

How India is Failing its Labouring Women

Krishna Menon

WOMEN IN THE WORLDS OF LABOUR: INTERDISCIPLINARY AND INTERSECTIONAL PERSPECTIVES

Edited by Mary E. John and Meena Gopal
Orient BlackSwan, 2021, pp. 468, ₹995.00

The question of women's labour has been central to most women's studies classrooms across the world. The book edited by Mary E. John and Meena Gopal is pathbreaking because it takes the question of women's labour out of the confines of traditional women's studies by adopting an interdisciplinary and intersectional perspective. The book opens with a section that is almost akin to a masterclass on the issues of women and labour in India in specific, accompanied by a very exhaustive discussion of the shifting theoretical paradigms, scholarly debates and literature review. This section has essays by Mary E. John, Samita Sen, Rajni Palriwala and Neetha N—all scholars whose names are associated with landmark and iconic research and writing on women and labour.

The introduction begins with reminding the readers about some landmark struggles in recent times led by women—the Dalit women-led tea plantation workers' struggle in Munnar, Kerala, the very big *anganwadi* women workers' struggle in Delhi and so on. These movements and many like these in India and elsewhere in the world, led largely by women, draw our attention to the precarity that has come to characterize women worker's lives. And yet, as Meena Gopal and Mary E. John write, women have risen to the occasion, mobilized, resisted and won in many instances. The editors believe that these struggles are powerful signals urging civil society, government and policy makers, hostile media, other social movements including the women's movements and a largely disinterested public that women must be fully recognized for the workers that they are—and not as accidental or incidental part of the workforce. The introduction ends by earmarking the need for an epistemological and ideological shift to understand the shifting contours of women's labour and the various forms of resistance they are mounting along the intersections of caste, region, class, sexuality and other social relations.

The first chapter of the book 'Marxism, Feminism and the Political Fortunes of Theories' reminds us of the need to engage closely with the category of labour as Mary E. John traces its journey from early socialist thinking, Marxist deliberations, Communist responses and finally the changing contours of feminist thinking on the category of labour. This chapter engages with a wide range of socialist (pre-Marxist) and Marxist thinking on the question of labour in general and women's labour in particular. The very rigorous conversations between Marxism and feminism are detailed in this chapter and the writer ends with the contention that this conversation which yields the Marxist feminist framework is in need of enlargement in order to be able to accommodate the complex terrain of women's labour while accepting that this would provide an important entry point into the understanding of women's labour. For it is only if women's labour and struggles are located within the intersections of caste, sexuality, gender and, of course, class relations that a viable and democratic and socialist resolution can be found.

Samita Sen's contribution, 'Rethinking Gender and Class', argues that while engaging with the complexities of working-class struggles, especially the struggles of women workers in contemporary times, it is crucial for postcolonial societies to factor in the historical trajectories of the changes and transitions in the nature of the economy and working classes. This would enable us to make crucial connections between seemingly disparate debates and scholarship on, for example, women's work on the one hand and the concerns about sexuality and violence. The understanding of women as workers, the value attached to women's work and labour are very closely linked to debates about women's sexuality and violence against women. Bringing these concerns closer would only help enrich feminist understanding of women's labour.

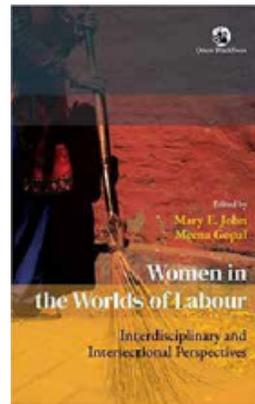
Rajni Palriwala's essay titled 'Trajectories in the Care Discourse' maps the entire field of scholarship and debates within feminist writing on care work. She argues that women have been particularly constrained in their individualization by their familial and caregiving responsibilities. She points out that while this is the case on the one hand, on the other hand, the fact is that this care work unfolds within an economy based on commodification and profit resulting in inequalities of work and gendered allocation of care labour and reinforcing women's economic dependence. She hopes for a degendering of care work along with

reevaluation of this work as part of the struggles for feminist futures.

N. Neetha's work 'Crisis in Female Employment: Analysis Across Social Groups' stands out for its clarity in presenting the sharpening gender-based inequality in employment with the use of a wide range of data. She observes that there is a shortage of employment opportunities for women creating further segmentation in employment along groups and communities. She argues that there are sharp economic and social differentiations within each social group impacting the nature of women's labour and hence the need for micro-level research that steers clear of unnuanced and sweeping generalizations.

Part II of the book gives us a glimpse of the historical nature of the many challenges and dilemmas faced by women workers in the contemporary context. Meena Gopal's very forceful articulation about the struggles of home-based beedi workers in the period 1930s-1960s has many valuable lessons for us today. Geeta Thatra's chapter titled 'Mujra and Baithak in Bombay' