen as the mechanisms by which women home workers were brought in as the lowest paid workers within the ambit of global commodity chains, the most influential strategic discourse about homebased workers, at least in India, was getting directed towards voluntary integration in global markets. Highly influential approaches included theorization about liberalization and freedom from the licence raj for the poor, and the search for space through integration in global markets.<sup>3</sup>The question that remains to be asked is whether these approaches actually reflect the experiences of the majority of homebased workers in India or was the field of theorisation getting narrowed down to reflect only some aspects and versions of the story.

Comprehensive studies on the connections between premier brands like GAP, Walmart and women workers across the world have indeed provided ample evidence of the way in which global supply chains operate in relation to women workers in factories/sweatshops of the readymade garment industry. Yet by the same measure studies of the role of piece rated home based workers in such global supply chains have been far less comprehensive. Larger generalisations on the role of global supply chains in propelling homebased work, have thus remained primarily based on fragmentary evidence, particularly when looked at from the perspective of the size of the homebased workforce in India. Why this is so, is an interesting question in itself. One might speculate that it is related to the highly unstable and intermittent manner in which only a fraction of home workers are actually drawn into and/or dropped from global supply chains, or even the virtually non-existent possibilities of their moving upwards in the value chains of the globally organized production networks or commodity chains, except into small niches that may be either short lived or too narrow based to be of significance to the larger community of homebased workers. It also points to the weight of domestic markets and other elements in homebased work in a country like India that cannot be explained or addressed solely, or even predominantly, from a framework of global supply chains, international division of labour or feminization of labour. Implicit and sometimes explicit recognition of these other elements is a feature of the more mature studies on homebased work in India, even as the decentralized outsourcing tendency in otherwise centralized production systems has remained a core element in the analytical frame.

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<sup>3</sup>Such an approach may be found in several case studies of individual homebased workers who are described as benefitting from access to global markets and being integrated with export firms. Further theorization on how to take economic liberalization to the people may be found in Ela Bhatt, 'Moving towards a People Centered Economy', [http://www.sewa.org/images/Archive/Pdf/Moving\\_Towards\\_People\\_Centered.pdf](http://www.sewa.org/images/Archive/Pdf/Moving_Towards_People_Centered.pdf) , which argues that liberalization policies must reach the 'people's sector' and not just the private sector.

One fallout of the preoccupation with international markets is that such perspectives on homebased work have become less concerned with the social significance of labour processes and work relations in homebased work in its specific historical location and formation. Changing modes of production or processes of social differentiation at national, regional, or even local levels, and their relationship/interaction with state policy or gender relations hardly make an appearance in the literature on homebased work from or about India. This has, in my view, led to an over-emphasis on the superficial idea of women's own choice or preference for homebased work at the cost of an understanding of deeper historical and structural changes taking place in women's employment, and the manner in which they shape the compulsions, perceptions, and indeed 'choices' of women. The strikingly steep fall in women's employment rates in India in recent years for example, - does not seem to be in the frame of much of the contemporary literature on homebased work. Interest in the links with social structures and developmental frameworks, that was so central to the framing of issues in the early years of the discussions on homebased work, appear to have given way to more immediately contingent and de-ideologised frameworks that easily blend in with liberalization and free market oriented approaches to policy and practice.

Further, the uncertainty that has become endemic to global markets and globalized economies, or the visible tendency for short term employment openings to be followed rapidly by closure, the narrow range of work that is available on any regular basis for women (even at pittance rates), the lack of facilities enabling women to go out of the home to work, and the decline in public provisioning towards reducing the burden of unpaid work in women's lives -have perhaps all been pushed into the background by the promotion of the idea that access to markets and finance is the only way forward. It is indeed curious that this strong market orientation is continuing despite a virtual consensus on the adverse effects on homebased workers of the volatility that is today a hallmark of globally integrated markets.<sup>4</sup>Such twists and turns in the process of mainstreaming homebased work needs a more detailed analysis that is not possible in this paper. Here we merely note that they exert an undeniable influence on the way in which strategies and demands are formulated by organisations of home based workers and vice versa.

At the other end of the spectrum, and in contradistinction to the above mentioned de-ideologised and contingent frameworks, are the perspectives on homebased workers of organisations/trade unions who challenge neo-liberal policy

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<sup>4</sup>See Marilyn Carr and Martha Chen (2002), *Globalization and the Informal Economy: How Global Trade and Investment Impact on the Working Poor* , International Labour Office Geneva

frameworks in India and focus on the anti-working class edge in the globalization paradigm. Such trade union perspectives, that generally have roots in socialist perspectives and ideologies and advocate equitable redistribution of society's resources through state intervention, have so far not documented their own experience of organizing homebased workers. They are yet to evolve their analytical and organizational perspective on the centrality of gender in homebased work. Although it is from these unions that the articulation of demands for rights of *home workers* first emerged in India (with reference to beedi workers), and they have a long history of organizing homebased/household workers in coir, handloom, etc., it has taken them a long time to perceive *women* homebased workers as a distinct category of workers and they are yet to develop effective strategies to promote their self-organizing capacities. Recognition of homebased workers as a category in itself has grown, and attempts have indeed been initiated by these unions to study the situation of homebased workers in various parts of the country. An overall organizational strategy and perspective is however yet to evolve, particularly with reference to the rapidly changing situations, locations, and gender of homebased workers. Still, the mainstream attitude of dismissing the experience of more longstanding trade union organization among home workers has been quite detrimental to the development of an understanding of the political economy of homebased work in the India, and the issues it poses for workers in the period of structural change under neo-liberalism.

One singular analytical contribution to the study of homebased work that has come from this stream has been to incorporate a focus on to the relationship between piece rates and labour time and stress on the conversion of piece rates to time rates to explicate the actual wage rates that obtain for home workers in India. The issue of real wages that generally informs the approach of such unions does not however, appear to have the same edge in relation to homebased workers, and in that they perhaps share common ground with the dominant approaches to homebased workers of other forms of organization. Further, they too have yet to develop a critical focus or perspective on the patriarchal structures and relations that shape the lives and conditions of homebased work by women.

### ***Visibilising Women Homebased Workers in India: The making of a field***

As is well known, the use of the term homebased worker and discussions on the significance of homebased work in India began in the watershed decades of



the 1970s and 80s.<sup>5</sup> Women were central to these early discussions, and have since then remained the focus of related research and analysis around homebased work across the last four decades. It was an interest in women's work that led to a focus on and an identity for homebased workers as a specific category of workers, even though men still actually outnumber women in homebased work in the country. An upsurge in the women's movement across the 1970s and 80s, and the emergence of its academic arm in women's studies had generated a hunger for new approaches and categories to understand the nature of and developments in women's work, -particularly when the increasing marginalization of women in the India's developing economy was put on the national agenda by the report of the Committee on the Status of Women in India (1974).<sup>6</sup> Scholars and activists began to further take up questions regarding the invisibility of much of women's work. They challenged the widely held male breadwinner oriented assumption that women contributed little to the productive sphere of the economy, and posed it as a problem deriving from gender blind definitions of work and methodologies adopted by employment surveys and censuses. It was in such a context that the lack of any official recognition of homebased work by women emerged as an important area highlighting the invisibility of women workers. While there were differing approaches to analysis of the data on employment and its ability to capture women's work, there was consensus on the invisibility of home workers in employment statistics. *Visibilising and giving to women working in homebased production an identity as workers* were among the key issues that the evolving women's perspectives of these watershed decades brought into the debates on labour and employment in India.

These discussions drew heavily on the practice and experience of the new organizations of women workers which had emerged in the 1970s. Of these, the first and best known was SEWA Gujarat established in 1972. Similarly, there was the Working Women's Forum (WWF), which came up in Tamilnadu in 1978, and Annapurna Mahila Mandal (AMM) which was formed in 1975 in Bombay. All three organizations, distinguished themselves from other trade unions by their women only character, and their special focus on 'self-employed' women. It was thus from an initial objective of organizing women whose forms of employment were not accepted as wage labour, and who tended to fall within a rubric of 'self-

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<sup>5</sup>This was a period of churning – of widespread popular agitations in response to economic and political crisis. Their repression culminated in the imposition of Emergency, whose lifting was followed by a democratic outpouring setting the stage for an upsurge in women's movements across India.

<sup>6</sup>The 1974 Towards Equality report of the Committee on the Status of Women in India (CSWI) had sparked off an intellectual churning among scholars who had come to realise that earlier assumptions of improvement of women's economic status with development had been proved wrong.

employment', that these organizations sought to raise the issue of homebased workers. Secondly, unlike other trade unions, all three used facilitation of access to credit/loans by poor women as a central organizing strategy/principle. Thirdly, all three initiated formation of some form of cooperative, drawing on an ideology inherited from India's freedom struggle, of cooperatives as a means towards self-reliance. It is however interesting, that both SEWA and Annapurna Mahila Mandal grew out of organized textile workers' movements and unions in Ahmedabad and Bombay respectively at a time when mills were closing down and women in textile workers' families were having to bear the burden of finding alternative sources of income. SEWA was started by Ela Bhatt within the Gandhian Textile Labour Association (TLA) in Ahmedabad, even though it was later expelled from TLA and became an independent organization in 1981.<sup>7</sup> The Annapurna Mahila Mandal was conceived of by Prema Puro, a trade unionist affiliated with the Communist inclined All India Trade Union Congress (AITUC), based on her observation of how women supported the protracted 1973 strike of Textile workers in Bombay.<sup>8</sup> Working Women's Forum, on the other hand emerged from within a social work tradition, its founder Jaya Arunachalam, who was 'groomed in the Gandhian mould', having quit Congress politics to form the WWF, which also formed its own trade union.<sup>9</sup> In their exclusive focus on women workers, all three organizations reflected a 'confluence' of a surge in women's involvement in struggles and movements, trade union based worker consciousness, and the ideas of self-reliance of the cooperative movement, albeit in a situation of industrial crisis when many of the larger organized industries were in the process of closing down.<sup>10</sup>

Parallel to the emergence of the above organizations of women workers, the mixed gender trade unions were also affected by the tide of female ferment and assertion that characterized the times. By the early 1980s, the established central trade union organizations (CTUOs) of mixed gender in India had all formed sub-committees or special cells for women workers, the first of which was the All India Coordination Committee of Working Women (AICWW) of the Centre of Indian trade Unions (CITU) in 1979. It was also this period that saw wider recognition of the need to organize the women who had emerged as the homebased outworkers in beedi, an industry which was earlier more male and factory/workshop

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<sup>7</sup> Manushi (1981) No. 8, SEWA Women Break Free from Parent Body, A Report By Ela Bhatt, General Secretary, SEWA

<sup>8</sup> Margaret H. Martens, Swasti Mitter- 1994, '*Women in Trade Unions: Organizing the Unorganized*'

<sup>9</sup> WWF is not itself a trade union, but has a trade union wing – the National Union of Working Women.

<sup>10</sup> Ela Bhatt often referred to SEWA as representing a confluence of the women's movement, the labour movement and the cooperative movement.

dominated, and had been significantly unionised from before independence. It was a period when issues of unorganized workers were becoming increasingly important for the trade union movement as a whole. In tandem with the crisis in several organized industries at the time, from the late 1960s through the 1970s, a spate of labour laws for various categories of unorganized workers were enacted, beginning with a specific law for beedi workers in 1966, and followed by laws for contract workers, casual loaders, bonded labour, contractor recruited migrant workers, etc. through the 1970s.<sup>11</sup> Some were initiated by trade union leaders and others by the government. Overall, a growing recognition of the enormous size and weight of unorganized sector/workers was in the air.

Many of the women so organized within CTUOs in this period were homebased workers, of which the most prominent were the coir workers in Kerala and beedi rollers in several states, etc. Yet their experiences of organizational or mobilisational strategies have not been documented by scholars of homebased work or women activists, possibly because these industries and organizations were considered 'traditional' rural industries, and did not fall into the rubric of 'new' forms of labour and of their organization. Further, scholarship inspired by the new forms of women's trade unions, was perhaps overdetermined by the assumption that the larger/older trade unions did nothing for unorganized or homebased workers or for women. In consequence, there has been an erasure of the experience of the mixed gender unions in the body of literature on homebased workers in India. Almost no one for example, refers to the fact that the first labour legislation that brought home workers into the ambit of labour law and conferred some rights and entitlements on them as workers, was the product of a decade long struggle that was initiated by the mixed gender trade unions. It is based on their struggles that the Beedi and Cigar Workers (Conditions of Employment) Act, 1966 specifically included "home worker" within its definition of "Employee", but we have no studies of either these struggles or of the scale of involvement of women workers.<sup>12</sup> It is of course true that the leadership of the early trade union

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<sup>11</sup> It bears mention that some of these laws, eg. In relation to contract workers, casual loaders, etc. were preceded by major struggles of workers that had already led to judicial expansion of unorganized workers' rights.

<sup>12</sup>The voices of women beedi rollers of Kerala's Dinesh Beedi worker cooperative, which was established in 1969 and where thousands of women constituted well over half the members and who resisted transfer of work to their homes – have not been included in the mainstream discourse on homebased workers. We know little of the specific experiences perspective of its women workers who had become a majority in the ownership of the cooperative by the mid-1980s and constituted 60 percent of its close to 50,000 members in the 1990s. In the 1990s, one study on 'Democracy at Work in an Indian Industrial Cooperative' suggested that it might have become the largest woman owned industrial cooperative in the world. However, mainstream literature on organizing women workers or homebased work in India has not intersected with such studies, even tangentially.

interventions with reference to home workers were rarely women (although the coir workers in Kerala had powerful women leaders such as Susheela Gopalan). Yet women's participation in trade union (TU) struggles, and their issues did have an impact on the conceptions of the TU leaders and opened the doors for a new generation of women trade unionists, who also became representatives of women workers, but whose voices are less advertised in the literature on women workers. Such an erasure of experience has been unfortunate and perhaps narrowed the scholarly gaze away from the multiplicity of experiences and dimensions of homebased work in India.

### ***Framing the Issues and Defining the Categories***

While the discussion on the expanding numbers and proportions of unorganized workers, self-employed women, and the relatively greater weight of unorganized forms of labour in women's work profile, was coming to the fore in India, the ILO led discourse on the informal sector and informal employment was also developing at the international level. Both lines of thought were incorporated in the 1988 *Shramshakti* report of the Government of India appointed *National Commission on Self-Employed Women and Women in the Informal Sector* that was headed by Ela Bhatt, founder of SEWA. In relation to homebased workers, *Shramshakti* laid out a series of proposals/recommendations for what would now be called formalization of employment relations of piece rated home workers.

Listing several kinds of activities in women's homebased work, *Shramshakti* expanded the arena well beyond the few segments of household and small-scale industry that had been listed earlier by the CSWI.<sup>13</sup> It classified homebased workers into two categories, the first being those working at piece rates for some other employer, and the second being own account small entrepreneurs or independent artisans. The first category was stated to be numerically predominant. *Shramshakti's* delineation of homebased workers, thus extended beyond the narrow definition of workers in household industries (of largely artisanal vintage) that was counted by the Indian censuses. It included both self-employed own account workers as well as piece rated workers in some kind of a wage relationship

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<sup>13</sup> CSWI had identified - handloom, khadi and village industries, sericulture, coir, cashew, manufacture of bidis, handicrafts, oil pressing, rice-pounding, pottery, tanning and leather manufacture, tobacco processing, etc., and argued that one of the greatest factors contributing towards the fall in women's economic participation in India has been the decline of this group of industries as a consequence of unequal competition with the factory sector.

with an employer/trader/contractor. As we shall see, such an inclusive definition has retained pertinence in the Indian context.

In terms of approach, *Shramshakti* argued that “the nature of legislative protection that is needed for these two categories of home-based workers is not the same. The piece rated home workers need better wages, better implementation of labour laws; on the other hand, the own account workers need remedies that generally lie beyond the scope of labour laws, such as better facilities and arrangements for purchase of raw material, for marketing, for credit, for storage, for workplace, for better prices and for protection against harassment from public authorities.” It also defined several of the key issues for home workers to be dealt with through labour law and its procedures. The report argued that without guidelines for fixation of statutory minimum wages or in the case of piece rates – the absence of any scientific or equitable procedure - below poverty line wages were the norm for piece rated home workers. It pointed out that this resulted in these workers “having to put in very long hours of work supplemented by the efforts of other members of the family, to earn a pittance of a wage which may be a fraction of the time-rated wage.”

*Shramshakti* therefore made the important recommendation that determination of minimum piece rates should be done “with reference to what an ordinary adult woman can be able to produce or achieve in a period of eight hours of work and that output must entitle her to earn what would be the minimum time-rate wages per day in that employment.” Further, it proposed a fallback wage to be paid to workers if output was low due to failure of the employer to provide raw materials, etc or a retaining allowance during offseason periods of inactivity. It also proposed establishment of a tripartite board for homebased workers, as no law would benefit women workers unless they had a major hand in its implementation. These recommendations were designed to effectively formalize the relationship between employers and workers, with the object of ensuring that employers of home workers were prevented from inequitable underpayment of piece rate home workers, and became bound to undertake some sustained responsibilities for the workers whose labour they profited from. The object was to reduce the vulnerability of the workers to excessive exploitation and insecurity of employment. These important recommendations were not however, taken forward by commissions set up by the government of India after the 1991 official turn to liberalization. They find no mention in either the Report of the 2nd National Commission on Labour (2002) or even in the 2007 Report of the National Commission on Enterprises in the Unorganised Sector (NCEUS).

According to *Shramshakti* and before it, CSWI's *Towards Equality* Report, the two strands that fed into women's homebased work were 1) traditional household

industry (originating in the period before the rise of modern markets and commercialization of the Indian economy (which were generally on the basis of caste) in interaction with trade based commerce as well as growing modern industry, and 2) the farming out of work into the homes of women from the modern factory sector. The driving force behind the conditions of homebased workers was further analysed as being caused by a) the decline of traditional industries characterized by self-employment, due to their inability to cope with the changes taking place in the economy and competition from the growth of the technology driven modern industrial sector, b) changes in the relations of employment in such traditional industries with many, and primarily women being reduced to below subsistence piece rated wage labour, dependent on merchants or other entrepreneurs for their employment, c) changing employer practices in the factory sector and their drive to lower wages and evade labour laws through subcontracting into the homebased sector, and d) a general social denial to women of access to education, skills, better technology, and markets, which combined with poverty and their role in the family to lead to their concentration in the lowest forms of paid work.<sup>14</sup>

What is of particular note is that despite their critique of aspects of the development process of industrialization and modernization of the economy resulting in marginalisation and increased exploitation of women workers, the line of thinking in both the CSWI report as well as Shramshakti, nevertheless sought the solution to such problems from a planned development oriented interventionist state. Their recommendations were directed at state regulation of the conditions of labour of women workers, towards mitigating the scale of exploitation, and improving the conditions of work. The demand was thus for extension of labour laws (and their enforcement) to women workers in the unorganized sector, and enactment of specific laws and policies protecting women's employment. At the same time, they sought direct intervention by the state in the economy for the purpose of enhancing employment and income opportunities for women, and for support and protection in sectors that played an important role in providing women with employment. Where extension of labour laws directly addressed the vulnerabilities of piece rated home workers, economic interventions and protection by the state were conceived of to protect the employment of self-employed homebased workers in the sectors where they were concentrated. In other words, labour laws to formalize the employment relationship and protect piece rated workers from extreme exploitation combined with support by the state through provision of low interest credit and market protection for the self-employed

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<sup>14</sup>Mazumdar,

homebased producers were the twin strategies enunciated in these two seminal reports.

The broad contours of a legislation for home workers were identified in *Shramshakti*, (1988). The enactment of a separate new law for homebased workers was designed to avoid “the vexatious question of employer employee relationship tests” that are operational prerequisites under all other existing labour laws. It proposed looking at control over the production process and the ultimate product as a method of identifying employers. Thus employers were to include contractors “and where they are working for a ‘principal employer’ then they shall be considered to be employment of the principal employer”. These proposals were then taken forward by the National Commission on Rural Labour (NCRL) appointed in 1987, and whose report came out in 1991. The NCRL had carefully examined the several practices through which contractors as well as principal employers of the beedi industry had evaded their obligations as enunciated in the Beedi laws. NCRL thus also provided a draft of what should be covered in a law for homebased workers with the object of ensuring regularity and continuity of their employment protection and improvement of their conditions including wages, hours of work, welfare benefits and working conditions. Both *Shramshakti* and NCRL laid stress on the establishment of a tripartite board for home-based workers for defining further entitlements and regulations.<sup>15</sup>

### ***One Step forward, Two Steps Back: Changed Discourses under Liberalization***

The significant contributions of the discussions across the 1980s to the framing of issues in relation to homebased work by women in India were of course set aside and washed away by the backtracking on worker rights that accompanied the rise to dominance of neo-liberal policies in India. Its effect on changing the terms of discourse in relation to homebased workers was at several levels.

As argued elsewhere, “by the 1990s with liberalization and the introduction of ‘economic reforms’, seismic changes in overall government policy as well as development strategies began to envisage a reduction in the state’s role in economic development and an increasing role for unregulated markets in determining the course of development. As state controls and protections for

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<sup>15</sup>One of the other recommendations of the NCRL was for a law to regulate the working conditions of construction workers. While that recommendation was taken forward, largely due to a nationwide and united campaign that culminated in the enactment of laws for Building and Construction Workers. It is unfortunate that in the case of homebased workers, there was no such concerted campaign for a legislation.

various sectors of industry were lifted, as public investment in industry, services, and the social sector retreated before increasing reliance on private profit driven enterprise, as the process of tailoring policy away from protective barriers towards integration with globalization and the world economy unfolded, and as the role of nationalized banks was 'reformed' towards the primacy of profit considerations rather than development needs, the ground on which the conceptual advances and policy prescriptions of the preceding period were made, actually shifted. It is a matter of some note that no strand of the women's or workers' movement in India was ever able to give unequivocal support to such a shift. The fact is that it was imposed on them, and was largely resisted by the advance guard."<sup>16</sup>

The switch to according a pre-eminent role to unregulated markets over the state effectively marginalised much of the earlier discourse proposing a regulatory law for homebased workers. This was also a period when much of the discussion focused on homebased work moved from the national to the international stage where a highly successful SEWA led international campaign saw fruition in the ILO Convention on Home Work. Theorization around homebased work also became more linked with western discourses and in line with the broader debates on globalization.

Incidentally, it was the early 1980s research on the movement of women from agricultural communities in Andhra Pradesh, India, into homebased manufacture of lace/crochet products for export that provided a basis for European feminist theorizations around patriarchy and accumulation on a world scale. Maria Mies' influential monograph 'The lace makers of Narsapur' (Mies, 1982), played a role in shaping worldwide approaches to homebased work and contributed to the evolving ideas in Europe that home workers in developing countries constituted an important part of the 'new international division of labour'. Feminist questions for industrial societies - as to why housework was not counted as work, had motivated Mies to posit that the invisible labour of such homebased workers as she found in Narsapur, was indeed the optimal labour for capitalism, since it was structurally free of costs. She had coined the term housewifisation of labour to characterise this type of homebased labour.

It however needs to be recognized that the overwhelming majority of women homeworkers in India have never and still do not work for export markets, but for markets that are more domestic and often -even local. Their common experience of below subsistence wage levels, poor conditions of work, and involvement of middlemen, have of course been extensively documented. That these operate

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<sup>16</sup>Mazumdar, Indrani (2005), 'Approach Paper: Vulnerabilities of Women Homebased Workers', [http://www.cwds.ac.in/OCPaper/Vulnerabilities\\_of\\_Women\\_Homebased\\_Workers.pdf](http://www.cwds.ac.in/OCPaper/Vulnerabilities_of_Women_Homebased_Workers.pdf)



regardless of whether the market for the product is local, national or international is indicative of a larger determining role for the nature of domestic labour market formation. The conditions in which the domestic labour market is formed, and its gender differentiated nature, thus remains the prime force shaping the life and work experience of home workers in India. There is therefore a need to locate the drivers of homebased work in India on a broader frame that incorporates a focus on national and local social processes and policies, as well as pays due attention to factors shaping local, regional and cross regional domestic markets.

By the end of the first decade into liberalization, employment data showed that the largest and most significant expansion of women's employment across that decade had taken place in the beedi industry within a larger context of a decline in female work participation rates.<sup>17</sup> More recent analysis of the industrial distribution of homebased workers alone has also shown that in 1999-2000, beedi accounted for 22% of female homebased workforce, retail trade for almost 16%, manufacture of wood & cork products for 9%, Food products & beverages for 7%, and education, community & personal services for almost 10%. Together, these clearly domestic market oriented industries accounted for more than 64 % of women in non-agricultural homebased work in India. Even in relation to segments where export orientation was much remarked upon, such as textiles and manufacture of wearing apparel, it is significant that they together accounted for 21% of all women homebased workers (less than those in beedi alone) in 1999-2000, and that every area/city based micro-study of the product mix of homebased workers tended to show that the domestic market component was more significant even in these two segments.<sup>18</sup> Empirical data from macro and micro sources in India thus, continued to show that across the 1990s, the overwhelming majority of home workers, even in the city centres of modern industry and commerce, remained predominantly involved in domestic circuits of capital, labour and services. The pronounced turn towards locating homebased work primarily from a globalized industry framework was thus more influenced by theories that drew on perspectives that looked outward from the first world, rather than empirically grounded in the lives and work of homebased workers in India. Such approaches

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<sup>17</sup>See Sundaram, K. (2001) 'Employment and Poverty in 1990s', *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 36, Issue No. 32, 11 Aug, 2001. Sundaram pointed out that between 1994 and 2000, the number of women working in the tobacco and beverages (mostly beedi) sub-sector of manufacturing had increased from 3.01 million to 3.67 million. On the other hand in manufacture of textiles and wearing apparel, the number of women workers declined from 3.6 million to 3.4 million across the same period.

<sup>18</sup> Jhabvala, Mazumdar, Sudarshan et al

were no doubt also influenced by the policy framework that was being put in place, which put a premium on India's integration with globalization.

It could be argued that the turn in policy since 1991 towards liberalization and globalization oriented 'economic reforms' was responsible for a roll back of the advances in understanding the context, location, issues and needs of homebased workers in the 1980s. In place of the early recommendations for enactment of a separate legislation that could incorporate the complex particularities and modes of home workers' relations with both contractor and principal employer, the 1990s was marked by a discussion around an 'umbrella' legislation for all unorganized workers.<sup>19</sup> This effectively stalled all the earlier progress towards a specific law for homebased workers. Consequently, the Report of the 2<sup>nd</sup> National Commission on Labour (2002), confined itself to a recommendation that piece rated workers should be included under the Minimum Wages Act and that the welfare schemes and provisions existing under some of the labour laws should be extended to them. The 2<sup>nd</sup> Labour Commission of course came under severe criticism from the trade unions for gone along with major items on the neo-liberal reform agenda for organized labour towards enhancing hire and fire rights for employers. Its indicative draft for an umbrella legislation for unorganized workers was also sharply criticized for having no regulatory teeth and no grievance redressal mechanism.<sup>20</sup>

In our view, the turn towards an umbrella framework for all unorganized workers, in effect neutralized the advances that had been made in the 1980s towards working out specific mechanisms attuned to the complex of employment relations in which piece rated home workers were embedded. The National Commission on Enterprises in the Unorganised Sector (NCEUS), of course pushed the debate ahead of the non-regulatory framework of the 2<sup>nd</sup> labour commission, and argued for an umbrella law that incorporated the need for regulation of working conditions of unorganized workers as well as social security. Nevertheless, the problem of lack of specific mechanisms for home workers persisted. As it happened, the legislation on social security for unorganized workers that was finally enacted in 2008, did not even incorporate the recommendations of NCEUS, and merely had provisions for the setting up of national and state social security

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<sup>19</sup> Fortunately the Building and Construction Workers laws had already been enacted in 1996, before the 2<sup>nd</sup> Labour Commission was constituted. Otherwise they may also have been brought under the umbrella concept.

<sup>20</sup> A summary of the broad discussion around the unorganized sector legislation till 2007, may be found in the chapter on 'Recommendations on Legislative Protection for Minimum Conditions of Work and Comprehensive Legislation', in NCEUS (2007) *Report on Conditions of Work and Promotion of Livelihoods in the Unorganised Sector*.

boards with powers only to recommend welfare schemes for unorganized workers. It did not include any *regulation* of working conditions, nor did it provide for any *entitlements* or *rights* of unorganized workers to social security. Although the Act included home-based workers – both self-employed and wage worker in its conception of unorganized worker, it did not confer them with any entitlements other than eligibility to register themselves for welfare schemes. The schemes listed in the Act were all pre-existing destitution level social assistance schemes for citizens below poverty line (BPL). Under the Act employers have no obligations to their workers. The social assistance schemes are also not binding, and there are no punishments for non-receipt of even the pitiful assistance. As such, the limitations of this law in providing for any social security have come in for sharp criticism from trade unions and scholars, and is being tested on the ground.

### ***Some Definitional Terminological Clarifications: Homebased Workers and Home Workers***

Inclusion of the self-employed or own account worker, while maintaining a distinction between genuine own account self-employment and dependent piece rated work for a trader, manufacturer, or contractor, has remained particularly pertinent to the Indian experience of homebased work, although in the statistics and even policy discussions on homebased work, such a distinction is often blurred over.

As is by now internationally accepted, Home Work implies an employment relationship between the home worker and the employer, subcontractor, agent or middleman. The agreement may be implicit or explicit, verbal or written, as specified in the national legislation. Convention No 177 of the ILO (1996) thus defines homework as: (a) work carried out by a person, to be referred to as a home worker, – in his or her home or in other premises of his or her choice, other than the workplace of the employer; – for remuneration; – which results in a product or service as specified by the employer, irrespective of who provides the equipment, materials or other inputs used, as long as this person does not have the degree of autonomy and of economic independence necessary to be considered an independent worker under national laws, regulations or court decisions; (b) the term “employer” means a person, natural or legal, who either directly or through an intermediary, if any, gives out home work in pursuance of his or her business activity (ILO 1996). The Home Work Convention therefore does not apply to genuinely self-employed home workers. An employer has to be identified.

The broader category of home-based worker, on the other hand, would additionally include independent artisans as well as other forms of independent self-employed workers who are involved in the marketing of their products, along with home workers. Within South Asia, the most progress with evolving a suitable definition has probably been made in India. The definition of homebased work that was pioneered here is more expansive than given in the ILO Convention and includes the genuinely self-employed and contributing family workers. As mentioned before, the first recognition in Indian labour law came in the Beedi and Cigar (Conditions of Employment) Act 1996 which defined the 'home worker' as any labour who is given raw materials by an employer or a contractor for being made into beedi or cigar or both at home". At another level, the home worker is also defined in terms of being an 'outworker' in the Contract Labour Act. Here an 'outworker' is "a person to whom any articles or materials are given out by or on behalf of the Principal employer to be made up, cleaned, washed, altered, ornamented, finished, repaired, adapted or otherwise processed for sale for the purposes of the trade or business of the principal employer and the process is to be carried out either in the home of the out-worker or in some other premises." This definition can technically include the home worker also, where the site of work is the home.

## **Situational Analysis: Women homebased workers in 21<sup>st</sup> century India**

### ***Trends in Sectoral Distribution and Redistribution of Women Homebased Workers (2000 – 2012)***

Where earlier studies on homebased work depended solely on micro-studies, sustained pressure from women's studies/informal sector scholars and discussions at conferences of labour statisticians have led to some refinements in data collected by the National Sample Survey Office (NSSO). Of course, some inadequacies persist, and problems of comparability across different rounds of surveys continue to arise because of changing definitions. Nevertheless, we are indeed now able to get a better macro-picture of recent trends in homebased work. With inclusion of 'own dwelling' as a location of work for non-agricultural workers in NSSO's larger employment surveys, macro-estimates of proportions, numbers, and distribution of homebased workers became available by the end of the 1990s.<sup>21</sup>In 1999-2000 a further distinction could also be technically made between a dependent home worker i.e., with an employer of some kind, and other own

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<sup>21</sup>In (i) dwelling unit and/or (ii) structure attached to dwelling unit and/or (iii) open area adjacent to the dwelling unit

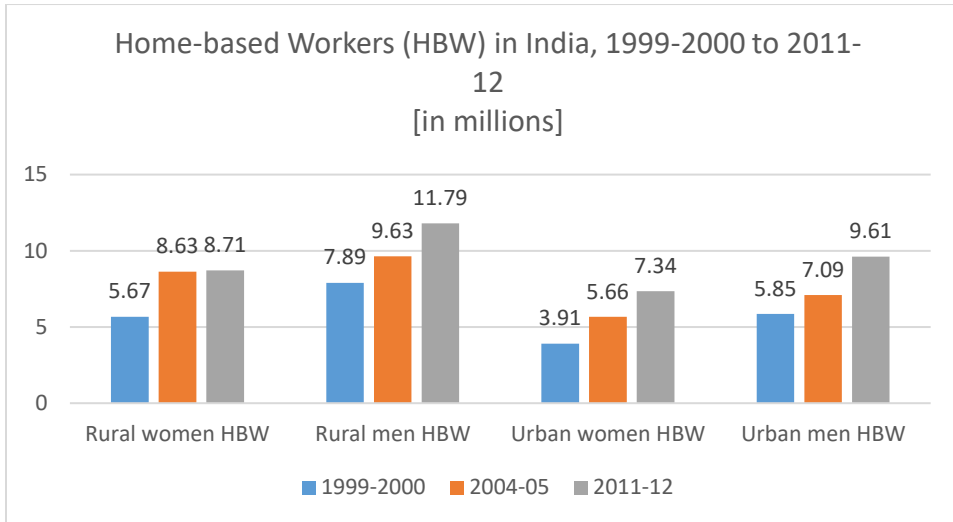
account self-employed homebased workers. Unfortunately the additional questions to elicit dependency were not included in the surveys of either 2004-05 or 2011-12. We therefore have trend data for homebased workers, but not separately for home workers. Nevertheless, the pattern of a higher proportion of dependent homeworkers among women in home-based work as compared to men was observed in 1999-2000 (45 % of women in home-based workers were home workers in contrast to 25.3 % among male home-based workers) can be assumed to have sustained, and the proportions of home workers among women may have even expanded.

One of the problems that one finds in reading the literature that draws on the macro-data, are differing numbers/estimates of homebased workers arrived at by various analysts even when the same NSSO surveys are being drawn upon. The reasons for such differences are because some analysts include workers across all ages, while other include only those above 15; some take a broader definition of homebased location and include any place not provided by the employer, others stick to own dwelling alone. Such varying numbers do indeed cause confusion making it difficult to comprehend the trends over time from the secondary literature. Recent initiatives by WIEGO to prepare statistical briefs based on various rounds of NSSO surveys, have used one consistent definition (age 15 and above). As such a body of analysed data is now available in the literature, from which some trends in homebased work can be clearly discerned. This data may be found in the tables provided by Raveendran et al (2013), and Chen and Raveendran (2014), and is drawn from three rounds of NSSO surveys (1999-2000, 2004-05, and 2011-12 (The 2011-12 round was the last large survey available at the time of writing). The numbers for homebased workers and the figures and graphs below, are all drawn and calculated from the tables given in the papers mentioned above. We have presented the data in percentage distribution as well as in absolute number estimates. In our experience, it is only when absolute numbers and percentage shares are both looked at, are we able to get a fuller picture of what is happening. The main points that emerge from the macro-data on homebased workers are as follows:

- 1) Of the 37.4 million homebased workers in 2011-12, 16.05 million were women. Women thus constituted 42.8% of homebased workers in India. In comparison, the share of women in the country's overall workforce stood at a mere 27% that same year [2011-12] (Mazumdar, 2013). Further, while men continue to outnumber women in home-based work in India, the *share* of home-based work in non-agricultural *female* employment (31.7%) is almost three times its share in non-agricultural male employment (11%). The data

thus confirms the understanding of the *substantially greater weight of home-based work in the structures of female employment in India.*

Fig.1



Source: Table 1 in Raveendran et al, 2013

- 2) Secondly, it is clear that the numbers of women homebased workers are continuing to increase. From a total of 9.58 million in 1999-2000, their number increased by 6.47 million across the 12 year period till 2012, which means that *more than half a million women were added to the homebased workforce per annum.*
- 3) However, when the figures are examined more closely across survey rounds for both men and women (Fig. 1), it is noticeable that the number of male homebased workers saw a major jump from 2004-05 to 2011-12 in both rural and urban areas. No such jump is visible for women homebased workers in rural areas. As a result, while male homebased workers increased their numbers by 4.68 million across this last seven year period, women homebased workers increased by only 1.76 million. This curious fact has not been commented upon in the literature on homebased work in India, and invites more serious scrutiny and analysis. Calculations based on the numbers given in Fig. 1 show that the share of women in India's homebased workforce increased sharply from 41.08% in 1999-2000 to 48.85% in 2004-05, but then fell almost equally sharply later to reach 42.8% in 2011-12.

In our view, the palpable volatility in the shares of women in the homebased workforce can and should be correlated with trends in unpaid work by women. We know from other studies on employment that there was a sharp rise in 'self-employment' between 1999-2000 and 2004-05. It has been argued that the inflation in the numbers of self-employed visible in 2004-05 reflected a crisis in availability of wage employment (Ghosh, 2006). Others have shown that the increase in self-employment among women in 2004-05 included a rise in the share of unpaid workers that was then followed by a fall in both alongside a steep fall in female work participation rates and a reduction in the number of women workers in India by more than 20 million in the following half decade. (Mazumdar/Neetha, 2012)We would argue for the need to also focus on unpaid work in interpreting the trends in women's participation in the homebased workforce. Increases in the share of women may sometimes be only increases in unpaid work by women, and decreases may yet represent increases in paid work. Either way, unpaid work does need to be factored in for arriving at a more nuanced analysis of trends for women homebased workers.

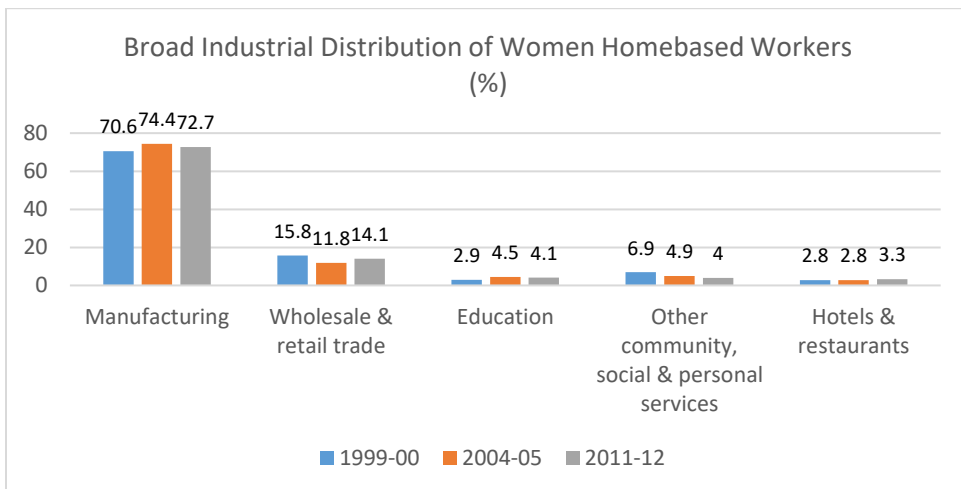
- 4) Raveendran et al (2013), have noted that while more home-based workers continued to be found in India's countryside, their numbers in urban areas have grown at a faster rate. This is borne out by the fact that the 54% of women homebased workers found to be located in rural areas by the 2011-12 survey, represented a significant decline from the rural location of 59 % of women homebased workers in 1999-2000. The centre of gravity for women in homebased work thus appears to be shifting to urban areas. What is not clear is whether this is the outcome of a greater control of homebased work being exercised by urban based merchants, traders, factories and/or formal industries, or of migration from rural to urban areas of own account/self-employed workers for a closer interaction/linkage with more concentrated markets. Or even whether the relative decline of women's homebased workers in rural areas is part of the generalized crisis in women's employment in rural India.

Strikingly, since 2005, stagnation in the numbers of women homebased workers in rural areas has become particularly marked. Micro-studies of homebased work in rural areas are naturally unable to capture the same range of multi-industry surveys that are indeed possible and available for urban areas. But it is possible to speculate that many of the 'traditional' homebased occupations of rural women may be in decline. There is some evidence to

support this argument in the declining share of some of the industries where homebased workers were earlier located.

- 5) In terms of broad sectors (Fig. 2), *manufacturing alone accounted for 72.7 per cent of women homebased workers in 2011-12*, leaving trade far behind at 14.1%. The overwhelming domination of manufacturing distinguishes the structural characteristics of women’s homebased work from that of men. Among *male* homebased workers, the share of manufacturing stood at just over 42% in 2011-12, not so significantly overwhelming of the 35.1% share of trade in the profile of the male homebased workforce.

Fig.2



Source: Table 2, Raveendran et al, 2013

In fact *across the 12 year period as a whole, manufacturing increased its share among women homebased workers*, while among male homebased workers, the share of manufacturing declined slightly and was matched by an increased share for trade. Further, Chen and Raveendran have shown that *among women workers in urban manufacturing, homebased work has been increasing its domination from 60.1% in 1999-2000 to 68.3% in 2011-12*. It seems that the considerable hype around potentialities of homebased work for women in services and particular IT services is not backed by empirical realities, and it is manufacturing that has remained the driving force behind women’s homebased work even in urban India.



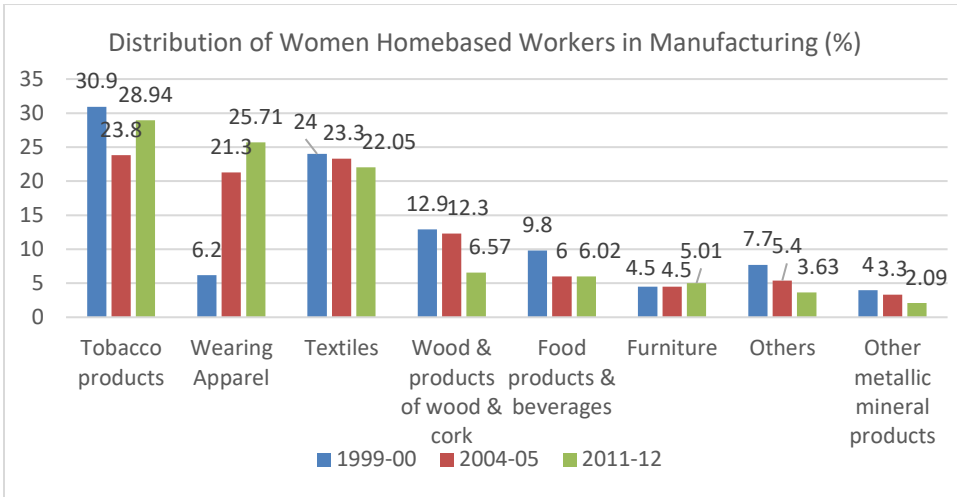
Among women in homebased services, trade - which for women is primarily retail trade, has shown a slight decline in share of the workforce (Fig. 2), but maintained a steady increase in numbers from 1.56 million in 1999-2000 to 2.26 million in 2011-12. Surprisingly, Community social and personal services (*hairdressers, beauticians, launderers, child day carers, etc.*) actually saw a slight decline not only in shares but in numbers of women homebased workers from over 6.6 lakhs in 1999-1000 to 6.42 lakhs in 2011-12. Education (tutoring from home), on the other hand, more than doubled in numbers from 2.77 lakh women in 1999-2000 to 6.42 lakhs in 2011-12. Similarly homebased work in Hotels & Restaurants (including serving meals, beverages, providing accommodation) saw an increase in the number of women from 2.68 lakhs in 1999-2000 to 5.29 lakhs in 2011-12.

- 6) Trends in the distribution of homebased women's work within manufacturing (Fig. 3) shows a striking increase in the share of manufacture of wearing apparel, from a mere 6.2% in 1999-2000 to 25.71% in 2011-12, representing a seven fold increase in numbers from less than half a million (4.1 lakhs) in 1999-2000 to 2.99 million in 2011-12. A five-fold jump seems to have really occurred in the first half decade of this century when the numbers of homebased women workers in apparel increased by 1.85 million to reach 2.26 million in 2004-05. Thereafter, the addition of another 7.3 lakh women to the homebased workforce in apparel manufacture over the next 7 years, brought manufacture of wearing apparel to a position second only to beedi as an employer of women homebased workers.

Interestingly, even as textiles showed a declining share in overall distribution of women homebased workers, the numbers of women in homebased textiles increased by almost a million (9.5 lakhs) across the 12 years from 1999-2000 to 2011-12.

- 7) Tobacco products (essentially beedi manufacture) has nevertheless, continued to be the single largest employer of women home workers in India. Although the sharp rise in share of wearing apparel in 2004-05 partly expressed itself in a declining share for beedi that year, the larger timespan of 12 years shows a steady increase in the number of women in homebased beedi manufacture from a little over 2 million in 1999-2000 to a little over 2.5 million in 2004-05 to 3.37 million in 2011-12. Surprisingly, in the latter seven year period between 2004-05 and 2011-12, the numbers of beedi workers rose by 8.7 lakhs, which was even more than the 7.3 lakh increase in wearing apparel across the same seven years.

Fig. 3



Source: Table 3, Raveendran et al 2013

- 8) While the distribution given in Fig. 3 combines both rural and urban locations, it is noticeable that the three segments of manufacturing that are most likely to be largely rural based have shown significant declines in share of the female homebased workforce. For example, the number of *women homebased workers in wood & cork products (which includes bamboo, cane, reed and grass products, straw related handicrafts, making of baskets, ropes, leaf plates, etc.) declined* from 8.7 lakhs in 1999-2000 to 7.6 lakhs in 2011-12 - almost halving their share in female homebased manufacturing from 12.9% to 6.5%. Similarly, the share of women workers in food products and beverages declined from 9.8% of female homebased manufacturing in 1999-2000 to 6.02 % in 2011-12, although their numbers increased marginally from 6.6 lakhs to a little over 7 lakhs. In manufactures of metallic & mineral products too (which includes pottery), the numbers of women homebased workers declined slightly from around 2.7 lakhs in 1999-1000 to 2.4 lakhs in 2011-12, reflected a more pronounced decline in share from 4% to 2.09%. Many of the above industries had a *traditional artisanal base in rural India, whose products and labour are both facing accelerated erosion with the deeper penetration of integrated markets and mass manufactures, based on alternative (often synthetic) materials.*
- 9) The more diffused category of 'other manufacturing' also more than halved its share from 7.7% in 1999-2000 to 3.63% in 2011-12, which in numbers meant

a reduction from 5.2 lakhs to 4.2 lakhs. The manufacture of furniture (including furniture made of cane and reed as well as mattresses and pillows) on the other hand increased its share, albeit marginally from 4.5% in 1999-2000 to 5.01% in 2011-12, which in numbers translated into an increase from a little over 3 lakhs to 5.8 lakhs.

Unfortunately, we do not have any idea of whether there have been any shifts within industrial categories which include rather disparate sets of products, and it is unlikely that the sample survey based macro-data can give us any accurate picture since the sample size becomes too small at a more disaggregated level. More importantly, and this applies across the spectrum of industries and services in which homebased workers are located, the macro-data has limitations in what it can offer for understanding the issues of the workers. For that, one has to turn to sector specifics.

***Sector specifics: Locations, modes of contracting, and skills of women homebased workers across India:***

Before entering the specific sectors in which women homebased workers in India are concentrated, it bears mention that the conditions obtaining in each such sector as well as for homebased workers in general are inevitably linked to the present macro-economic situation and the overall development framework. For the present, it is clear that the current situation of slowdown, particularly in manufacturing, cannot but also have an impact on homebased workers, although the connections and processes remain to be adequately addressed in the current literature on homebased work.<sup>22</sup> Secondly, there are the effects of structural changes in the economy and its employment patterns, which entails losses in petty production or genuine self-employment as markets become more dominated by cheaper industrially produced goods, including an array of cheap imports. Thirdly, such tendencies have to be understood with reference to the immediately contemporary scenario which has been marked by a massive reduction in women's employment rates – i.e., losses of older modes of employment without opening of adequate compensatory avenues for women's employment.<sup>23</sup> Such a gendered employment crisis cannot but have an adverse impact on the incomes and potentials for viable employment for women in the homebased sector as well.

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<sup>22</sup>Sudarshan makes this point in her study on visibilising homebased workers.

<sup>23</sup> While low employment growth has been a feature of the liberalization era, absolute falls in numbers of workers and declining work participation rates have affected women only.

Is increase in services the answer? From the trends visible in the macro-data, it does not appear to be so for women, although there are almost no studies of women in homebased services from the perspective of the workers. As far as trends in homebased services are concerned, the composition of services – such as education predicate a requirement of significantly higher levels of education and skills than are currently available to the majority of India’s women homebased workers. The very acquisition of such skill assets may actually incline women and facilitate their turning towards a separation of home and workplace, although such propositions/prognostications can only be tested or answered by future research. As of now, with reference to women homebased workers in India, the concerns and related stress must needs be focused on the major industries in manufacturing where they are presently working. Let us begin with the beedi industry which despite (as we shall see) having shown a decline in production, still remains the largest employer of women homebased workers in 21<sup>st</sup> century India.

### **Beedi**

As is well known, beedi is a leaf-rolled cigarette made of coarse uncured tobacco, tied with a string at one end. Known as the poor man’s smoke, it dominates the smoking market of India. It is estimated that for every cigarette, ten beedis are smoked here (Lal, 2012). The main task of rolling beedis (making of green/unbaked beedis) has for several decades been farmed out to women in their homes. Home work by women in beedi rolling emerged from the decentralizing sub-contracting route taken by a manufacturing industry that is completely indigenous to South Asia, and well before the cross-border outsourced production systems had fully emerged on the world stage. It was facilitated by the fact that Beedi manufacturers use little machinery, relying solely on the manual dexterity and human skills of beedi workers for their productivity and production. It was thus very easy for manufacturers to shift the most labour intensive and basic function of beedi rolling out of karkhanas/factories/worksheds where they were earlier rolled - into the homes of women.

The ILO has given significant attention to beedi workers in its sectoral activities programme and its consolidation of studies across 4 states provides a comprehensive picture of the issues, conditions and status of beedi workers as obtained till and through the 1990s.<sup>24</sup> Nevertheless, as the single largest employer of women homebased workers, in 21<sup>st</sup> century India – the story of beedi remains

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<sup>24</sup> ILO, Geneva, (2003), *Making ends meet: Bidi workers in India today: A study of four states*, Sectoral Activities Programme Working Paper.

relevant for understanding the driving forces and social processes behind homebased work by women in India.

### ***The story of beedi in outline***

It is indeed quite remarkable that within a few decades since inception of its mass production in the early 20th century, beedi had permeated into folklore, cultures and tradition in India. The trail of India's beedi manufacturers actually begins in 19th century Gujarat where tobacco was rolled in various kinds of leaves for local 'haats' (weekly markets). Gujarati families that settled down in Bombay, then started manufacturing beedis on a larger scale. Still, until 1900 beedi manufacturing was largely restricted to Bombay and southern Gujarat. Nationwide beedi distribution came when two railway contractors, who had migrated to Jabalpur [according to legend because of famine in Gujarat (1899)], made the discovery that leaves of the tendu tree (*Diospyros melanoxylon*) are the best for making beedis. Tendu is found abundantly in the degraded deciduous forests of peninsular India, while the beedi tobacco growing areas were in the west (Charotar region of Gujarat near the Gulf of Cambay). Most importantly, tendu leaves were widely available after the tobacco crop was ready and cured, when most other trees had shed their leaves. (Lal, 2009).

The expansion of the railways in Central India opened new tobacco markets and made it cheaper to source tobacco and tendu leaves. The first trademark using tendu leaves was registered in 1902. By 1918, the rapid expansion of the railways had led to clusters of beedi manufacturing in Gondia, Vidarbha, Telangana, Hyderabad, Mangalore and Madras. The beedi cult itself spread rapidly to all parts of the country, moving from a strong foothold in informal urban and rural economies to remote villages alongside the development of the railways. Beedi manufacture received a further impetus during the civil disobedience movement of the 1930s, when several leaders, among whom Hassan Imam's name is prominently mentioned, openly supported the beedi against foreign cigarettes in solidarity with Mahatma Gandhi's swadeshi (boycott of foreign goods) policy.<sup>25</sup>

A further stimulus came from the procurement of beedi for soldier's rations during WW II, while urban shanties in the textile cities of western India provided the engines of growth for the beedi industry in the 1940s. The industry was seen as a role model for small Indian businesses and manufacturer traders. An innately mercantilist approach led beedi manufacturers to evade the slew of labour laws

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<sup>25</sup> The history of beedi draws heavily from Pranay Lal, 'Bidi - A Short History', CURRENT SCIENCE, VOL. 96, NO. 10, 25 MAY 2009

that came into being for factory establishments at the advent of independence. They outsourced several functions and production/collection/distribution sites to contractors and transferred the main work of beedi rolling out of their factories and into the homes of workers. Their ability to do so without cost to themselves is what set the trajectory of beedi workers on a downward informal spiral, widening the distance between their conditions of work and the other factory workers in post-independence India.<sup>26</sup> Nevertheless, massive profits were garnered from such farming out of the manufacturing process, as the commercial empires of beedi magnates spanned the length and breadth of the country with a commodity that targeted the common and poor man for its customer base.<sup>27</sup>

It has been said that Beedi is a footloose industry, ever in search of cheaper labour. However, the ease with which beedi manufacturing has travelled across the country has been fed by several social, economic, and political developments, even as its facility to move is inherently premised on its reliance only on the hands and fingers of beedi workers for its production. For example, as K. Srinivasalu (1997) has pointed out - when faced with heightened political awareness/unionisation of the beedi workers, the beedi barons of Surat, Gujarat and parts of Maharashtra decided to shift their operations to the northern Telangana districts. The entire process was eased through their previous contact with Telugu weavers (from Telangana) in Surat, and for Maharashtra it was the geographical proximity of Telangana. The whole region as such had been affected by the decline of handloom weaving with the spread of powerloom in the 1960s, which had also created a huge labour market of displaced handloom workers. It was the women workers from displaced weaver households who became beedi rollers. Their transition to becoming beedi workers was smoothed due to the experience of the earlier generation of migrants who were forced to migrate back from Surat and similar textile centres. It was their prior experience/skill in beedi-making in textile towns that helped initiate the younger women into beedi-rolling. Even in the 1990s, it was found that more than 60% of the beedi workers in the Telangana region hailed from the weaver community (the Padmashali caste), while the others

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<sup>26</sup> Beedi barons/magnates/ tycoons/kings, tend to be politically powerful and even in the present parliament (2014-2019) there are at least three MPs with substantive commercial empires in beedi manufacture, and more may be found in some state assemblies. While there are many studies of beedi workers, the capital side of the beedi industry has not attracted much scholarly attention.

<sup>27</sup> In the 1980s, some of the big manufacturers of Beedi could be found in the list of the top income tax bracket/payers in the country. See 'Beedi barons: Rolling in money' by N.K Singh, Chidanand Rajghatta, and Uday Mahurka.

<http://indiatoday.intoday.in/story/bound-by-traditional-values-rs-3000-cr-beedi-industry-now-sees-winds-of-change-blowing/1/324122.html>

were Dalits and Muslims. In other words, crisis and displacement from other sectors – particularly textiles fed into the process of making cheap labour easily accessible to beedi manufacturers. A continuous process of displacement from rural artisanal industries and a deepening crisis in agriculture has continued to feed the process of rural spread of beedi workers.

Trade unions have a presence among beedi workers in all the states where beedi workers are located, even as their organisations face constant destabilization because of the ease with which beedi manufacturers have kept shifting their base areas. The existence of unions predates the laws for beedi workers [Beedi and Cigar Workers (Conditions of Employment) Act, 1966, Beedi Workers Welfare Cess Act, 1976, and Beedi Workers Welfare Fund Act, 1976].<sup>28</sup> As mentioned before, the 1966 legislation was the first to give recognition to home workers in beedi and define their entitlements to minimum wages, provident fund, etc. The 1976 laws that provided for cess on beedis to provide for the workers' welfare fund was also among the early templates for welfare of unorganized workers whose employment relationship was with an industry, and through sub-contractors, but not necessarily with only one establishment/employer.<sup>29</sup> Nevertheless, as stated in the 2011 report of a parliamentary committee on Welfare of Beedi Workers, "The Beedi and Cigar Workers (Conditions of Employment) Act, 1966, explicitly incorporates provisions encompassing obligations of contractors and subcontractors in respect of home-workers, but effective implementation is lacking."

### ***Present Day Employment structures, labour processes, and earnings of home workers in the beedi value chain***

Beedi tobacco is grown in only a few districts of Kheda and Baroda in Gujarat, Belgaum (Nipani) in Karnataka, and Kolhapur and Sangli in Maharashtra, while tendu leaves come primarily from MadhyaPradesh/Chhattisgarh (45%), Odisha (20%), Maharashtra (10%).<sup>30</sup> Manufacturing clusters are far more spread out,

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<sup>28</sup> It may be mentioned that the Cess Act of 1976 has been quietly repealed in 2017 to make way for a new taxation regime (GST). Hitherto the Beedi workers welfare funds were raised through the cess on beedis. It is uncertain what will happen now, and whether alternative funds will be made available.

<sup>29</sup> The use of cess for workers' welfare was first introduced for limestone and dolomite mining workers in 1972 and was followed by similar cess laws for other mining sectors such as manganese, chrome, iron ore in the 1970s. In the 1990s, cess for workers' welfare was introduced in construction. Recent reports in the press suggest that the labour ministry is going to stop collection of cesses in all mining industries, but will continue to collect cess for beedi and construction workers

<sup>30</sup> Forest Governance Learning Group (FGLG), IIED, Bhopal, 'NTFP Enterprise and Forest Management: Tendu Leaves', (undated), available at [http://fglgindia.org/tendu\\_handout\\_fglg.pdf](http://fglgindia.org/tendu_handout_fglg.pdf)

their location determined by markets and labour rather than any proximity to the raw material source areas. Prominent beedi manufacturing clusters include Sagar, Jabalpur, and Damoh (Madhya Pradesh), Murshidabad and Malda (West Bengal), Nizamabad, Karimnagar, and Warangal (Telangana), Tirunelveli and Chennai (Tamil Nadu); Mangalore, Mysore and Tumkur (Karnataka); Solapur, Gondia, Bhandara, Ahmednagar (Maharashtra).<sup>31</sup> Clusters have also come up in western Odisha. While new clusters have been created rapidly, several old clusters have dissipated. Even strongholds like Madhya Pradesh, which accounted for more than half the beedis produced in India till the 1980s, are said to have lost out to new epicentres of beedi rolling like West Bengal.

The range of beedi establishments have been classified by the labour bureau into

- 1) Trade Mark Establishments or Brand Establishments, having licences under the Beedi and Cigar Workers (Conditions of Employment) Act, 1966 and the Excise Laws.
- 2) Branches of the Brand Establishments, i.e., depots at various places for direct transaction with the Contractors, supply raw material and collect the green (unbaked) bidis and either transport them to some main establishment or get them baked, labelled, packed and marketed directly on behalf of that Trade Mark establishment.
- 3) Distribution/Collection Centres for distribution of raw material to the home workers and collection of green bidis from them, usually located near the clusters of dwellings of the Bidi Rollers. The records of quantity of material supplied and of the bidis rolled by workers are maintained at such centres for payment of wages.
- 4) Contractors/Sattedars/Thekedars/Middlemen, who for a commission, distribute the raw material provided by the main employer to the Bidi Rollers, and return checked beedi bundles back to the Principal Employers. Deployment of contractors is the key instrument in widening access of the large manufacturers to a vast network of cheap labour and for keeping the beedi workforce dispersed.

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<sup>31</sup> Although several reports indicate that beedi production has moved out of Gondia and Ahmednagar, we have included them since in 2010, the district-wise distribution of 256,000 women beedi workers in Maharashtra given Director general, Labour Welfare, Ministry of Labour, as cited by Bhanumate & Chauhan, shows that the largest number are concentrated in district Solapur (27.86%), followed by Gondia (25.05%), Bhandara (10%), and Ahmednagar (8.45%). 71.36 per cent of Maharashtra's beedi workers are concentrated in these four districts. See <http://aygrt.isrj.org/UploadedData/727.pdf>



- 5) Un-branded Beedi Establishments, usually small in size and mostly operated without the requisite licenses. Often a network of such establishments is run by larger manufacturers for the purposes of tax evasion, since establishments that show an annual output of less than 20 lakh beedis are exempted from excise duty as well as the cess for beedi workers' welfare.<sup>32</sup>

The beedi workforce, of which more than three quarters are located in rural areas, comprises of predominantly home workers and a much smaller segment of establishment based workers:

- 1) The home workers comprise of *Beedi Rollers* who constitute 95% of the beedi workforce, and therefore the principal workforce in beedi (summed estimates from a range of micro-studies suggest that more than 70% of beedi rollers are women). It is they who dampen and cut the leaves to size, fill the tobacco, roll the leaf, and tie the rolled beedi with a thread - all according to the specifications of the contractor/employer. A Beedi Roller is generally provided with 575 to 700 grams of tendu leaves and 225-280 grams of tobacco (depending on the quality of leaves and the size of beedis to be rolled) for rolling 1000 beedis. They are all paid at piece rates, fixed per 1000 beedis. The beedi industry is on the schedule of employment for minimum wages,<sup>33</sup> yet the labour bureau's own surveys show that the average wages received are around 40% less than the statutory minimum wage rates.<sup>34</sup>
- 2) Home workers include *helpers for beedi rollers* who may be other family members or some others who might be paid part of the wage of the beedi roller, adding one more step to the farming out process. A labour bureau study across 12 districts in Madhya Pradesh (2003) found that such helpers constituted over 50 % of the workers rolling beedis, rolled around 42% of the beedies, and earned a third of the average daily income of the beedi rollers.<sup>35</sup> Obviously, a large proportion of such helpers were also unpaid family workers.
- 3) Establishment based beedi workers include *wrappers and labelers, beedi checkers* who sort and check the green beedis, the *furnace-man (sekaiwala)*

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<sup>32</sup> Labour Bureau, (2003) *Report on Evaluation Studies on Implementation of the Minimum Wages Act in Bidi Making Establishments in Madhya Pradesh*.

<sup>33</sup> Despite being a part of the informal sector, beedi rollers are covered by minimum wage laws, unlike many other informal workers who have yet to find a place in the schedules of employment listed under minimum wage laws.

<sup>34</sup> The most detailed labour bureau survey (2003) found that the average number of beedis rolled by a beedi roller was 1069 per day for which they earned Rs 22.04, which was equal to just 60% of the then statutory minimum wage.

<sup>35</sup> The 2003 labour bureau survey found that 806 beedis were rolled by helpers in comparison to 1069 by the main roller.

who bakes the beedi in a furnace. These workers are mostly men and while some are paid at piece rates, others are paid time rated wages.

- 4) *Clerical staff* (including cashiers, accountants), and raw material distributors who distribute the requisite quantity of tobacco and tendu leaves by weight to the contractors, and are also always male and work in establishment premises.

Our focus is of course on the first two categories – the beedi rollers and helpers. It is significant that even the labour bureau surveys show that the average daily wage/income of all the other categories of beedi workers (who together constitute just 5% of the beedi workforce) is more than three times the wage/earnings of the homebased beedi rollers and more than 4 times of the helpers. As is obvious, the beedi industry which occupies such a large share of India's homebased workforce is structured along a gendered hierarchy including between manufactory establishment and homes, with the woman home worker and her helper at the bottom. At the heart of the organization of this immensely spread out workforce by a relatively small group of manufacturers and brand names, is outsourcing through contractors. It is in the beedi industry that contractors perfected the practice of camouflaging the employment relationship to avoid paying minimum wages and other benefits of workers by making it appear as a seller-buyer relationship, i.e., as a sale of raw materials to beedi rollers and buying of the rolled beedies from them. The fact that manufacturers have continuously expanded the use of contractors indicates that by doing so, they are able to reduce their costs on labour to such a degree that what the contractors earn does not eat into manufacturer profits.

One study that investigated the value chain in beedi in 2001, showed that out of a retail price value of Rs 100, the cost of inputs was Rs 20.00, home workers' wages was Rs 17.10. The share of contractors and sub-contractors was Rs 0.18, that of manufacturers was Rs. 41.90, and of distributors, wholesalers and retailers was Rs 19.3.<sup>36</sup> Obviously the profits of manufacturers would then be an incredible 35- 40% of the price of beedis, since wage costs of the 5% establishment workers and other establishment costs is unlikely to be more than Rs 2 out of the Rs 100, and would in all probability be even less. In a production process that is almost purely based on manual labour, the contrast between the 95% of the beedi workforce earning a mere 17% from the final price of beedi and the manufacturer earning 35-40% is indeed striking. It demonstrates the scale of aggressive profit

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<sup>36</sup> Ratna M. Sudharshan, Shanta Venkataraman, Laveesh Bhandari, 'Sub-contracted home work in India – A Case study of three sectors, in Santosh K. Mehrotra, Mario Biggeri (eds) *Asian Informal Workers: Global Risks Local Protection*, Routledge, 2007

maximization through a low wage regime that beedi manufacturers have assiduously sustained through the use of contractors and shifting of sites of production.

### ***Volatile shifts in production sites and loss of work in Beedi manufacturing***

Table 1 draws on Labour Ministry figures for number of beedi workers across different states (including men and including those who work in factories/worksheds) for 1997, 2000, 2009, and 2010. There are of course limitations to the labour department's estimates which would be partly reliant on the identity cards issued to beedi workers. The Parliamentary Standing Committee on Labour that reviewed the work of the Beedi Workers Welfare Board in 2010-11 estimated that the actual numbers of beedi workers were more than the figure given by the labour ministry. Nevertheless, the four sets of figures across a 13 year period do give us an idea of the shifts in the areas of concentration of beedi workers in contemporary times.

The table shows the emergence of West Bengal as the principal state for beedi manufacture by 2010 as a striking phenomenon. Andhra Pradesh, and Odisha – show an increase in their share of the beedi workforce across the 12 year period from 1997 to 2009, and then there appears to be a sudden drop in numbers and shares within a year. Madhya Pradesh (which was the largest producer of beedis for decades) and Tamil Nadu were showing a declining share in between 1997 and 2009, but without a drop in numbers. They too show a sudden drop in numbers and shares between 2009 and 2010. Karnataka, on the other hand, saw a dip in both numbers and share across the long 12 years till 2009 and then suddenly the numbers and share jumped within a year.

The huge difference that appears between 2009-10 is difficult to explain, and it is not clear whether the earlier or later figures suffer from exaggeration or whether the major states like MP, AP, Tamilnadu are now really shedding their workers at a vastly accelerated pace. Nevertheless, if one assumes that 70 per cent of the beedi workers are women home workers, then the figure for 2010 is close enough to the estimates provided in the NSSO survey of the following year (2011-12).<sup>37</sup>As such, the labour ministry figures ought not to be dismissed out of hand.

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<sup>37</sup>Several studies have pointed to the fact that women home workers constitute anywhere between 60 to 80 per cent of all beedi workers. Although in a minority, some male workers may also be found in homebased beedi rolling.

Table 1: Statewise numbers and percentage distribution of Beedi workers across India (1997-2010)

State	1997	2000	2009	2010
West Bengal	4,75,000 (10.89)	4,97,758 (11.28)	7,52,225 (15.45 )	14,01,778 (28.09)
Madhya Pradesh	7,50,000 (17.19)	7,50,000 (17.00)	8,27,195 (16.99)	8,09,319 (16.22)
Tamilnadu	6,21,000 (14.23)	6,21,000 (14.08)	6,25,000 (12.84)	5,65,538 (11.33)
Karnataka	3,60,876 (8.27)	3,60,876 (8.18)	2,87,082 (5.9)	4,08,418 (8.18)
Uttar Pradesh	4,50,000 (10.31)	4,50,000 (10.20)	4,50,000 (9.24)	4,07,661 (8.17)
Andhra Pradesh	6,00,000 (13.75)	6,25,000 (14.17)	7,35,000 (15.09)	3,65,208 (7.32)
Bihar	3,91,000 (8.96)	3,91,500 (8.87)	3,35,000 (6.88)	2,55,533 (5.12)
Maharashtra	2,56,000 (5.87)	2,56,000 (5.80)	2,56,000 (5.26 )	2,45,696 (4.92)
Odisha	1,60,000 (3.67)	1,60,000 (3.63)	2,65,000 (5.44)	2,18,158 (4.37)
Kerala	1,36,000 (3.12)	1,36,416 (3.09)	96,324 (1.98)	79,658 (1.6)
Gujarat	50,000 (1.15)	50,000 (1.13)	50,075 (1.03)	47,434 (0.95)
Rajasthan	1,00,000 (2.29)	1,00,000 (2.27)	31,736 (0.65)	39,362 (0.79)
Tripura	5,000 (0.11)	5,000 (0.11)	9,946 (0.2)	11,648 (0.23)
Assam	7,775 (0.18)	7,725 (0.18)	7,725 (0.16)	7,062 (0.14)
All India	43,63,520 (100)	44,11,275 (100)	48,69,417 (100)	49,90,068 (100)

Source: For 1997, Statement furnished in reply to Parliament (Lok Sabha Starred), Question No. 445 dated May 1997, cited in ILO 2003, Labour Bureau (2003) for 2000 and (2010) for 2009, The Standing Committee on Labour (Fifteenth lok Sabha), Seventeenth Report (2010-11) for 2010

The massive and fast paced shifts in the distribution of beedi workers in Table 1 indicate that the beedi industry is in the throes of extraordinary volatility and that a large number of beedi workers have been losing work. In Andhra Pradesh alone, more than 3 ½ lakh workers seem to have lost their jobs within the space of just one year, i.e., between 2009 and 2010. In all, more than 6 lakh workers seem to have lost their employment in the beedi industry across ten states that year, which may actually be more since intra-state movement of beedi production and related losses of jobs would not appear in the state figures. The aggregate increase is however, primarily because of the extraordinary doubling of the number of beedi workers in West Bengal.<sup>38</sup> This fact cannot in any way mitigate the situation for those who are losing their employment. Despite the existence of long established welfare boards, and regulatory procedures for beedi manufacturing establishments, which includes providing information on employees who are home workers, there is little information whether any of those losing work received any compensation, or alternative employment. Compensation for loss of work, and alternate employment packages for home workers in the beedi industry are therefore emerging issues for homebased beedi rollers.

### ***Paradox of Declining production of beedis and expanding numbers of Beedi workers***

According to Pranay Lal (2012), the annual production of beedis started to decline after 1998. Beedi production had grown from 550 billion (0.55 trillion) in 1975 to a peak of more than one trillion by the mid-nineties, but the current level of beedis produced is estimated at 650–720 billion (605 billion in 2007–2008), representing a decline by over a third from the mid-nineties.<sup>39</sup> It is difficult to tell whether this reduction is because of a constraint in supply of tobacco (Gujarat and Maharashtra have apparently reduced their production of beedi tobacco), whether it is because of a growing preference for cigarettes over beedis, or whether it is

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<sup>38</sup> In West Bengal, studies have shown a high concentration of Muslim women in beedi rolling, although in aggregate terms they may not be a majority. A similar pattern has been observed in parts of Bihar and Uttar Pradesh.

<sup>39</sup> Lal's estimates of beedi production is based on calculating the number of beedis from the beedi tobacco output figures since otherwise accurate data on beedi production is hard to find. Beedi tobacco is grown in Kheda and Baroda districts of Gujarat, Nipani in Belagaum district of Karnataka and Kolhapur and Sangli in Maharashtra. Both Gujarat and Maharashtra have shown reduction amidst variability in beedi tobacco output, and only Nipani has sustained its level of production. (Lal, 2013)

because of anti-smoking legislation and campaigns.<sup>40</sup> Whatever the case may be, it does seem that beedi manufacturing output in the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century has fallen from the mid-nineties. Yet through this period, and despite changes in their location, we have still seen an expansion in the number of women beedi workers, which suggests that there has been a reduction in the amount of work available per worker, and manufacturers and contractors are adding to this contraction in availability by employing more workers in different states while giving each less work.

The reasons for distributing less work among more workers appear to be integral to the continuous drive to lessen the wage rate for which beedi manufacturers and their contractors are well known. However, there does not appear to be any correlation between changes in the distribution of beedi workers and differences in statutory minimum wage rates across states.<sup>41</sup> West Bengal's statutory minimum wage for beedi workers in 2010 was more than three times that of Madhya Pradesh.<sup>42</sup> Yet ground reports indicated a shift by manufacturers out of MP towards Bengal. On the other hand, micro-studies have suggested that in West Bengal, women home workers received less than 40% of the statutory wage, in which case official wage rates cannot be taken to mean much. The parliamentary standing committee on labour found that in West Bengal, Rs.41/- was being paid per thousand beedis in 2009 when the minimum wage had been fixed at over Rs.113 in all the zones, which was even less (barely 36% of the minimum wage). A comparison of actual wage rates with statutory rates across would no doubt provide some insights. Unfortunately, the numerous studies on beedi workers are generally locale specific. It is perhaps time that more cross regional studies were undertaken.

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<sup>40</sup>As is well known, the anti-smoking campaigns in India really took off with The Cigarettes and Other Tobacco Products (Prohibition of Advertisement and Regulation of Trade and Commerce, Production, Supply and Distribution) Act, 2003 and the Prohibition of Smoking in Public Places Rules, 2008, which banned smoking in public places and were followed by major anti-smoking campaigns, advertisements, and included pictorial warnings on consequence of smoking on cigarette and beedi packing.

<sup>41</sup> The statutory wage rates per 1000 beedis and the percentage distribution of beedi workers across different states in 2010 are given in the annexure

<sup>42</sup>It should be borne in mind that the statutory wage rates do not necessarily reflect the actual wage rates obtaining.

### ***Limited Welfare: Report of the Parliamentary Standing Committee on Welfare of Beedi Workers***

“They are forced to breathe in tobacco fumes due to which they easily become prey to asthma, bronchitis and TB.....Though there are many welfare schemes for the beedi workers yet these schemes have not yielded the desired results and have not succeeded to ameliorate the conditions of these workers....Though there are prescribed minimum wages by respective State Governments to be paid by the contractors to these beedi workers, however, the contractors blatantly flout the norms in paying the minimum wages, in the absence of any checks on them.” These are the comments in the report of the Parliamentary Standing Committee on Labour (2010-11). The Committee found that some of the State Governments themselves don't adhere to the minimum wages prescribed by them and record bipartite agreements on wages that were far below the statutory minimum. Under the Beedi Workers Welfare Fund (BWWF) there are four schemes viz. (i) Health; (ii) Education; (iii) Recreation, and (iv) Housing. A cess collected on beedi production, was the source of finance of welfare schemes under BWWF.<sup>43</sup> Till the year 2006-07, the BWWF had surplus funds, but from the year 2007-08, the corpus of BWWF plummeted, and went into a deficit.<sup>44</sup> The parliamentary committee had recommended that the cess on beedis be raised to more than the present ceiling of Rs 5 per 1000 beedis and that the exemptions granted to smaller companies, i.e., those manufacturing less than 20 lakh unbranded beedis in a year be withdrawn. No decisions had been taken by the government on these recommendations, and now the whole issue is shrouded in uncertainty with the recent repeal of the Beedi Workers Welfare Cess Act.

Under the Beedi laws, employers of beedi workers are required to issue identity cards to their employees to enable them to receive welfare benefits. Because of widespread violations, the responsibility for issuing cards was later shifted to the government run Labour Welfare Organisation through the Welfare Commissioner. There are also a number of players running illegal beedi companies through contractors and sub-contractors. According to the parliamentary committee, these employers show in their records a very small number of people working under them whereas a large number of people are actually employed through their contractors and sub-contractors. Resultantly, these workers are not registered in the main employers' muster roll. The committee had recommended that a proper mapping should be done for identifying the beedi workers engaged

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<sup>43</sup> The cess law has since been repealed.

<sup>44</sup> Standing Committee on Labour (2010-11) (Fifteenth Lok Sabha) Ministry of Labour and Employment, Welfare of Beedi workers, Seventeenth Report, Lok Sabha Secretariat, 2011

by unregistered small companies and also under contractors and sub-contractors for issuance of Identity Cards to enable access to welfare schemes meant for them. At the time of writing, no report on any such mapping was available.

Quoting a Voluntary Health Association of India (VHAI) study, the committee additionally noted that 75% of the beedi workers suffer from multiple illnesses due to continuous exposure to tobacco and other hazardous substances. The workers spent at least 12 hours rolling beedis and faced the risks of contracting TB and developing chronic bronchitis, asthma, skin and spinal problems among others. For 55 lakh identified beedi workers, there were 7 hospitals and 204 dispensaries all over the country, often without adequate staff. Even where facilities exist on paper, they may not be available. For example, as the committee noted, a 30 bedded hospital at Bihar Sharif which was constructed long back was still not operational for want of medical staff.

Scholarships given to children of beedi workers studying in class I and above in recognized institutions range from a paltry Rs.250/- for class I to Rs.8,000/- for Professional Degree courses per child per annum, under the Education Scheme. However, all schools that had been set up for the wards of beedi workers have been closed down and it is said that the funds are now being utilized for disbursement of scholarships.

A housing scheme exists for subsidy @ Rs.40,000/- per tenement per worker who has completed at least one year in Beedi making, having a plot of at least 60 Sq. yards and who deposits Rs 5,000 as security. 23,845 houses were constructed under this scheme between 2007-08 and 2009-10.<sup>45</sup>

Recent proposals from the Central Advisory Committee of the BWWF in 2014 include enhancement of the housing subsidy to Rs 75,000.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> In 2004, an integrated housing scheme for beedi workers with group housing schemes was introduced. Under this scheme cooperative housing societies of beedi workers could apply for the subsidy. This has contributed to the emergence of several beedi housing colonies, of which the largest and best known is the CITU's beedi workers' housing society in Sholapur, Maharashtra (Comrade Godutai Parulekar Mahila Beedi Kamgar Sahakari Griha Nirman Sanstha Maryadit) that built a colony of 10,000 houses by 2006 and was made possible by a protracted struggle for over more than a decade by the workers and their union. An account of this project may be found in Deepak Chincholi (2010), 'Resettlement of Beedi Workers in Solapur from Slums to Regular Housing- A Study of the Project', TISS dissertation (mimeo)

<sup>46</sup> Press Information Bureau, Government of India, Ministry of Labour & Employment, 21-August-2014.



## ***Handloom***

Textile manufactures in the homebased sector includes handloom, coir spinning, embroidery/chikan/zari, crochet/lace, and in some areas even homebased powerlooms may also be found.<sup>47</sup> Yet among all the above, handloom stands out as the most widespread, and with an evocative history as the foremost of the traditional household industries in India. Given its association with swadeshi and the freedom struggle as well as Indian aesthetic traditions, handloom used to carry a special status, that was simultaneously craft and culture based as well as linked with the common people of the country as producers and consumers.<sup>48</sup> The position accorded to handloom was also based on the enormous size of the handloom workforce in India, which was second only to agriculture at the time of independence, when the memory of the invasion of English mill-made textiles having led to 'the bones of the cotton weavers bleaching the plains of India' infused the collective anti-colonial imagination of newly independent India.<sup>49</sup> In the early decades after independence, handloom was therefore considered an important industry meriting special protection and government support. Since then, there has been a sea change in the policy environment and in the conditions, numbers, and composition of the handloom workforce, of which the most striking consequences in contemporary times have been:

- 1) A sweeping and generalized crisis in the livelihoods of handloom workers, whose most tragic consequence has been a continuing spate of suicides by distressed handloom weavers since the 1990s
- 2) A precipitate decline and fall in the number of handlooms in the country from around 48 lakhs in 1985 to less than 24 lakhs by 2009-10;
- 3) An equally precipitate fall in the size of the handloom workforce from the mid-1990s onwards, with the number of handloom workers dropping steeply from 6.55 million in 1995-96 to 3.85 million in 2009-10<sup>50</sup>; (See Table 2 for the fall in numbers of handloom workers across different states)
- 4) Connected to this decline is the emergence of women as the overwhelming majority of handloom workers (77% by 2009-10); [For proportions of women

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<sup>47</sup> It is interesting that while initially powerloom factories displaced homebased handloom workers, elements of crisis in the powerloom sector has led to installing of such machines in workers' homes. (Source: Personal observation in Mau, Uttar Pradesh)

<sup>48</sup> Before the rise to dominance of cheap synthetic yarns, coarse cotton cloth from handloom was often preferred by common people as being thicker and more durable.

<sup>49</sup> William Bentinck, in a confidential report of the Governor General of India in 1835.

<sup>50</sup> While even earlier there had been some decline in the numbers of handloom workers from 6.74 million in 1987-88 to 6.55 million in 1995-96, the following one and a half decade is marked by a substantially accelerated fall.

in handloom across states see Table 4 for the northeastern states and Table 5 for states in the rest of India]

- 5) Also connected to the decline in handloom is a residual concentration of looms and workers in the northeastern region, which now accounts for more than 65% of handlooms in India and 65% of the country's women handloom workers.<sup>51</sup>

### ***Accelerated Feminization amidst decline and crisis in 21st century handloom in India***

Despite the overall fall in handloom employment, the numbers of women workers in handloom have continued to increase. The 1995-96 handloom census had counted a little over 2 million women handloom workers (2,103,887) in India, constituting 61% of all handloom workers at the time. In comparison, the 2009-10 handloom census counted close to 3 million women workers (2,998,362) constituting 77% of the handloom workforce. Thus across this 15 year period, women workers in handloom increased by around 9 lakhs, while men in handloom reduced their numbers by close to 36 lakhs.

As discussed in an earlier section, the NSSO estimates had shown an increase of 9.5 lakh women in homebased textiles between 2000 and 2012. The handloom census figures suggests that the bulk of this increase was in handloom. Although the NSSO estimates of homebased women in textiles at 2.57 million is slightly less than the 2.9 million women workers counted by the handloom census and we may assume that some handloom workers may be working in work-sheds/factories rather than in their homes, there can be little doubt that women homebased workers in textile manufacturing are still largely concentrated in handloom. As such for women in homebased production in India, handloom merits a special focus, although the sector, which has remained largely rural and in the eastern regions of India, does not figure strongly or substantively in the mainstream of research on homebased work in India.<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> The source of state-wise data in this section is the Handloom Census of India, 2009-10 and 1995-96.

<sup>52</sup> This might partly be due to the fact that a major part of research on homebased work in India has been centred in Gujarat, where handloom has moved to virtual extinction. Interestingly, NCEUS (2007) had commented that handloom was largely absent in western India, and more visible in the eastern states. Perhaps we should add that Powerloom, on the other hand is concentrated in the west. Only Tamilnadu seems to have experienced the survival of some segments of handloom managing to coexist with powerlooms.

A degree of what may be termed accelerated feminization in the handloom industry is particularly evident from the increases in both numbers and share of women recorded by the last handloom census (2009-10) in comparison to the preceding handloom census (1995-96). In several states, the proportions of women in the handloom workforce doubled - increasing from, from 30% in 1996 to almost 63% by 2010 in West Bengal, from 21% to just short of 50% in Uttar Pradesh, from 28% to more than 51% in Andhra Pradesh, from 29% to more than 53% in Tamilnadu, while in some north-eastern states handloom virtually became a women only sector with increases in women's share from 87% to 99% in Assam, and from 98% to more than 99% in Manipur.

Table 2: Changes numbers of handloom workers in states of India (1995-96 to 2009-10)

States	Number of Handloom Workers		Change 1995-96 to 2009-10	States	Number of Handloom Workers		Change 1995-96 to 2009-10
	1995-96	2009-10			1995-96	2009-10	
Andhra Pradesh	490,616	306,465	-184,151	Madhya Pradesh	56,106	13,181	-42,925
Arunachal	53,473	29,566	-23,907	Manipur	462,087	204,319	-257,768
Assam	2,322,268	1,483,864	-838,404	Nagaland	126,228	65,303	-60,925
Bihar*	167,707	56,166	-111,541	Odisha	246,782	103,158	-143,624
Gujarat	57,936	9,496	-48,440	Rajasthan	71,915	30,102	-41,813
Haryana	22,810	1,625	-21,185	Tamilnadu	607,675	318,512	-289,163
Himachal Pradesh	65,099	7,730	-57,369	Tripura	291,761	131,742	-160,019
Jammu & Kashmir	51,847	20,749	-31,098	Uttar Pradesh*	420,684	231,615	-189,069
Karnataka	177,562	76,849	-100,713	West Bengal	686,254	665,006	-21,248
Kerala	63,153	14,518	-48,635	<b>Northeast states</b>	<b>3,255,817</b>	<b>1,968,908</b>	<b>-1,286,909</b>
<b>All India</b>	<b>6,550,126</b>	<b>3,846,835</b>	<b>-2,703,291</b>	<b>States other than northeast</b>	<b>3,163,336</b>	<b>1,853,547</b>	<b>-1,309,789</b>

Since the 1995-96 handloom census took place before bifurcation of these states, Uttarakhand is included in Uttar Pradesh and Jharkhand in Bihar for this table.

Handloom work is not simple or unskilled work, and the requisite skills grow over long periods of apprenticeship. It is heavy duty manual work and involves multiple levels of physical strain and mental concentration. It is also somewhat heterogeneous in terms of products, markets, and related skills and technologies, even as it is largely confined to a narrow range of articles. The classic model of

handloom production in India (outside the north-east) was mostly based on specific weaver castes/communities, although allied work such as hand spinning involved a larger pool of communities, and weaving of coarse cloth also brought in other communities.<sup>53</sup> Handloom production, especially production for non-domestic use, generally involved gender segregated tasks with weavers being largely male and women working in the allied tasks. Feminization of handloom has meant that several of the tasks that were earlier shared by men and women, are now falling more heavily on women's shoulders alone. Also, it can no longer be said that only designated weaver castes are involved in handloom although traditional weaver castes are still a major part of the handloom workforce in most states of India.

In fact, it could be argued that it was because handloom has always employed women along with men, that the industry gave an opportunity to poor households displaced from their earlier occupations in agriculture to intensively combine their labour and keep their families going. Such combined family labour generally meant more laboring hands that in totality enable survival, but in effect means lower incomes per worker. It also usually represents the lack of an independent wage/earning for women. Nevertheless combined family labour may still provide higher output and thus provide more household earnings than if there was only a male earner/breadwinner.<sup>54</sup> It is the paradox of our times that in 21<sup>st</sup> century India, the relatively greater absence of opportunities for women to earn independent incomes/wages of any kind in rural India is driving their greater involvement in family based home production. It is after all, no mere coincidence that accelerated feminization of an obviously declining industry such as handloom (that is still

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<sup>53</sup> Even during India's freedom struggle – the participation of a wider community in the making of cloth was more focused on the less complicated task of spinning rather than weaving. However, in several parts of the country, it has been noticed that non-traditional castes/communities have also entered the handloom workforce, particularly in rural areas, where the need for non-farm employment has become particularly acute. For example, Vasanthi Raman (2013) refers to the entry of Dalits displaced from agriculture into weaving in villages around Banaras where the traditional weavers were Momin Ansaris. Seemanthini Niranjana (2004) suggests that diversity in castes practising weaving in Yeminaganur, Andhra Pradesh may be attributed to the fact that weaving was promoted as an income-generation activity when cooperatives were set up. Mazumdar (2005) observed that women losing agricultural employment had been shifting to weaving under master weavers in Kanchheepuram, where they combined the labour of mothers and daughters.

<sup>54</sup> Even if one male worker earns a wage that is substantially more than the per capita wage for collective family labour, it may still be less than the income earned by a household through the combined labour of the family. It is this factor that induces families to submit to the highly exploitative per capita wage rates that generally obtain where the laboring unit is a family. It is a product of absence of employment opportunities in the wider economy, and particularly for women.

largely rural based) is taking place during a period of accelerated decline in female employment rates in rural India.

Significantly, even when numbers of looms and workers fell, handloom cloth production did not. Handloom cloth produced in the year 1995-96 was 3120 million metres. In 2009-10 production had more than doubled to 6930 million metres. Further, the number of days worked by handloom workers increased from 497.7 million days in 1995-96 to 531.3 million days in 2009-10, and the man-days per worker (in the years of the censuses) from 197 to 237. Taken together, the data thus indicates a quite dramatic increase in women's work hours in handloom. Such an increase is however embedded in the context of a dwindling importance of incomes from handloom, evident in a fall in the share of handloom in the income of handloom households. In 1996, the share of handloom in incomes of handloom households was low enough at 39%. By 2010, it had fallen further to less than one third (30%). The dire conditions that underlie such a low share may be gauged by the fact that 57% of handloom households are officially designated below the poverty line (BPL) including 10% who are counted as being in extreme poverty.<sup>55</sup> This is more than double the official estimates of proportions of BPL households in the general populace.

The declining share of handloom in household income amidst high levels of poverty clearly indicates that accelerated feminization of the handloom workforce is linked to the decline of handloom as a viable source of livelihood. Combined with increases in work days, such conditions also suggest an increase in unpaid work by women in handloom households as mothers and daughters/daughters in law take on more work to keep the looms working.<sup>56</sup> The bones of the handloom worker may not still be bleaching the plains of India, but can it be said that the blood is not being leached from her frail body?

### ***Concentration of handloom workers in northeast India***

A remarkably high proportion of women handloom workers (65%) are now concentrated in the north-eastern states. 49% of the country's female handloom workforce is of course located in just one north-eastern state - Assam, which accounts for more than 75% of women handloom workers of north-eastern India, despite showing the largest fall in numbers of handloom workers across all states in India during the past two decades. However, it is still remarkable that all the

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<sup>55</sup> The handloom census of 2009-10 showed that 57% of handloom households had BPL ration cards including 10% who had Antyodaya Anna Yojana (AAY) cards.

<sup>56</sup> See Mazumdar (2005) p. 21-22.

other smaller states in the north-east which account for just 1% of India's population, yet contribute 16% of the country's women handloom workers. While the concentration in the north-east invites attention, it also highlights the devastation that has swept across handloom workers in other parts of the country, from which even the north-east is no longer immune. As evident from the figures in Table 3, the north-eastern states accounted for 48% of the accelerated decline in the numbers of India's handloom workers between 1996 and 2010.

The persistence of large numbers of handloom workers in the northeast may in part be explained by the fact that, a) handloom households in the north-eastern states are relatively slightly better off than their counterparts in the rest of the country, and b) they are less dependent on handloom for household income or survival. The average annual earnings of handloom households in the northeast was found to be Rs 42,685 in 2009-10, which worked out to around Rs 3,557 per month. In comparison, the average earnings for handloom households across the rest of India was around two thirds of that at Rs 26,773, which works out to around Rs 2,231 per month. (See Table 4 and 6). Further, around 46% of the handloom households in the north-east are not into any commercial production and weave only for their own household consumption, a practice that is today based more on cultural considerations rather than being economically driven. In contrast, in the rest of India, 99% of handloom households are involved in commercial production. As such, the share of handloom in the income of handloom households in all the north-eastern states bar one (Tripura) is extremely low (less than one-fourth), indicative of the fact that the major part of their earnings is from other sources. Finally, what really marks out the north-eastern states is the overwhelming numbers of *women weavers*. Where women constitute close to 99% of all handloom workers in the north-east, weavers constitute almost 95% of these women, which is quite different from the rest of India. A majority of the women weavers in the north-eastern states are of course, part time workers, particularly those who weave for domestic consumption. Nevertheless, it would be a mistake to ignore the fulltime women weavers, who numbered more than 8.7 lakhs in the north-east, of which more than 6.8 lakhs were in Assam and around 1.7 lakhs in Manipur.

Table 3

North-eastern States	Number of Women Handloom workers in north-eastern states by rural and urban location					Women's share of handloom workforce in each state (%)	Share of each state in female handloom workforce (All India) (%)
	Rural		Urban		Rural+Urban		
	Number	%	Number	%	Number		
Assam	1,443,887	98.3	24,566	1.7	1,468,453	99.0	49.0
Manipur	171,047	84.4	31,695	15.6	202,742	99.2	6.8
Tripura	129,293	99.3	876	0.7	130,169	98.8	4.3
Nagaland	56,841	99.0	581	1.0	57,422	87.9	1.9
Mizoram	30,874	78.7	8,380	21.3	39,254	95.3	1.3
Arunachal	26,749	91.4	2,526	8.6	29,275	99.0	1.0
Meghalaya	12,828	100.0	0	0.0	12,828	99.2	0.4
<b>North-eastern Region</b>	<b>1,871,519</b>	<b>96.4</b>	<b>68,624</b>	<b>3.5</b>	<b>1,940,143</b>	<b>98.6</b>	<b>64.7</b>

Unfortunately, the nature of the handloom census data is such that a separate look at the incomes of households involved in commercial production is not possible. Yet, it is noticeable that the lowest income of handloom households in the north-east was found in Tripura, the one exceptional state where handloom accounts for close to 83% of their household income (see Table 4). This suggests that incomes from handloom are relatively lower than from other sources. The inability to separate households involved in commercial production from the others is of course really a problem with reference to the northeastern states, where close to half the households are involved in weaving for only domestic use. Even though we know that more than half of the northeast based handloom workers are full-time workers, who presumably work for income, we are unable to see them separately from the others. For the rest of India, where 99% of the households are involved in commercial production, this is not really a problem, and we can speculate that although social features may be quite different, some of the economic processes that are visible for handloom in the rest of India may apply to commercially oriented handloom workers in the northeast<sup>57</sup>

<sup>57</sup> While some broad data from the 2009-10 census has been laid out in the tables, they have been supplemented in the text with other figures taken from censuses of 1987 and 1995-96 as well as various other elements in the 2009-10 census that are not in the tables.

Table 4

	Women Weavers	Women Workers in Allied Tasks in handloom	% weaver	Average Earnings of handloom households (Rs)		Share of handloom in household income %
				Annual	Per Month	
Assam	1,388,637	79,816	94.6	40,343	3,362	20.8
Manipur	199,111	3,631	98.2	56,261	4,688	9.5
Tripura	128,791	1,378	98.9	38,299	3,192	82.7
Nagaland	44,522	12,900	77.5	57,208	4,767	21.0
Mizoram	38,512	742	98.1	43,973	3,664	12.0
Arunachal	25,662	3,613	87.7	57,232	4,769	37.4
Meghalaya	12,534	294	97.7	39,418	3,285	6.4
<b>North-eastern Region</b>	<b>1,837,770</b>	<b>102,373</b>	<b>94.7</b>	42,685	3,557	

*Majority women, but less women weavers: Handloom workers in the rest of India*

Given that handloom households in states outside the north-east are almost all involved in production for income/commercial purposes, it is not surprising that the majority (63%) of India's women handloom workers who work for income, are located in mainland states. Of course the share of northeast, even in this segment of workers remains much higher than its share in population. Nevertheless, a separate focus on states outside the northeast gives us a better idea of what is happening to women workers for whom handloom is a source of income. Table 5 and 6 present an outline of the distribution of women handloom workers, their share of the handloom workforce, the proportions of weavers to allied work, and the earnings of handloom households for and in the states outside the north-east.<sup>58</sup>

As evident from Table 5, women handloom workers in states outside north-east are also primarily rural based (73%) and women constitute the majority of the handloom workforce in every state barring two – i.e., Uttar Pradesh and Jharkhand, and even in Uttar Pradesh, they are already almost 50%. Table 6 shows that at an aggregate level, and - unlike the north-east - just over a third (35%) of the women handloom workers are weavers in the rest of India. Women handloom workers in most of these states (with the exception of Kerala, Himachal Pradesh,

<sup>58</sup> Only those states where the numbers of women workers in handloom exceeded 5,000 in 2009-10 have been included in the table.



and Tamilnadu) are still more concentrated in allied occupations, which includes winding of yarn for the purpose of warp, winding of pirns for weft, as well as spinning, dyeing, sizing, reeling, post loom operations, etc.<sup>59</sup> Thus, largely speaking, weaving in mainland India has remained a male dominated activity, even though women are indeed increasing their presence in weaving.<sup>60</sup> Further, where women are weavers, an overwhelming majority of them (85%) are working full time.

Women may constitute only a third of handloom weavers in states outside the north-east, but their conversion to full time labour in handloom is notable, and their concentration in allied activities should not be taken to mean they are primarily part time workers. The overwhelming majority of the women workers in allied activities (82%) are also working fulltime. In fact, what the handloom census of 2009-10 highlighted was that the share of full-time workers in the handloom industry as a whole had increased from 44% in 1995-96 to 64% by 2010. Among women handloom workers, the increase was obviously even more.

Nevertheless the concentration of women in allied activities does make for relatively lower incomes from handloom work for women. As has been the norm in handloom for decades, even in 2009-10, the earnings of allied work households was substantially less than weaver households.<sup>61</sup>

#### *Declining independence/autonomy: Increasing Contract work*

It is significant that the proportion of the independent/autonomous self-employed among handloom workers in mainland states has dropped sharply from over 43% in 1987 to 25% by 2009-10. Even among this 25% there would be many who are nominally independent, but actually dependent on traders for their inputs and markets. Nevertheless, it is indeed striking that more than half of the handloom workers (53%) in these states were contract workers under master weavers and another 13% worked under other private owners in 2009-10. By comparison, in 1987, a mere 19% of them worked under master weavers and 6%

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<sup>59</sup> The warp refers to the lengthwise yarns that are held in tension on a frame or loom. The weft is the yarn that is inserted over-and-under the warp threads. The pirn is a rod on which the weft yarn is wound. Sizing refers to the coating of the warp yarn with starch paste so that the threads can be gathered side by side, and wound on a beam.

<sup>60</sup>In Kerala, Himachal Pradesh, and Rajasthan however, women have already emerged as the majority of weavers, but their numbers are small in comparison to some of the other states like West Bengal, Andhra Pradesh, Tamilnadu and Uttar Pradesh.

<sup>61</sup> Where average annual earnings for weaver households in India (including the northeast) as per the 2009-10 handloom census was Rs 37,704, for allied activity households, it was Rs 29,300.

under private owners. The majority of handloom workers (66%) in these states had thus had become subordinate workers by 2009-10 from just 25% in 1987.

The predominance of work on contract for master weavers and private owners as the principal mode of handloom employment marks the mass conversion of self employed handloom workers into wage labour in the era of liberalisation.<sup>62</sup> It also reflects the complete collapse/withdrawal of institutional and policy support for handloom workers. Its effects may be seen in the proportions of India's handloom workers working in co-operatives having dropped to barely 4% by 2009-10, from over 25% in 1987, and those under the Khadi and Village Industries Corporation (KVIC) or State Handloom Development Corporations (SHDC) becoming virtually negligible at 1%.<sup>63</sup>

Table 5

State	Number of Women Handloom workers by state and by rural and urban location					Women's share of handloom workforce in each state (%)	Share of each state in All India female handloom workforce (%)
	Rural		Urban		Rural+Urban		
	Number	%	Number	%	Number		
West Bengal	344,765	83.0	70,542	17.0	415,307	62.5	13.9
Tamilnadu	99,858	59.0	69,281	41.0	169,139	53.1	5.6
Andhra Pradesh	96,521	61.6	60,048	38.4	156,569	51.1	5.2
Uttar Pradesh	60,008	55.7	47,667	44.3	107,675	49.6	3.6
Odisha	49,958	96.1	2,046	3.9	52,004	50.4	1.7
Karnataka	37,874	91.3	3,598	8.7	41,472	54.0	1.4
Rajasthan	16,656	68.4	7,701	31.6	24,357	80.9	0.8
Bihar	18,872	83.0	3,856	17.0	22,728	60.2	0.8
Jammu & Kashmir	11,198	74.8	3,775	25.2	14,973	72.2	0.5
Kerala	8,513	78.9	2,273	21.1	10,786	74.3	0.4
Uttarakhand	5,180	63.3	3,005	36.7	8,185	56.1	0.3
Jharkhand	6,837	84.6	1,244	15.4	8,081	43.8	0.3
Madhya Pradesh	2,181	30.3	5,015	69.7	7,196	54.6	0.2

<sup>62</sup> See Vasanthi Raman (2013), Seemanthini Niranjana (2004), Mazumdar (2005) for descriptions of changed policies under liberalisation.

<sup>63</sup> KVIC and SHDC workers constituted 6% of handloom workers in 1987.

Himachal Pradesh	5,297	99.8	9	0.2	5,306	68.6	0.2
Gujarat	4,099	81.1	954	18.9	5,053	53.2	0.2
<b>All the above</b>	<b>767,817</b>	<b>73.0</b>	<b>281,014</b>	<b>26.8</b>	<b>1,048,831</b>	<b>56.6</b>	<b>35.1</b>

Table 6

State	Women Weavers	Women in non-weaving allied work	Share of weavers among women in handloom %	Share of women among handloom weavers %	Average annual Earnings of handloom households (Rs)		Share of handloom in household income %
					Annual	Per Month	
West Bengal	148,117	267,190	35.7	42.5	26,571	2,214	42.1
Tamilnadu	92,016	77,123	54.4	40.3	24,181	2,015	79.4
Andhra Pradesh	52,760	103,809	33.7	29.1	28,305	2,359	61.7
Uttar Pradesh	25,409	82,266	23.6	21.8	22,547	1,879	85.1
Odisha	7,556	44,448	14.5	15.4	29,782	2,482	75.2
Karnataka	8,783	32,689	21.2	22.0	24,897	2,075	73.2
Rajasthan	4,362	19,995	17.9	51.4	43,921	3,660	25.2
Bihar	2,473	20,255	10.9	21.0	23,903	1,992	64.9
Jammu & Kashmir	2,126	12,847	14.2	28.9	43,285	3,607	32.9
Kerala	7,820	2,966	72.5	70.0	39,991	3,333	43.1
Uttarakhand	2,101	6,084	25.7	33.8	18,433	1,536	39.1
Jharkhand	1,955	6,126	24.2	19.6	17,967	1,497	83.2
Madhya Pradesh	1,834	5,362	25.5	25.2	29,543	2,462	66.6
Himachal Pradesh	4,572	734	86.2	69.5	26,539	2,212	15.7
Gujarat	970	4,083	19.2	23.2	37,289	3,107	64.4
<b>All the above</b>	<b>362,854</b>	<b>685,977</b>	<b>34.9</b>	<b>35.0</b>	<b>26,773</b>	<b>2,231</b>	

Several studies of developments in the handloom sector across the 1990s have pointed out that the collapse of a number of co-operatives was effected through a combination of delayed payments by government run marketing agencies and the cessation of schemes for government procurement of subsidized 'janta cloth'.

Indebtedness and increased dependence by handloom workers on traders and master weavers for loans and orders was an inevitable consequence. But the withdrawal of policy support for handloom workers extends beyond public procurement whose impact was always limited. Earlier the policy towards handloom in the period following independence was primarily based on recognition of its employment potential. Protections from being overwhelmed by competition from cheaper mill cloth were therefore put in place by controls on mill output, and calibrated expansion of powerlooms through quota permits. Powerloom absorbed only a section of handloom workers when a few erstwhile handloom centres became converted to powerloom centres.<sup>64</sup> At a broader level, decentralized powerlooms that produced handloom style articles (saris, lungis, etc.) at a faster, cheaper rate and with far less numbers of workers, actually edged out handloom and displaced many of its workers.<sup>65</sup>

From 1985, government's textile policy shifted its priorities to "productivity" rather than "employment". Lakhs of unauthorised powerlooms, who had by then emerged as the principal competitors of handloom, were regularized. The Hank Yarn Obligation Scheme (HYO) stipulating that spinning mills pack 50 per cent of yarn produced in hank form for handloom was poorly implemented and diversion of hank yarn to the powerloom sector was allowed to sabotage the stated aim of ensuring adequate yarn at reasonable prices for handloom.<sup>66</sup> Increased emphasis on exports led to increasing amounts of yarn exports and resulted in destructive spurts in domestic yarn prices. The Handloom Reservation Act, according to which initially 22 articles were reserved was never made fully operative, even after the reserved articles were reduced to 11 in 2003.<sup>67</sup> Finally, from 1998, the Indian government's policy became explicit about eliminating that segment of the handloom industry that produced plain and low cost cloth.<sup>68</sup> Further, its stated aim

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<sup>64</sup> Ichalkaranji, Bhiwandi, and Sholapur in Maharashtra, and Surat in Gujarat exemplify this process. See Douglas Haynes (2012), *Small town capitalism in western India: artisans, merchants and the making of the informal economy, 1870-1960* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press).

<sup>65</sup> It is generally accepted that each powerloom displaces 12 workers in handloom.

<sup>66</sup> Powerloom owners avoided high yarn duty imposed on them by buying up hank yarn and converting it to the cones that are used in powerloom since the cost of re-reeling is minimal.

<sup>67</sup> The remaining items reserved for handloom are Sarees and Dhoti (other than synthetic or 145% man-made yarn based), Towel, Gamcha & Angavastram, Lungi, Khes, Bedsheet, Bedcover, Counterpane, Furnishing (including tapestry, upholstery), Jamakkalam, Durry or Durret, Dress material, Barrack blankets, Kambal or Kamblies, Shawl, Loi, Muffler, Pankhi etc., Woollen tweed, Chaddar, Mekhala/Phanek. Almost all products are also produced by both powerlooms and mills now.

<sup>68</sup> Interestingly, it was precisely through production of coarse cloth for common Indians that handloom had been able to withstand the loss of their earlier markets across the world to industrial textile products from Britain, and survive through late colonial India. The common people at the time,

was preservation of that segment producing unique and exclusive item, but this was linked to high value addition and therefore higher prices in the market. Items that were previously available to a wider section of society, was to become the preserve of only rich.<sup>69</sup> The net result of all the above has been that large numbers of handloom workers lost their traditional markets as rising prices of inputs made handloom unaffordable for mid-level and poorer customers. Master weavers survived by focusing on wider market linkages and adaptation of designs, but maintained their optimum price lines through squeezing wages of the workers to whom they put out orders. It was possible for them to do so because over the years the workers were both indebted to as well as dependent on master weavers for orders.

In an important study for the erstwhile Planning commission in 2001, Seemanthini Niranjana and Soumya Vinayan had argued that the non-availability of adequate quantities of good quality yarn at reasonable prices, the decline of local markets for handlooms, the consequent separation of producers from the market leading to the domination of middlemen in marketing channels, and the blocking of any trickledown of the profits earned by middlemen/traders/ master weavers even when profit margins are high - were among the key issues for handloom workers.<sup>70</sup> They had contested the argument that handloom is in universal decline, arguing that the share of handloom in cloth production had stabilized at around 20% of India's cloth production. Based on qualitative field studies, they suggested that some dynamism was visible where local markets had been effectively tapped into by handloom workers. Such an argument challenged the policy framework since 1998 of focusing only on high value handloom for niche markets across spatially wider markets. By 2014, however, the share of handloom had dropped to 11% of cloth production in India. The decade that followed the 2001 study appears to have further eroded any residual dynamism that had been able to survive the 1990s.

### *Of Master Weavers, Traders, Contractual relations and Government Schemes*

The emergence of master weavers as the largest group of employers in handloom is a striking development in the contemporary period that is also linked

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felt thicker and sturdier handloom served more purpose than finer mill cloth. See Douglas Haynes, op.cit

<sup>69</sup> The devastation experienced by handloom workers since the 1990s even in the unique and exclusive Banarasi silk industry has been beautifully documented by Vasanthi Raman (2013)

<sup>70</sup> Seemanthini Niranjana & Soumya Vinayan (2001), *Report on Growth and Prospects of the Handloom Industry* (Commissioned by the Planning Commission)

to the emergence of handloom clusters where shed/workshop based production coexists with homebased handloom. A common pattern that emerges from various field studies, is that local origin handloom workers tend to work from home either on their own or rented looms. Outside entrants who migrate to the handloom clusters may work more in sheds. The development of these clusters are themselves linked to the increasing role of master weavers as well as differentiation among them, with the larger ones involved in middleman business as their primary activity rather than organization of production. Larger master weavers/traders in these clusters give out work to both to homebased workers as well as to sheds, sometimes through mini-master weavers who may be weaving themselves as well as through sub-contracting to other weaver households. Broadly speaking, it seems that the role of the larger master weavers is now geared first to procuring the raw material and then distributing the orders based on their designs to a set of handloom workers, who actually produce the articles. He (almost nowhere does one find a woman master weaver employer) then delivers the products to clients (textile retail outlets or traders) who sell them on to the end-customers. While master weavers may have knowledge of weaving, usually they are no longer active weavers themselves. Instead they have become either manufacturer trader entrepreneurs or middlemen sub-contractors or a combination of the two.

In a 2006 case study of master weavers in Mangalagiri, Andhra Pradesh, Syamsundari and Niranjana argued that even where master weavers have established their dominance, they are themselves dogged by uncertainties in markets and yarn prices as well as competition from powerloom imitations of their products. With expansion into wider markets and related adaptation of handloom products, their focus has shifted away from the local and traditional. With products that no longer have any local traction, even master weavers run greater risks of payments from distant markets being held up or rejected. Given their dependence on short run credit from yarn merchants, such risks could easily have catastrophic consequences. Each of the master weavers in the study area had consolidated their business through kin networks, but their operational sizes varied from controlling over 100 to over 600 looms. Master weavers in Mangalagiri, had indeed expanded into new markets, and adapted handloom products (eg. changing over from sarees to dress materials). However, the study argued the master weaver's profit margin lies either in cutting wages or increasing volume of sales, and in the

case of handloom, there are limits to volume of sales, since the handloom market is not indefinitely elastic.<sup>71</sup>

In other words, the findings of the Mangalagiri case study suggest that even the rise of the master weaver under the specialized niche market for handloom that is envisaged by the present policy framework contains elements of crisis, and the attendant uncertainties and risks move them almost inexorably towards cutting of wages of their handloom workers. Vasanthi Raman, in her study of Banaras weavers (another high value weaving centre) takes it one step forward and refers to the virtual destruction of the handloom weaving cottage industry, which has affected all tiers, including the grihastas (master weavers) who had for some time emerged as significant employers, but whose looms now lie rotting with their business no longer viable, while the highly skilled weaver families 'have become faceless pauperized unskilled manual workers, bereft of any pride or dignity.'<sup>72</sup> Nevertheless, a section of master weavers have indeed risen to positions of prominence and greater wealth, even if they run the risk of momentous reversals. In that rise lies both economic differentiation as well as greater elements of exploitation for the homebased handloom worker, whose work they control.

In a 2010 study of master weavers in four handloom clusters in Andhra Pradesh, Suresh Bhagavatula has posited that master weaver firms emerged through two routes. The first route was through what he termed 'inheritance' of a family firm, i.e., a weaving family/kin business where some members develop and focus on managerial or marketing aspects. The second route was when weavers who initially worked for an intermediary (including cooperatives) established a fresh start-up with financial support from family or elsewhere.<sup>73</sup> What is common to either route is that they are open only to members of weaver castes, even though it may seem to be a process of economic differentiation. Bhagavatula's study recorded that entrants from other communities were soon wiped out. The same study however, also suggested that a saturation point had been reached for master weaver firms, since the average age of the master weavers in the sample was about 46 years, the average age of their firms was 18 years, and no new firms had come up over the five years preceding the study.<sup>74</sup>

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<sup>71</sup>B. Syamsundari and Seemanthini Niranjana (2006) 'Mangalagiri: Case Study of Master Weavers' *Economic and Political Weekly* August 5, 2006.

<sup>72</sup> Vasanthi Raman, op.cit

<sup>73</sup> Suresh Bhagavatula (2010), 'The working of entrepreneurs in a competitive low technology industry: The case of master weavers in the handloom industry', IIM Bangalore Research Paper No. 321

<sup>74</sup> Bhagavatula, op.cit. For a different time frame (pre-1960) Haynes has described a similar process in the contest of western India over a longer period, and straddling a journey from handloom to

The contractual arrangements between master weavers and homebased workers to whom they give orders/work may include providing looms to loomless workers - sometimes the loom and housing may both be provided on rent to the weavers.<sup>75</sup> It could also be a relationship in which the master weaver supplies the yarn, design, and then buys the product from the homebased handloom worker at a predetermined piece rate. There are distinct variations to the forms of contract between master weaver and worker that may be based on regional histories or differentiated by the scale of the master weaver's operations, or even by the caste/community to which the worker belongs. Further, where the weaving designs are complicated, the master weaver may send other employees to set the loom. But the lack or loss of independence of workers is common to all regions and regardless of any gradations among employers or whether the worker is from a traditional weaving caste or not. With the mass conversion of independent weavers to subordinate labour having already taken place, and with the master weaver accumulation model having reached saturation levels, it is doubtful that any further upwardly mobile differentiation is any longer possible from amongst the handloom workforce.

Vijaya Ramaswamy, a leading historian of the south Indian textile industry, has demonstrated that the master-weaver played a vital role in textile production even during the 17<sup>th</sup> century when the growth of a widely differentiated market and consequent stratification among weavers followed from their engagement with European companies. But the emergence of the master weaver then was not as an independent producer but as one more middleman in the long chain of intermediaries between the weaver and the Company. Further, she argues that while in the initial period of Company rule the master weaver functioned as a representative of the weaver, by the 19<sup>th</sup> century he had become a symbol of imperial tyranny and oppression. According to Ramaswamy, "The institution of the master-weavers remained crucial to textile production organization until the 20<sup>th</sup> century and the only effective challenge to them came from the establishment of Weavers' Cooperatives."<sup>76</sup> So also, it could be argued that the rise in importance of the master weaver in the contemporary period is linked to the neglect and decline of the cooperatives leading to the insertion of a new generation of middlemen, and a return to their tyrannical systems of control over workers.

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powerloom. He termed it weaver capitalism. What would have happened to these master weavers if they had not made the move to powerloom is a question for present day master weavers..

<sup>75</sup> See Mazumdar (2006) for a description of such arrangements in Kanchhepuram, Tamilnadu.

<sup>76</sup>Vijaya Ramaswamy (1985), 'The Genesis and Historical Role of the Master Weavers in South Indian Textile Production' *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient*, Vol. 28, No. 3 (1985), pp.294-325



Perhaps the lessons to of history will be learnt again through repetition. Only this time, with an additional gender dimension in the male master weaver and the increasingly feminized handloom worker.

Unfortunately, the handloom census does not present a picture of the role of traders, only some of whom may be drawn from among master weavers. Control over handloom by traders/businessmen drawn from non-artisanal merchant communities, who are in no way involved in organization of the production process, have long been a feature across the country. The few studies on master weavers do not delve into their connections with traders/merchants, although one long term study of the silk town of Arni (near Kancheepuram) in Tamil Nadu shows that, although initially distinct in their roles, with the former in trade and the latter in organization of production, these roles often merged in the same person. It is argued that such overlapping increased with the spread of the putting out system that in turn, reduced the manufacturing role of the master weavers.<sup>77</sup> In north India, most traders in handloom were originally drawn from non-artisanal merchant communities who functioned through deep and interconnected social networks for trade and credit across regions.<sup>78</sup> In southern India, some of the important merchant communities/networks also emerged from artisanal castes/communities, in the course of a long history.<sup>79</sup> The role of traders/merchants in the value chain in which contemporary homebased handloom workers are located is an area where there is a crying need for more studies.

All that can be said at this point is that in the larger situation of declining state support and collapsing cooperatives, greater dependence on the master weaver and trader for their continued employment has become the norm for homebased handloom workers. In this, the phenomenon of widespread indebtedness is one of the key processes through which handloom workers have lost their independence and become tied to traders/master weavers and intermediate middlemen.

The overall situation of debt distress that affected individual handloom weavers and cooperatives, was indeed finally officially acknowledged when the government announced a Revival, Reform & Restructuring package for the

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<sup>77</sup> Elizabeth Basile (2015), 'A heterodox approach to capitalism: insights from a market Town in South India after the Green Revolution' in Barbara Harriss-White and Judith Heyer (ed) *Indian Capitalism in Development*, Routledge

<sup>78</sup> See Vasanthi Raman, op.cit for a description of trader gaddidars in Banaras

<sup>79</sup> See Mattison Mines (1984) *The Warrior Merchants: Textiles, Trade and Territory in South India*, Cambridge University Press, for a description of how the Kaikkoolar caste in Tamilnadu, who were weavers by occupation and warriors by ancient heritage, diversified into different sections with often opposing interests in the textile industry.

handloom sector in 2011 that was later integrated into the National Handloom Development Programme (NHDP) in 2013. It includes waiving off loans that became overdue by March 2010, and subsidized credit @ 6% for a period of 3 years for individuals, groups and cooperatives involved in handloom production, but not for what is termed non-viable units. Other than that, some welfare schemes on the insurance model have been instituted for weavers, including 1) the Mahatma Gandhi Bunkar Bima Yojana, that provides insurance in case of death or disability and a scholarship of Rs 300 per quarter for up to two children for 4 years. The annual premium for this scheme includes Rs. 80 from the weaver, 290/- from the central government, and Rs 100 from the insurer, LIC, and 2) Health Insurance Scheme (HIS) for weavers which provides annual health insurance up to Rs 15,000 for up to 4 members of handloom households. Annual insurance premium includes Rs 770 to be paid by the central governments and Rs 170 by the relevant state government and the worker of which a minimum of Rs 50 to be paid by the handloom household. No review studies of the impact or outreach of these schemes are yet available, but it is noticeable, that the feminization of the handloom workforce is not even acknowledged in the design of schemes and policies for handloom workers.

### ***Coir***

A rich resource of historically grounded studies on Kerala's coir industry, although not part of the mainstream literature on homebased work, provides valuable material for understanding the kinds of factors involved in ebbs and flows in homebased work by women in India. Again referred to as a traditional industry, the manufacture of coir was born as an export oriented industry in colonial times. Its workforce is predominantly female, and based in household production. Although somewhat uniquely localized to southern India, and particularly Kerala, the fairly well documented developments in coir manufacture - including the shifts in correlations between global demand, domestic markets, Govt. policies, local labour market conditions and workers' movements –present valuable insights for developing a more mature understanding of the manner in which interconnected vicissitudes can and do affect the situation of women homebased workers in other industries and states.

As is well known, coir is a fibre made from the husk of coconuts that is used to make ropes/yarn which may be both a final product as well as an intermediate product used in weaving of mats and matting.<sup>80</sup> As a final product, coir yarn also

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<sup>80</sup> Coir matting has a variety of uses including as underlay for carpets, and is currently increasingly used as geo-textiles to prevent soil erosion.

finds direct use in cultivation (fencing of cornfields and scaffolds for vines), fishing (ropes), and house construction, particularly by the poor.<sup>81</sup> Our interest in coir is directed primarily at and through the spinning of coir yarn, in which a significant number of women homebased workers in Kerala are employed.

India has been the world's largest producer of coir for over a century, although not so pre-eminent in producing the coconuts that provide its raw material. In 2009, India's share of global coir production was 46%, when its share of the world's coconuts was just 16%. The country's share in global coir manufacture had peaked in 1991, when 65% of the world's coir was supplied by India. It was however, a peak driven by a spurt in India's own domestic demand becoming a major component in the figures of global demand for coir. After 1991, it appears that the world market has become a renewed driver of global coir production. Other countries have been drawn into coir production, leading to a relative decline in India's share in the world's coir output.<sup>82</sup> Despite its reduced global share, coir produced in India nevertheless continued to rise from 3.7 lakh tonnes in 1991 to more than 5 lakh tonnes in 2009.<sup>83</sup>

#### *From Metropolis to Peripheral villages: Colonial Origins of Kerala's coir industry*

The roots of the coir industry lie in the colonial era, when production and trade of coir products was clearly under the dominance of international capital. In its earliest phase, coir was primarily used for making rope for ships' rigging, for which expanding European maritime trade provided much of the demand. Later, world demand for coir mattings led to an increasing number of weaving factories in Kerala, the first of which was set up in 1859. Accordingly, the demand for coir yarn expanded significantly, prompting changes in technology and scale of production. Hand spinning gave way to spinning by wheel, and innumerable households in the backwater-side villages of Kerala became sites of coir yarn production.<sup>84</sup> Kerala

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<sup>81</sup> A byproduct of coir manufacture – the pith that remains after fibre extraction is finding new applications as a soil conditioner, as well as a soil less medium for agri-horticultural purposes, and has emerged as a major item in the coir export basket since the turn of the century.

<sup>82</sup> India and Sri Lanka have been the biggest producers of coir. Recently Vietnam has emerged as another coir producing centre, and with 25% of the world's coir output, it has overtaken Sri Lanka to become second only to India.

<sup>83</sup> These figures are all drawn from FAO statistics as given in Suresh C. Kumar (2013), PhD thesis, *Coir Cooperative Societies in Kerala, An Economic Analysis*. Interestingly Indonesia, with 35% and Philippines with 25% of the world's coconut production do not produce any coir. On the other hand, Sri Lanka and Vietnam, who produce 3% and 2% respectively of the world's coconuts, manufacture 17% and 25% of the world's coir.

<sup>84</sup> T.M Thomas Isaac (1990), 'Evolution of Organisation of Production in Coir Yarn Spinning Industry' *Centre for Development Studies*, Working Paper 236.

was the natural home of the coir industry, and its most concentrated location. As the original and pre-eminent coir state, Kerala accounted for 46.98% of India's coir production even in 2001, albeit with Tamilnadu, which produced 32.25% of India's coir at the time, fast emerging as a rival contender.<sup>85</sup> More importantly, according to the last available annual report of the Coir Board (2012-13), of the 7 lakh coir workers across India, 4.7 lakhs (66%) were located in Kerala, although a 2007-08 Kerala Government Coir Commission Report had put the number at 3.66 lakhs.

The concentration of coconut production on the Kerala coast, the existence of backwaters that helped the soaking of husks (retting) and the preparation of fibre (extracted from retted husks), the integrated network of backwaters and canals that facilitated economic transportation of bulk material like coconut husk, fibre and yarn, and the possibility of locating/obtaining cheap labour - all these had historically contributed to localization of coir production in Kerala. The production system established by colonial interests was entirely geared to serve the world market. Yarn produced by households was carried in country boats to the port towns, and either woven into mats and mattings in the factories operated by metropolitan capitalists or directly exported - again through the metropolitan export firms based in port towns. Western Indian merchants acted as factors in the dealings between local traders and metropolitan firms. The Coir products, so produced/procured rested on 'a long arm of credit extending from the metropolis to the peripheral village through traders of various sorts and scales', and ensured that "most of the backwater-side villages became helplessly dependent on coir production for survival."<sup>86</sup>

By the 1940s, there were several coir manufactories that employed more than 500 workers, and half a dozen big manufacturer-shippers, mostly European, who controlled 50 per cent of the market. Apart from their own weaving manufactories that were concentrated in the town of Allepey (Allapuzha), large and medium manufacturer-shippers sub-contracted to non-shipping manufacturers who were distributed in the suburbs and the adjoining rural areas where the cost of production was lower.<sup>87</sup> Among these were 'cottage units' where particularly spinning was mostly by household members themselves, along with one or two hired workers. The export orientation of the industry and the extremely

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<sup>85</sup>Suresh Kumar, op.cit. No more recent data on coir production by states is referred to in any of the contemporary studies or reports on coir.

<sup>86</sup>K.T. Rammohan (1999), 'Technological Change in Kerala Industry: Lessons from Coir Yarn Spinning' Discussion Paper, Centre for Developing Studies (CDS), Thiruvananthapuram

<sup>87</sup> T M Thomas Isaac (1982), 'Class Struggle and Structural Changes: Coir Mat and Matting Industry in Kerala, 1950-80, *Economic and Political Weekly*, July, 1982

fragmented production structure necessitated a long chain of middlemen for the collection and disposal of the yam. Similarly the localisation of the industry along the coastal belt of Kerala and the dispersal of coconut production throughout the low and mid lands of the region required an equally elaborate system of traders for the collection and supply of husks.<sup>88</sup>

After independence, the 1950s and 60s saw a sharp decline in coir exports, an erosion of European monopolies, and the rise to dominance of middlemen traders. An industry that had been entirely geared to exports was thrown into crisis. Excess production was taken advantage of by traders who were able to buy cheaper, while increasing underemployment combined with low wages for workers.

*Interlocking of raw material and product markets: Middlemen and decentralized production*

T.M. Isaac (1982) has shown how the period between 1950 and 1980 saw a restructuring of the coir industry with capitalists moving away from direct management of production and increasingly confining themselves to the sphere of trade. The shift of the levers of control to traders drove the decentralized, often household based production into the rural hinterlands of Kerala where wage rates were around 25% lower than what prevailed in the urban manufactories of the day. The backdrop to this move included powerful movements of coir workers who had managed to raise their wages but whose force waned over the years because of the decentralization and ruralization of coir manufacturing. Decentralization was further facilitated by the retreat of retrenched coir workers into household based production.<sup>89</sup> In such a production structure, homebased 'self-employed' women spinners emerged as a significant category of workers in coir. Spinners might hire in one or two other workers, or share some orders with other homebased spinners or just manage their own domestic manufacture with other family members, including children.<sup>90</sup>

Like we saw in the case of beedi, mercantilist interests responded to the tide of worker organization and movements, by moving towards sourcing from ever smaller units down to the household level. Also, like in beedi, the interlocking of the raw material (in this case coconut husks) and product (yarn) markets rendered

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<sup>88</sup> T.M Thomas Isaac (1990), op.cit.

<sup>89</sup> T M Thomas Isaac (1982), op.cit

<sup>90</sup> Rammohan quotes an elderly spinner as saying, 'During earlier days, we would give the baby some kanji or a couple of pieces of cassava or whatever in the morning and seat her in a corner of the worksite or near the spinning wheel. Alternatively, spread a mat and make her lie there. As she grows up a little, she would start pecking good fibre from bad. By the age of 10, she would be a full-fledged wheel rotator. And later, begin to spin as well'

dependence of household workers on the middlemen who combined in themselves control over both the supply and demand ends. Even where an illusion of purchase (of husks and fibre) and sale (of yarn) was maintained, the petty producer was in reality a wage worker but without even the modicum assurance of a guaranteed return to labour. Studies showed that in the mid-1960s the earnings of the so-called 'self-employed' spinners were half those of the hired workers in manufactories.<sup>91</sup> However, unlike beedi that moved easily across state borders, in the case of coir, sub-contracted decentralized production had to still locate itself within Kerala, at least till quite recently when Tamilnadu has developed as a second hub for coir manufacture. Again, unlike beedi, post-independence Government policy towards coir encouraged and promoted co-operative reorganization of the industry from the 1950s onwards. Cooperatives were seen as both a solution to the fragmentation of the production structure, as well as a counter to the exploitation of the middlemen.<sup>92</sup>

*Homebased Women Spinners, Workers' movements, and unity between small producers and workers*

More than two-thirds of present day coir workers in Kerala are women involved in the spinning of yarn. The yarn manufacturing node in coir's production chain engages exclusively women, almost all drawn from the poorest among a numerically large backward caste of Kerala (Ezhavas), and working in homebased production. The physical conditions of their work are extremely strenuous. Although a very small number, particularly old women, still spin by twisting the fibre just between the palms of their hands, coir yarn is overwhelmingly spun on spinning wheels known as ratts. In Kerala, ratts are mostly operated by hand, with one woman worker rotating the fixed wheel and two other women walking backwards feeding fibre, each of them drawing out a strand of yarn and later twisting these into one by pushing forward the moveable wheel. The spinning worker thus has to walk several miles a day, forward and backwards, between the two spinning wheels that make a ratt set. As all these operations are performed outdoor, the workers have to bear with rain and sun too. Their conditions of work are stamped on their features, and it has been said, "A coir worker can be easily identified by her appearance: ...if she is a lifetime spinner, her feet curved outwards as a result of the endless walking towards the back on spinning."<sup>93</sup> There

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<sup>91</sup> Isaac (1990) op.cit

<sup>92</sup> By the '70s cooperative inclined policy had evolved the aim of bringing the entire coir spinning sector under workers' co-operatives.

<sup>93</sup> Olga Nieuwenhuys (1990), *Angels with callous hands: children's work in rural Kerala (India)*, PhD thesis, quoted in K.T. Rammohan, op.cit.

are an estimated 3.25 lakh such women coir spinners in Kerala. A coir spinner may be self-employed, working in her own household unit, working for her neighbour or for other private entrepreneurs as a waged worker, or working in a cooperative as a member-worker, although the site of work is usually on land around her dwelling. Spinners may work for private entrepreneurs as also for cooperatives depending on the availability of work. Many of the coir spinners thus have what has been termed - a hybrid identity. What is however common, is that their workday is usually from 7 in the morning till 3 in the afternoon, and that the overwhelming majority work around their own dwellings.<sup>94</sup>

Interestingly, and despite continued decentralization of production, workers' unions, became revitalized in the mid-1960s and were once again able to bring tangible wage gains for coir workers for some time. In the 1950s, a minimum wage committee report descriptions of coir spinners mentioned "girls between 16 to 20 were dwarfed on account of insufficient nourishment, women between 25 and 30 were so worn out by work and starvation that they looked 40 to 50 years of age". The committee (1954) accordingly set the minimum wage at levels much beyond what the workers were receiving at the time. Even in 1963, a minimum wage committee found workers getting less than the statutory minimum. By 1972 on the other hand, a minimum wage committee found that prevalent wages of coir workers were "10 to 125 per cent higher than the legally stipulated minimum wages."<sup>95</sup> Accordingly, the 1972 committee merely regularized the actual gains won by the workers through their own struggle in the minimum rates they prescribed, and stabilized wage levels by introducing a price indexed dearness allowance.<sup>96</sup>

A feature of coir workers' movements in the 60s and 70s (which may be of interest to those interested in strategies of organising homebased workers), is the way coir workers' movements were able to imprint themselves on the political landscape of Kerala, and shaped the terms of discourse with reference to the coir industry. Over time the struggles of small producers and workers in decentralized production had begun to merge, particularly for spinners who were largely small producers and workers. Common interests against exploitation by middlemen, strong community and social ties (including of caste) between workers and small producers, facilitated such merging. Demands for increases in wages were linked with demands for remunerative yarn prices, engendering unity against the

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<sup>94</sup> Rammohan, op.cit

<sup>95</sup>Raghavan, Pyaralal (1995), *Dynamics of industrial cooperatives: a study of traditional industries in Kerala*,

PhD thesis, JNU

<sup>96</sup> Isaac (1990), op.cit

powerful traders. The coir workers' movement was thus based on unity across categories of workers bringing decentralized homebased spinners together with other contingents of the coir workforce.

In the late 1950s and early 1960s, landlords and rich peasants had a greater controlling share of the retting and fibering node of coir production unlike in spinning, where the small worker producers predominated. A 1968 coir board survey had noted that the large retters formed about 10 per cent of the total retters but controlled 75 per cent of the retted husk.<sup>97</sup> Defibering workers were often indebted tenants of these large retters. Over the next decade or so, the controlling influence of these large retters was challenged first by the land reforms of 1967, which prevented eviction of tenants and gave hutment dwellers rights over 10 cents of land.<sup>98</sup> As landlords lost their controlling power over their tenant workers, they tried to replace them by mechanizing the defibreing operation. This was then challenged by a powerful and successful agitation by coir workers against such mechanization in 1971-72. A unity of identity as coir workers - between small producers in spinning and workers in defibreing and spinning - ousted the erstwhile landlords from the cooperatives, which were then transformed into workers' cooperatives in 1972.<sup>99</sup> The role of women in these struggles, was particularly striking. Women had long been important participants in the factory based coir workers' movements from the 1930s onwards.<sup>100</sup> What is particularly relevant for our discussion, is that by the end of the 1960s Kerala's coir workers' unions also had powerful women leaders whose primary base now incorporated the large community of homebased women spinners.<sup>101</sup>

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<sup>97</sup> T. M. Thomas Isaac, P. A. van Stuijvenberg, K. N. Nair (1992) *Modernisation and Employment: The Coir Industry in Kerala*, Sage.

<sup>98</sup>It is difficult to comprehend the special features of conditions and movements of coir workers in Kerala without reference to their great importance in the growth of the communist led left movement in Kerala and vice versa, i.e., how they were given a special position by the left.

<sup>99</sup> The worker focus of coir co-operatives distinguished them from several other forms of cooperatives formed around agricultural commodities such as the sugar co-operatives in western India in which workers or worker producers had no place.

<sup>100</sup> See Meera Velayudhan (1991), 'Caste, Class and Political Organisation of Women in Travancore' *Social Scientist*, Vol. 19, No. 5/6 (May - Jun., 1991),

<sup>101</sup> Susheela Gopalan was the President of the Coir Workers' Centre from 1971 and actively raised coir workers' issues even in the Indian parliament to which she was elected in 1977. She was also the founder general secretary of the All India Democratic Women's Association, and one of the leading advocates of the need for close links between the women's movement and workers' movements.



### *Coir Cooperatives, workers' wages, and descent into crisis*

Reportedly 41% of Kerala's coir workers are working under cooperatives, 51% in unorganized manufacturing for a range of traders and small producers, and around 8% work for the government. Homebased women spinners of course form the majority of those working for cooperatives *and* unorganized manufacturing. Despite the policy turn towards worker cooperatives, not all workers working under cooperatives are members, and a recent study has shown that the proportion of workers who were members of cooperative societies had dropped from an all-time high of 68% in 1990-91 to just 21% in 2009-10.<sup>102</sup> Further, despite the fact that coir yarn spinning is practically an all-women industry, it is indeed a problem that women have largely remained outside the 'core' of the cooperatives for whom they work, despite having been unionized to a large degree.

Nevertheless, the role of the cooperatives, in improving the conditions of Kerala's coir workers cannot be negated. Even the most critical study of the functioning of coir co-operatives in Kerala admit that they had a significant impact in ensuring decent wages to at least a section of workers. The higher wage rates in the coir cooperatives became standard reference for wage bargaining in the unorganised sector and exerted a beneficial influence on labour conditions in general. The co-operatives were thus central to the ability of coir workers to protect themselves from the super-exploitation that is so typical of decentralized homebased production systems under capitalism. Interestingly, the reorganization of cooperatives into worker cooperatives with government and workers' shareholdings, which moved from the sale purchase system to production and sale after guaranteeing minimum wages was the result of trade union led coir workers' struggles.

The improved conditions were not to last, and by the 1980s, the crisis in Kerala's coir industry became evident. Shortages in supply of husks and fibre and the effects of consistently declining demand for coir products undercut the ability of cooperatives to provide regular employment to workers. Growing underemployment meant that even when minimum wage rates were maintained, the incomes of coir workers in cooperatives actually declined. Ultimately by the 1990s, even minimum wages could not be maintained and gave way to negotiated wages below the statutory minimum. If this was one consequence of the protracted stalemate and crisis in Kerala's coir industry, demoralization among workers and a related decline in their involvement in cooperative managements

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<sup>102</sup> Suresh Kumar, op.cit

fueled bureaucratization of management of cooperatives.<sup>103</sup> Kerala's homebased spinners now faced declining work availability, underemployment, inability to even retain the minimum wages they had achieved, and finally a bureaucratic cooperative structure that no longer represented their needs. The natural conditions (backwaters) and highly developed skills of Kerala's spinners that had together given Kerala's coir its superior quality, were not able to protect them from falling demand for their products, nor the new technologies based mechanized competition from elsewhere that ate into even the limited markets for their products.<sup>104</sup>

### *The contemporary export dimension*

Exports accounted for less than 15% of India's coir production in 2001, but rose to more than 39% of India's production in 2009.<sup>105</sup> In all likelihood the share of exports has continued to rise in the following years, (coir production figures after 2009 are not cited in the literature and not published on the website of the Coir Board). However, this big jump is almost solely because of rising exports of coir pith, which is essentially the coir dust that was earlier merely waste product after defibering of the coconut husks. The value of coir pith exports jumped from Rs 251.26 lakhs in 1998-99, to 43,295.24 lakhs in 2014-15, and in quantity from 2,215.39 tonnes to 316,425 tonnes, reflected in an incredible increase in share of pith in India's coir exports from around 4% in 1998-99 to over 50% in 2014-15. For homebased coir spinners therefore, the rising coir export figures do not reflect any expansion in export markets for their products. In fact the quantity of exports of coir *yarn* have fallen substantially from 16,538.78 tonnes in 1998-99 to 4,070 tonnes in 2014-15, and in value terms reduced from Rs 4,827.41 lakhs to Rs 3,000.89. Similarly, products based on coir yarn such as mats and matting have either remained stagnant or fallen in quantity and value terms. Rising coir exports has thus been of little use to Kerala's homebased spinners of coir yarn, and like many other segments of homebased workers, coir workers too remain locked into a crisis of declining workdays, underemployment, and deteriorating wage levels.

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<sup>103</sup> Raghavan, op.cit

<sup>104</sup> T.M. Isaac and Pyarelal Raghavan (1990), 'A Policy Framework for Revitalisation of Coir Industry in Kerala' Working Paper No. 240, CDS, Thiruvananthapuram

<sup>105</sup> Coir board figures give the quantity of coir exports as 67493.08 tonnes for 2000-2001 and 199924.93 tonnes for 2008-09. Suresh Kumar's figures for India's coir production are 450,000 tonnes in 2001, and 507,400 tonnes in 2009.

## ***Crochet Lace and Chikan embroidery***

*Chikan embroidery workers* in and around Lucknow, and *crochet lace makers of Narsapur* have long had a somewhat iconic status in the world's perception of home workers in India. Their boundedness within a locale (now given the nomenclature of cluster) is a characteristic that they share with each other.<sup>106</sup> Separated by a distance of around 1900 kilometres, speaking different languages and belonging to distinctively different community and class backgrounds, Lucknow's chikan workers and Narsapur's lace makers are on the one hand valorized as skilled craft workers and on the other, equally defined by their identity as highly exploited home workers with below subsistence earnings. Differences include the fact that Narsapur crochet lace making grew as an export led industry, while Lucknow's chikan has an export dimension, but is still primarily geared to the domestic market. Perhaps the more important difference is that chikan embroidery and its workforce grew in an urban city milieu while lace making grew in a predominantly rural and small town setting. Yet despite such differences, studies all suggest that social restrictions on women working outside their homes and the refrain that the home work distributed among the women was not work proper but mere leisure time activity has provided the social foundations for the prevalence of home work in both areas. Such a cultural framing of chikan embroidery work by particularly Muslim women in Lucknow and crochet lace making women by Hindu women by particularly the Kapu caste in Narsapur, Andhra Pradesh, laid the social basis for the prolonged devaluation of and quite extraordinarily unequal conditions faced by these two long established segments of home workers in India.

### *The lace makers of Narsapur*

In the case of Narsapur, the development of lacemaking was documented by Maria Mies as going through three stages. The first stage was the introduction of lacemaking skills in the colonial era, initiated as charity work by Christian missionaries, but which also introduced ideological and organizational changes through which women were made into housewives and workers at the same time. The second was when a few men developed as export traders who introduced a classic putting out system by splitting the production into part processes, i.e., from

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<sup>106</sup> Lucknow is also recognised as an exclusive hub of chikankar by the Geographical Indication Registry (GIR), which accorded Geographical Indication (GI) status for chikankari in December 2008. Although the same is being discussed with reference to Narsapur lace, no applications have been made so far. For both Lucknow and Narsapur the issue is of their markets being eroded by machine products, especially made in China.

one woman making a whole product to her making a part, which was then joined together by other women, and thereby instituting and controlling the division of labour among the women themselves, while still maintaining that the women's work was an autonomous leisure time activity. The third stage (from 1970) was the product of agrarian social differentiation during the green revolution, which saw the emergence of monopolistic male capitalist farmers and the expansion of the world market for handicrafts, that together led to the merging of capitalist farmers and merchant traders into one class that now profited from housewifed women lace makers' labour. As the industry expanded and fulfilment of greater demand required widening the net to include more workers, even the women agents who distributed the raw material, collected the products, and paid the wages who lost out to the more mobile male intermediaries who could move faster on their bicycles than the women who had to walk. Mies concluded that the "integration of the women lace workers into a world system of capital accumulation has not and will not transform them into free wage labourers. It is precisely this fact of their not being free wage-labourers, but housewives which makes capital accumulation possible in this sector."

Of course, Mies was writing in 1981, and while her study remains an invaluable classic, there are indeed several developments, which perhaps do not fit so easily into the schematic framework of patriarchy and capital accumulation that she espoused. Now, 35 years later, while the architecture of the crochet lace manufacture in Narsapur still rests on the labour of women home workers, global demand, production systems, and accumulation regimes have become far more dominated by finance and its attendant restructuring of industry and labour relations. In the meantime, there have been developments at the local level too. Not much is known about interventions by cooperatives and trade unions among Narsapur's lacemakers in these interim years, but it does appear that their worker identity has been established both legally and in public discourse.<sup>107</sup> However, lace making in Narsapur is no longer a growing industry, and the number of homebased lace makers appears to be shrinking. Further, over the past 10-12 years,

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<sup>107</sup> The Andhra High Court, in *All India Crochet Lace Exporters ... vs The Government Of Andhra Pradesh, ...* on 29 December, 2004, Equivalent citations: 2005 (2) ALD 409, 2005 (3) ALT 737, (2005) IILLJ 781 AP, unequivocally declared that an employment relationship existed between the lace artisans and the export establishments and that Minimum Wage Law was applicable, and that the establishments were required to contribute to A.P. Labour Welfare Fund. Further the Chennai based WWF in its website has claimed to have organized 35,000 lace makers in Narsapur in the 1980s-90s, while the Godavari Delta Women Lace Artisans Cooperative Cottage Industrial Society Ltd. was started by a lace artisan and has a present strength of 610.

government policy has become more interventionist and identified Narsapur as a mega cluster under the Handicrafts Cluster Development Scheme.

In 2004, the Central Government established a lace park in Narsapur, as a not-for-profit organisation with the aim of providing a platform for thousands of lace makers where they could supposedly sell their products and bypass the middlemen. The prevailing mantra has been enhanced productivity and improving quality, so as to become more competitive in the export market, and as such the lace park was intended to be 'a cooperative setup with a corporate framework'. The lace park was to also train and develop the skill of lace making, and modernize and integrate the lace making in Narsapur with pre and post production processes that were earlier not so well established in Narsapur. The Manufacturers' association was initially unenthusiastic and the focus of activity concentrated on forming self-help groups of women lace workers called MACs or Mutually Aided Co-operative societies, who were federated into the West Godavari Alankriti Lace Manufacturing Mahila Mutually Aided Cooperative Societies Federation, affiliated to the lace park. Through this system, it is assumed that the artisans would get a much better price for their products as the lace park itself would be an outlet for sale. Official reports state that 30,000 women are involved through 50-100 co-operative groups/societies. The Lace Park, however, has been promoting production centres as sites of work, and it remains to be seen as to whether lace making is going to continue as a homebased activity, or become transformed into a different form of organization of production. Further, whether the MACs and production centres are going to sustain as independent producer groups, or just become commercially tied as jobbers to export establishments is another area where we have to wait and see how developments unfold.

35 years ago Mies had commented on the lack of any statistics on women working in crochet lace. Even today, and despite the government's interventions and investments (of more than 5 crores to establish and run the lace park and more than 5 crores in 2015 for training of 5000 lace artisans) a statistical record of numbers of women lace makers in Narsapur is still lacking. The estimate given by Mies in 1981 quoting 'official sources' was around 1 to 1.6 lakh home workers, and she added that some estimates put the figure at 200,000.<sup>108</sup> Today, the figure of 200,000 is routinely used for Narsapur's crochet lace makers and without explanation. More thought out estimates for the contemporary period continue to vary from 1 lakh to 1.6 lakhs, yet the basis for such estimates remains unclear.<sup>109</sup>

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<sup>108</sup> Maria Mies (1981), 'Dynamics of Sexual Division of Labour and Capital Accumulation: Women Lace Workers of Narsapur', *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 16, No. 10/12, Annual Number

<sup>109</sup> Most official reports give the figure of 200,000, and so do some studies, eg., TVS Prasad, et al, 'Crochet Lace Industry: Narsapur', *Indian Journal of Commerce and management (IJOCAM)* volume 2

Certainly, the estimates of the annual turnover of Narsapur's lace industry make estimates of lakhs of workers quite unreasonable. According to news reports, in 2010-11, the Narsapur cluster was said to have earned Rs 100 crores from exports, although by 2013, export earnings had dropped to 30 crores.<sup>110</sup> As per Govt. India's International Lace Trade Centre (ILTC), Narsapur, the most recent export figures for lace and lace products were as follows:

In 2012-13 - Rs. 11.82 crores; in 2013-14 - Rs. 17.75 crores; and in 2014-15 - Rs. 21.36 crores<sup>111</sup>

If indeed there were 200,000 active lace makers, workers' earnings from such exports would roughly amount to less than Rs 500 in a year. That earnings are indeed extraordinarily low is evident in the 2006 cluster case study by MSME, Govt. India, according to which lacemakers earned Rs 400 a month *whenever* they have work. In other words, despite current day hype about the export potential of handcrafted crochet lace, dearth of work availability has become the norm for the lacemakers of Narsapur, as has been a recurrent experience of other export oriented home workers. Again, like other home workers, volatile/declining global demand, and competition from machine made lace from other countries, particularly China, is rendering this longstanding craft product of home workers non-viable as a source of income.

### *Chikan embroiderers of Lucknow*

As is well known, Chikan is a style of hand-embroidered clothing. Chikan embroidered garments are made in stages, starting with fabric cutting and tailoring, followed by block printing and embroidering, and, finally, laundering. In all stages but one, male specialists predominate. It is the most labour intensive embroidery stage that is completely dominated by women, the majority of whom work from home. Estimates of the number of homebased chikan craft workers in and around Lucknow hover around 2.5 lakhs, although again no methodology for arriving at such estimates is ever explained. It is estimated that around 15 per cent of the embroidery products produced are for local markets, 10 per cent for

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issue 3 Dec-2014 , ISSN- 2348-4934(P), 2348-6325(O). On the other hand, a recent project report of the Export Promotion Council for Handicrafts on skill development in Narsapur (2016) gives a number of 1 lakh, while another study - Pardha Saradhi et al (2015) 'A Study on Nimble Fingers' Magic: Narsapur Lace Park, *International Journal of Academic Research* Vol.2, Issue-3(5), July-September, 2015 gives an estimate of 1,60,000.

<sup>110</sup> G. Nagaraja 'Fall in export orders hits lace industry', The Hindu, ANDHRA PRADESH , September 13, 2014

<sup>111</sup> <http://narsapurmegacluster.epch.in/about-iltc/>

other parts of Uttar Pradesh, 50 per cent for the rest of India and 25 per cent for export.<sup>112</sup> The core of chikan craft is the embroidery, which is executed by women home workers, among whom the majority is Muslim.

Since chikan has become a mass-market commodity, cheaper, coarser work is now far more common than fine and high skilled work, and the spread of such work has drawn in women from other communities and also expanded from the urban core of Lucknow into surrounding peri-urban and rural areas. The most accomplished chikan embroiderers can name and execute dozens of discrete stitches. But the majority now know only one form of work that employs, typically, no more than five stitches. Foremost amongst the less skilled forms of chikan embroidery is what is called *bakhya*-work (shadow-work), which is easy to learn and to make, and is the most prevalent. It has been argued that the turn to less skilled work has been driven by the demands of traders, catering to an increasingly competitive readymade mass market. Such pressures have led to both a quickening of the labour process and an expansion of the chikan embroidery workforce.<sup>113</sup>

Interestingly, although it is assumed that chikan embroidery has always been women's work, it appears that it became women's speciality much later than assumed. Earlier it was men who were the most famed embroiderers even in the mid-twentieth century.<sup>114</sup> It would appear that it was the shift to commercial production and the emergence of traders as marketers of Chikan as opposed to the feudal patron and customer that made it into a mass occupation for Muslim women. Most embroiderers are young unmarried or married women with children. But several studies tend to cite the large numbers of embroiderers who have been widowed, divorced, or abandoned, particularly in the traditional urban Muslim residential core of embroidery workers in old Lucknow. Similarly, most studies cite the prevalence of seclusion and *purdah* as constraining of any other options for these women, compelling them to stick to home work, even when the mismatch between labour invested and earnings is so stark.

The production chain of course has several nodes, since chikan embroidery is generally done on stitched garments. A 2008 survey of chikan craft workers gave the average monthly income of the chikan embroiderers as less than Rs.600/-, when the average reported income of entrepreneurs was Rs.21,231/-, ( roughly

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<sup>112</sup> SSA Jafri (2008), 'Chikan Craft as a Subsistence Occupation among Muslims in Lucknow', paper presented in National Seminar: "Emerging Patterns of Contractual Employment in Indian Labour Market " BAU, Lucknow

<sup>113</sup>Clare M. Wilkinson-Weber (1997), 'Skill, Dependency, and Differentiation: Artisans and Agents in the Lucknow Embroidery Industry', *Ethnology*, Vol. 36, No. 1 (Winter, 1997), pp. 49-65

<sup>114</sup>*ibid*

35 times higher than that of chikankar women workers). Other artisans in the production chain like cutting masters, tailors, printers, washermen and agents at the time, earned around Rs.2500/- per month.<sup>115</sup> In other words, the core skill and craft of embroidery that makes chikan unique, is the least valued in terms of wages/payments. For each item of chikan the maximum time taken to finish the respective jobs by cutting master, printer, tailor and washerman was found to be not more than 60 minutes. The labour time of the embroiderers, of course depended upon the quality of embroidery. Still, the minimum labour time required of a single chikankar woman to embroider a quality kurta was found to be 61 hours and the maximum 138 hours; a Shalwar-kameez required a minimum of 119 and a maximum of 218 hours, ladies' top a minimum of 24 hours to a maximum of 49 hours. A Sherwani-kurta took a minimum of 451 hours and went up to 606 hours, a saree varied between 178 to 389 hours, a bed sheet 240 to 360 hours, and a dupatta 228 to 430 hours.

The entire system operates through agents who act as the intermediary between the mahajans/traders and the home workers. In a 2004 study, it was estimated that there are 3,000 retailers and manufacturers of chikan in Lucknow, in addition to 5,000 exporters operating from Lucknow and Delhi alone, although as pointed out by one researcher, exporters here include those who export to other parts of India.<sup>116</sup> The traders, true to their mercantile character and do not associate themselves with the production process as such, but rely on procurement through the agents. The agents are predominantly male, and it has been suggested that the first male agents may have been drawn from erstwhile skilled embroiders, who because of their greater mobility could institute a division of labour between the women and themselves to their benefit.

Studies indicate that the 1990s saw the emergence of female agents, primarily concentrated in the in the old city. According to Wilkinson-Weber (1997), female agents are usually middle-aged and are moderately to highly skilled in embroidery, and the bigger agents have all been recipients of government awards for excellence in chikan embroidery. She argues that as town-dwellers and mature women, they are less under the constraints of purdah than younger or rural women. While they may still do embroidery when it is specially commissioned, or when a batch of work needs to be finished quickly, they are more likely to have assumed supervisory roles, allocating work and domestic tasks to clients and young family members. Having longstanding business relationships with

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<sup>115</sup> Jafri, op.cit

<sup>116</sup> Gulati, Bhavana, *Health and well being of women embroidery workers in the chikan industry of Lucknow*  
PhD thesis, JNU, 2004



mahajans, they are slightly differentiated from the women who still need to approach someone outside the household for work. According to her, no highly skilled embroiderer can survive by producing high quality work alone, and can maintain her craft identity only if she makes a living from making or subcontracting piece work. Like male agents, female agents customarily take a portion of the wage for themselves, and over the long term, a significant difference in the income of agents and their clients is created. Since women agents are drawn from the embroiderers themselves, their cut may be of a lesser order, but the system is such that the exploitation of the worker by capital here takes place through the medium of the exploitation of one worker by another.

What is of particular note, is that highly skilled embroiderers too have to undertake cruder, coarser, and simplified work in order to survive. Since high quality and more elaborate work also entails more time, ultimately the wage per hour is not significantly different from what the less skilled work brings in. It is therefore no surprise that the inevitable process of deskilling is expressed in a refrain from the skilled artisans that the art is dying. In this, some non-profit institutional interventions have attempted to bring together/train high skilled embroiders to serve high end markets and brought in designers to enable them to cater to such markets. Yet, even the most successful among them, such as SEWA, Lucknow, which was established in 1984, say that funds are a problem, especially when there is not much support from the government.<sup>117</sup>

### ***Manufacture of Wearing Apparel/Readymade Garments (RMG)***

With manufacture of wearing apparel showing an increase of almost 14 lakh women homebased workers across the first 12 years of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the apparel/garments industry has indeed emerged as the key sector of expansion for homebased work in India. Homebased work has long dominated the profile of women workers in Indian readymade garment manufacture. Nevertheless, the phenomenal increase in the share of homebased workers among women garment workers in the new century - from 63.7% in 1999-2000 to 85.5% in 2011-12, predicates a further concentration in homebased work.<sup>118</sup>

A part of this increase may be attributable to the export segment of the readymade garment (RMG) industry. Garment exports indeed played a catalytic

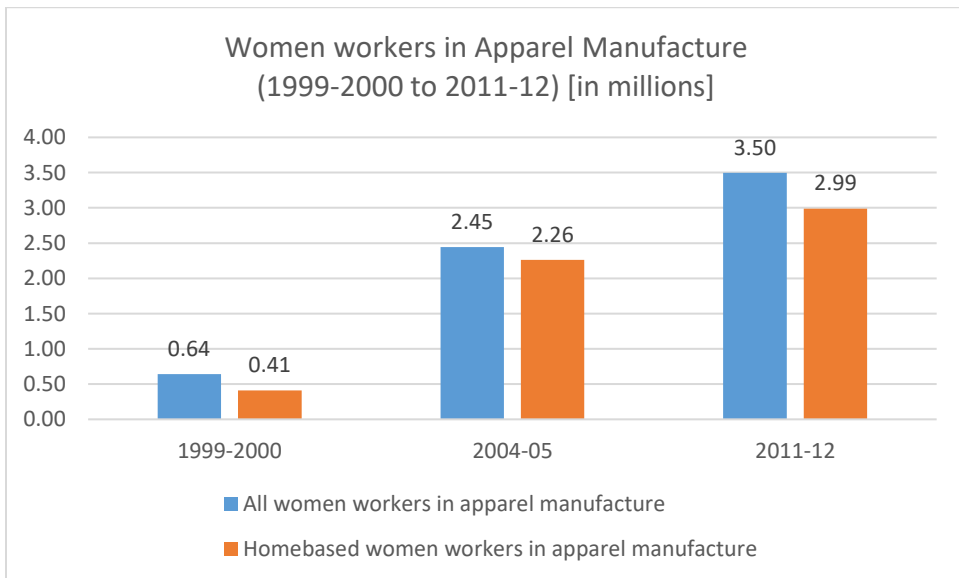
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<sup>117</sup>Anuradha Shukla, 'No End To The Exploitation Of Chikankari Workers' Sunday, July 12,2015, Women's Feature Service

<sup>118</sup> The share of homebased workers in women's employment in garments actually peaked in 2004-05, at more than 92%. That was the year when the share of self-employment and unpaid work in the total female workforce also peaked.

role in establishing a significant industrial base for the RMG industry in India, transforming the earlier mode of limited production of ready-mades that was led by shop level retailing.<sup>119</sup> Studies have shown that during the initial phase of the rise of the garment export industry in India from the late 1960s onwards, it was driven by merchant exporters with limited manufacturing capacities in their factories. Outsourcing to fabricator units was common practice for such export oriented merchants and manufacturers through the 1970s and 1980s. Fabricators, in turn, passed on some tasks/functions, such as thread cutting, embellishment with embroidery, etc. to women home workers. Fabricators, unlike the merchant manufacturers, and like contractors in other sectors, were often socially connected with their workers, sometimes through ties of community and common areas of residence. It was through the fabricators that home workers were initially brought into RMG production for exports in cities like Delhi.

Fig. 4



Source: Calculated from various rounds of NSSO employment surveys for women's employment in apparel manufacture, and Raveendran et al for homebased workers

<sup>119</sup> Manufacturing of readymade garments had its origins in India during the Second World War when units for mass production of military uniforms were set up. However, domestic demand for ready-mades was limited and from the sixties, the rapid growth of the industry was brought about through the rising growth of exports, which by the end of the eighties accounted for more than 50 per cent of the total garment production in the country.

Indian garment exports were initially largely low volume with high fashion content (including Indian ethnic prints and embellishments – the ‘India look’ that had caught American and European fancy in the late 1960s and 70s. Production and design was driven by the exporters themselves who searched out markets for their wares in developed countries, even when ease of entry was curtailed by the Multi-fibre Arrangement (MFA 1974-2005) of quota allocations/restrictions on textile and garment imports by developed countries.

This was to change alongside changes in the global architecture of the readymade garment industry, which became more driven and controlled by buyers with monopoly control over markets in the developed countries. By the first decade of the new century, the garment export industry in India had become more integrated with the buyer driven structuring of global trade in RMG, as the MFA was phased out, via the Agreement on Textiles and Clothing (1995-2005), bringing an end to the quota regime. Global trade in garments became more governed by monopoly retailers/buyers with market control in the developed country destinations. Such buyers who demanded higher volumes and shorter time runs for production, tended to forge closer relationships with larger manufacturers in India.

Even as garment exports from India continued to rise, the industry was marked by consolidation of production into larger manufacturing units. Such larger units brought several hitherto outsourced processes in-house. Further, machinery largely replaced the hand embroidery embellishment that had earlier often been outsourced to home workers. Recent studies of home workers in garment embellishment for export markets seem to increasingly be focused on what is called zari work or sequin stitching, which is a process that has so far not been mechanized. As a result of such developments, and contrary to popular perception, some studies indicate that the garment export sector may no longer be as major a force behind homebased work in India, as it was during the 1980s and early 1990s.<sup>120</sup> There are several indications that it is the expansion of RMG in the domestic markets that is today more of a factor in the increasing numbers of women homebased workers in garment manufacture.

Unfortunately, studies that focus on garment production for domestic markets are too few, and it is difficult to draw out a larger picture of the sector in which we might situate the homebased workers. Nevertheless, a rise in per capita consumption of RMG in India is strikingly evident from a 2009 study on textile and clothing conducted by NCAER. Using Textile committee data, which lists items of clothing made of woven cloth in detail, the study presents an interesting view of

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<sup>120</sup> See Mazumdar (2007)

items of clothing that any survey of home workers tends to show as being at least part produced by women in their homes.

Table 7: Domestic consumption (itemwise) of readymade garments of woven cloth in India  
1990, 2000, and 2006  
(Million square metres of woven cloth)

RMG Item for Domestic Market	1990	2000	2006
	In million sq. metres		
Shirt/Bush Shirt Manila	228.5	442.4	807.8
Trouser	110.01	236.6	538.56
Half Pant/Shorts/Quarter Pants	67.7	113.16	100.98
Pyjama salwar Churidar/Kurta Zubba Kameez/Kurta Pyjama/Salwar Kameez/Night Suit/Dressing Gown	135.41	1059.59	2064.48
School Uniform	33.85	92.59	134.64
Blouses/Choli	101.56	185.17	134.64
Frock	397.76	308.62	370.26
Skirt/Midi	16.93	61.72	67.32
Petticoat	186.19	442.35	807.84
Brassiere	8.46	10.29	22.44
Slacks/Jeans/Pants	-	205.75	325.38
Maxi	33.85	41.15	33.66
Baba Suit/ Baby Jabla	110.02	174.88	224.4
All RMG for Domestic Market	1489.49	3579.98	5654.88

Source: Calculated from Table 4.3A, in NCAER (2009), *Assessing the Prospects for India's Textile and Clothing Sector*

From Table 7, it must be first noted that between 1990 and 2006, there was an almost fourfold increase in the total woven cloth based readymade garments consumed by the population in India from 1489.49 million square metres in 1990

to 5654.88 million square meters in 2006. In per capita terms, this would mean an increase from 1.76 sq metres per person in 1990 to 5.04 sq metres per person in 2006. Such an increase has led to a rise in the share of Readymade Garments in woven products from 11.75% in 1990 to 19.27% in 2000 and further to 23.75% in 2006.

Most studies of home workers in garment manufacture have tended to focus on embellishment activities such as embroidery, of which chikan is a prime example. Yet, it may not be the artisanal quality of the work that is driving this quite significant increase in women homebased workers in apparel manufacture. In discussing developments in the chikan industry, we had already noted that servicing a larger market entailed quickening of the production process that in turn shifted the focus of activity away from more finely honed craft skills towards less skill intensive and faster production, albeit of handmade variety.

In the above table, it is striking that the items such as pyjama, salwar, kurta, kameez, etc., whose manufacture tends not to be factory based, have shown the greatest increases in production quantities. In 1990, these items constituted only around 9 per cent of domestic consumption of readymade garments. By 2006, their share in domestic consumption of RMG had jumped to around 37 per cent. It could be argued that the movement of these items from the tailor's shop to the RMG segment of clothing manufacture has been one significant factor in the spread of home work by women in the contemporary period.

#### *Stitching and finishing: RMG and women's home work*

It is well known that tailoring was earlier an exclusively male profession, although development programmes for women from the social welfare institutions of the early years after independence, to the mahila mandals of the 1960s, through the several vocational training programmes for women in later decades (which generally included some training in stitching and a sewing machine), all promoted the idea that the vocation of stitching/tailoring, as such, suited femininity. Perhaps it did suit the domestication of women's labour in that it contributed to clothing members of the family, particularly children, at lesser cost than professional tailoring.

Nevertheless, in our view, behind the significant surge in home work in commercial stitching lies the story of the shift from custom tailoring to readymade garment manufacture. Such a shift includes a deskilled format of repetitive specialization in one or other part process that was perfected on the garment factory floor and then moved to the homes of women. It's not as if the persistent official orientation of women towards tailoring over successive decades did not

play a role. It did, and particularly in the making of a reserve army of women workers with the ability to use sewing machines. However, this is only one aspect of the story. The mere availability of cheap female labour in homes cannot by itself give rise to their employment in any given industry. The questions that need to be studied is the processes by which the gendered division of labour is established – which tasks fall to women at home, and which tasks to men, whether at home or in factory/workshop.

In examining such processes, it may be possible to discern the repetitive motif of mobile male intermediaries with relatively less labour intensive tasks, and immobile homebased women on whom the most arduous and labour intensive processes are imposed. At an impressionistic level, it seems that cutting and styling garments even in the readymade garment sector including on factory floors, remain male dominated tasks, while women may stitch along pre-determined lines using a sewing machine, or complete with hand the hemming, trimming, and related tasks.

A 2014 study of home-based workers in Ahmedabad showed that stitching, embroidery, finishing and packing were the tasks carried out by home workers in the garment industry where the bulk of goods were for the domestic, but not necessarily local, market. The study suggested that sub-contracting by firms based in the city cast a wide net so much so that 80 per cent of the work, and particularly higher value addition processes (stitching, embellishment and ornamentation) were sent outside the city and only the low value addition tasks such as trimming/thread cutting and finishing work was given to local workers.<sup>121</sup>

Unsurprisingly, the study also showed that the mean monthly earnings of garment home workers getting work through contractors was significantly lower at Rs 2,112.56, in comparison to the mean monthly earnings of Rs 2,555.50 of those who worked directly for traders. Ahmedabad's garment workers also spend a considerable amount on the purchasing of materials like thread, needles, machine oil, and electricity for running their sewing machines. What this implies is that it is not the craft aspect that was a primary aspect of garment home workers' jobs, but rather their ability to take on jobs where ownership/access to a sewing machine in their homes could also be used. One focus of the Ahmedabad study was on the civic context, and it pointed out that housing and space issues and irregular electricity were both worker issues for these home workers. Lack of space to keep raw material and final products created problems, and when electricity

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<sup>121</sup> Mahadevia D. et al, 'Home Based Workers in Ahmedabad, India: A City Report', WIEGO IEMS study, 2013

(for which the worker household no doubt pays) was not available, they had to use manual sewing machines that increased their labour time.

Strikingly, the study showed that the majority (54%) of the homebased garment workers had been working in the industry for more than 10 years, suggesting a degree of stability in relation to employment, even though there could be seasonal ups and downs. Since the study was conducted through and in areas of SEWA's membership, it is possible that the presence of SEWA facilitated such stability. Equally, it could be related to the fact that in many cases traders and contractors were getting free use of machines supplied by workers without paying any charge for them, or, to put it another way, the workers were subsidizing the cost of production. Higher productivity (using machines) at the lowest end wage no doubt provides an extra fillip to the process of capital accumulation.

*Apparel value chains and their governance: the Bareilly embellishment hub*

Unni and Scaria have mapped value chains in Bareilly (city in Uttar Pradesh some 5-6 hours from Delhi). According to them, Bareilly has become 'one of the biggest centres in India where embellishment activity is done on a large scale,' and their study provides some nuanced insights.<sup>122</sup> It shows that only men constitute hired workers (i.e., working in enterprises), sub-contractors, wholesale traders and exporters, while women predominate in home work (89%). Unni and Scaria identified the availability of cheaper labour as the reason for large scale outsourcing of embellishment activity to Bareilly, since the rate for sequin/bead embellishment of a full saree was 22 per cent less than the prevailing rate in Delhi for the same work. Lack of alternative employment opportunities, limited access to productive sources, and landlessness of these workers who are mostly employed as agricultural labourers during the off season is posited as having weakened the bargaining position of the Bareilly workers. Daily earnings of both hired workers and homebased workers were well below statutory minimum wages.

The chains for domestic markets were found to be of four types.

- a) Where the wholesale traders or retailers in Delhi outsource to wholesale traders in Bareilly who in turn outsource to contractors in Bareilly. Then the chain proceeds to subcontractors and finally reaches workers. This chain includes all the agents and is the longest chain within the national chain.

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<sup>122</sup> Unni & Scaria, 2007, op.cit

- b) Where the contractors in Bareilly who gets work from wholesale/retailers in Bareilly may directly outsource to home-based workers overriding subcontractors.
- c) The wholesale traders/retailers in Delhi may directly subcontract to contractors in Bareilly and then the chain proceeds to sub-contractors and reaches workers finally. This chain overlooks wholesale traders in Bareilly.
- d) It is also possible that the above chain (c) bypasses subcontractors and reaches directly to workers. This chain avoids two agents, wholesale traders in Bareilly and subcontractors.

The chain for export markets followed a similar pattern at the Bareilly end, but at its apex was the international retailer or buying house. Unni and Scaria report that usually the international value chain starts from either retailer or buying house. It then proceeds to exporters in Delhi who in turn outsource to contractors in Bareilly, then to subcontractors and finally reaches workers. This chain includes all the agents. A shorter chain starts from retailer or buying houses and then proceeds to exporters in Delhi who in turn outsource to contractors in Bareilly. Then contractors directly subcontract the work to homebased workers. This chain avoids subcontractors.

Regarding governance of the chains, it has been argued that the export oriented chain is governed through the work process – from control over design, to pre-production approvals and stipulations of adherence to tight time schedules for each process, quality controls - all managed by rejection if something is not adhered to or is interrupted. In contrast, the domestic chain, it is argued, is more relaxed and sustained/controlled by social institutions in which community and caste may also play a role, particularly since the majority of workers up to contractors are Muslim Ansaris, categorized as OBC (Other Backward Classes). Although the power of rejection can operate in the domestic chain as well, the difference in commodity composition is such that items manufactured for export may be difficult to take to local markets, while items manufactured for the domestic market, if rejected, may still find markets accessible to workers and low end sub-contractors. An important finding was that for home workers, earnings from export or domestic markets were not significantly differentiated and in general, workers preferred to work for a domestic market rather than for exports. The study did not quantify in financial terms, either value addition or appropriation of value along the chain.

It is perhaps important to bear in mind that the nature of embellishment in Bareilly is sequin or bead (*moti*) embroidery, which perhaps remains one of the



last outposts of hand embroidery that has yet to be breached by machines. The specific nature of such embellishment has some significance at a time when homebased silk thread based hand embroidery has largely given way to machines in factories. Just a short while before Unni and Scaria's 2007 study in Bareilly and Delhi, a survey of homebased workers conducted in 2004 in Delhi had shown that embroidery was one of the homebased occupations that had seen a significant drop in even nominal wage rates, and a switch to machine embroidery by garment exporters had left only a small residual handful of homebased hand embroiderers.<sup>123</sup>

The emergence of garment manufacture as of singular importance in the profile of women homebased workers in India requires a more comparative framework that encompasses and integrates regional specificities into a more general frame. The growing importance of domestic market oriented homebased work in garments suggests that the predominant frameworks of analysis, that have grown out of approaches to global production networks, are not adequate for understanding the far more decentralized, yet increasingly integrated nature of domestic markets or the location of homebased workers in circuits of capital and trade and the circulation of the products of homebased workers within India and its states.

### **Multi sectoral survey findings**

Although we believe that our detailed discussion of some specific sectors has been important in highlighting both commonalities as well as variations of experience of homebased work in India, it must be said that there are limits to the sectoral approach to women homebased workers. Processes of social differentiation that are inbuilt into the fluid situation that so many homebased workers find themselves in, are not sector specific, and actually cut across sectors in many common ways. On the other hand, in general, multi-sector studies of homebased workers have necessarily had to be largely limited to a few cities and areas. We are however, fortunate that one of the central trade unions (CITU) conducted a fairly large survey of 3300 homebased workers across several trades in 40 districts of 10 states in India, which makes it probably the largest and most wide ranging of any such survey till date.<sup>124</sup>

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<sup>123</sup> Mazumdar, 2007, op.cit

<sup>124</sup> The survey which was supported by the ILO, covered 2719 women and 578 men. Although, the survey was conducted in 2006, its findings were published only in 2013. It was however, unevenly distributed across states, with Tamilnadu providing the largest number (27 per cent of the surveyed workers) followed by Andhra Pradesh (14 per cent) and Kerala (10 per cent). The three southern

The sheer variety of products and labour processes that go into the making of a homebased workforce in India have become evident from this survey, which also included some services, something that is rare in studies of homebased work. We may end this section with 3 tables drawn from the CITU survey that present a bird's eye view of the types of employers of homebased workers, a rough idea of the range and forms of homebased work in India, the hourly and daily incomes earned in 2006, and the markets for products of homebased workers. The special merit of this survey is that it draws on and advances trade union experience among home based workers. Although predominantly urban in its outreach, what is unique as far as the coverage of the survey is concerned is that it investigated workers in 4 metropolitan cities, 41 towns (small, medium, as well as relatively large) and 43 villages.<sup>125</sup>

Table 8: Employers of homebased workers

<b>Suppliers Of Raw Materials And Work Contracts</b>	<b>Number Of Workers Surveyed</b>	<b>Percentage Distribution Of Workers</b>
Agents, brokers, contractors, etc.	798	31
Merchants, traders, businessmen	515	20
Companies, manufacturers, factories	201	8
Shops (including tailor shops, general stores, goldsmiths, tea and snack shops, etc) and small proprietary establishments (including master weavers, saloons, etc)	686	27

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states thus accounted for 51 per cent of the survey. The north Indian Hindi belt represented by Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Delhi and Haryana together constituted 28 per cent (9, 11, 6 and 2 per cent respectively), the eastern states of Assam and West Bengal were represented by 16 per cent (8 per cent each), and Maharashtra in western India provided the remaining 5 per cent.

<sup>125</sup> Most remarkable is the number of small and medium sized towns (with less than one million population) covered including Tamilnadu (18), followed by Andhra Pradesh (8), Uttar Pradesh (4), Kerala (3), Madhya Pradesh (2). The small and medium sized towns of West Bengal (5) were all however, located close to and connected with the growth of the metropolis of Kolkata. Of the 43 villages 30 were in Kerala, 5 in Tamilnadu, 2 in Assam, 5 in Uttar Pradesh and 1 in Haryana. Among the villages, those in Assam were part of an important silk weaving centre closely connected with the state capital, Guwahati, while those in Uttar Pradesh were either linked to the industrial town of Firozabad or a part of the Mirzapur-Bhadohi carpet weaving belt.

Own account, independent or through direct customer	345	14
Total	2545	100

Table 9: Homebased workers across India

<b>Industry</b>	<b>WOMEN</b>	<b>MEN</b>
<b>Manufacturing</b>	<b>2511</b>	<b>563</b>
<b>Textiles and textile products</b>	<b>742</b>	<b>371</b>
<i>of which:</i>		
1 Handloom	200	293
2 Hand work – stitching, cutting, knitting, threadcutting, hosiery, reeling, winding, weaving net, etc	113	3
3 Embroidery	124	27
4 Machine tailoring/stitching	305	48
<b>Food processing</b> <i>(making papad, adhirasam, badi, banana peeling, chatni making and packing, chura cutting (supari), making candyfloss, jaggery, drying peeling fish, grinding flour, making bonda, idli, murukku and other wet or dry snacks, sweets, pickles, etc)</i>	<b>426</b>	<b>49</b>
<b>Beedi</b>	<b>363</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>Flower tying, making garlands etc.</b>	<b>117</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>Bamboo/ leaf and Coir products</b>	<b>109</b>	<b>22</b>
<i>Of which</i>		
1 Bamboo/palm and other leaf baskets, boards, mats, plates, fans, boxes etc.	41	17
2 Coir baskets, ropes, mats, etc.	51	2

<i>3 Brooms</i>	17	3
<b>Chemical</b>	<b>115</b>	<b>5</b>
<i>Of which:</i>		
<i>1 agarbatti (incense sticks)</i>	83	2
<i>2 washing or cleaning powders, bleach, candles, phenyle, soap, rubber, lime etc</i>	32	3
<b>Metal and electrical</b>	<b>40</b>	<b>2</b>
<i>Of which:</i>		
<i>1 brass screws, chimti, steel, wires, aluminium, iron work, goldsmiths, rolled gold workers, etc.</i>	28	2
<i>2 Electrical</i>	12	
<b>Leather</b>	<b>11</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>Paper</b> <i>(packets, envelops, cards, paper chains and flowers etc)</i>	<b>50</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>Pottery</b>	<b>38</b>	<b>14</b>
<b>Miscellaneous manufacturing</b>	<b>500</b>	<b>91</b>
<i>Of which:</i>	34	14
<i>1 beads, bangles, mosaic and imitation jewellery</i>		
<i>2 Bindi pasting</i>	33	
<i>3 Matches</i>	13	
<i>4 Others including plastic products (toys, dolls etc), packing sacred ashes, preparing sacred thread, rakhis, prayer chains (rosaries) tag fixing, shell work, recycling processes (eg. separating thread from rubber tyres, unraveling old cloth etc), wire cots, painting threads, carpentry, brushmaking, etc</i>	420	77
<b>Services</b>	<b>208</b>	

<b>Retail</b> <i>(cooked food, flowers, bangles, cloth, fish, milk, chicken/mutton, general goods, snacks, tea etc.)</i>	<b>158</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>Other Services</b> <i>(beautician, washing and ironing, sundry domestic services, providing water, running phone booths etc)</i>	<b>50</b>	<b>10</b>
<b>Total</b>	<b>2719</b>	<b>578</b>

Table 10: Incomes and Distribution of Homebased workers by the markets for their products

Industry	Hourly Income Rate (Rs)	Earnings in a Day (Rs)	Percentage working for Export market	Percentage working for Domestic market	Percentage working for Local market
Flower tying, making garlands etc.	4.14	11.53	0	3.3	96.7
Agarbatti (incense sticks)	3.02	14.06	0	97.6	2.4
Beedi	4.21	15.3	0	100	0
Bamboo/ leaf and Coir products	4.69	17.16	0	43.5	56.5
Hand stitching, knitting, thread cutting, hosiery, reeling, winding, weaving net, etc	3.08	17.5	0	89.7	10.3
Matches	3.73	19	0	100	0
Paper -packets, envelopes, cards, paper chains and flowers	2.87	20.94	0	74	26
Beads, bangles and imitation jewellery	3.79	21.17	0	83.3	16.7
Handloom	4.42	22.52	13.6	81.9	4.5
Food processing	5.41	25.73	2.5	51.4	46.1
Toys, dolls, packing sacred ashes, preparing sacred thread, rakhis,	5.15	26.18	2.7	68.4	28.9

prayer chains (rosaries) tag fixing, shell work, recycling processes, wire cots, painting threads, carpentry, brush making					
Bindi	3.81	26.88	0	97	3
Electrical goods	4.52	28.18	0	75	25
Brassware, screws, chimti, steel, wires, aluminium, iron work	3.87	29.12	0	83.3	16.7
Hand Embroidery	6.67	32.65	46.4	48.3	5.3
Leather	6.71	32.77	0	92.9	7.1
Machine tailoring/stitching	6.83	33.47	1.1	53.5	45.3
Cleaning powders, bleach, candles, phenyle, soap, rubber, lime	10.16	39.54	0	28.6	71.4
Pottery	7.68	44.68	0	1.9	98.1
Retail-Cooked food, flowers, bangles, cloth, fish, milk, chicken/mutton, general goods, snacks, tea etc.)	6.41	45.68	0	0	100
Other Services (beauty parlour, washing and ironing, sundry domestic services, providing water, running phone booths etc	9.55	65.24	0	0	100
<b>All Homebased Workers surveyed by CITU</b>	<b>5.28</b>	<b>23.65</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>62.1</b>	<b>32.8</b>

## Concluding Remarks

This paper has tried to present a perspective overview of the evolution of approaches to homebased work by women in India. It touches on the advances made to bring women homebased workers 'out of the shadows' and make them visible in statistics and global debates on labour, which have indeed been significantly based on the Indian experience, and particularly of organisations like SEWA. It suggests however, that there is a need to broaden the storyline to include the experiences of a wider range of actors and sectors which also have a history of work and organization among homebased workers. It points out that

mainstream debates, perspectives, and research on homebased work in India have tended to erase the experience of mixed gender trade unions.

A broadening of the view becomes particularly important in the context of the rollback of some of the advances made in conceiving of regulations and rights for homebased workers in the 1980s over the following decades of liberalization in India, and the need for greater and united assertion by worker organisations. At the same time, the paper suggests that the gendered nature and patriarchal hierarchies that underpin the contours and spread of homebased work in India are also underresearched. It argues that purely economic approaches that have indeed enabled greater access by women homebased workers to credit and markets or some inspiring stories of overcoming difficulties and solidarities, may however restrict the gaze away from the larger context of declining work/income opportunities for women in general and even within homebased work in India.

Drawing on macro-data briefs prepared by WIEGO, the paper has further unpacked and extended the interpretation of trends in homebased work in India. It draws on the experience of women's studies scholars in India, who have argued that when it comes to women's employment, there is a need to take a combined view of the actual numbers as well as percentage ratios in order to comprehend developments. It suggests that observable volatility in the shares of the homebased workforce in female employment should be correlated with trends in unpaid work by women, an area that has not received adequate focus in discussions on homebased work.

The pervasiveness of extreme volatility is confirmed by sector specific reviews, which also bring out the fact that only a small percentage of the products of homebased workers in India are directed at export markets. The paper therefore suggests that frameworks of analysis, that have grown out of approaches to global production networks, are perhaps not adequate for understanding the Indian experience. More attention requires to be paid to the far more decentralized, yet increasingly integrated nature of domestic markets, and to the location of homebased workers in circuits of capital and trade and to developments in the circulation of the products of homebased workers within India and its states.

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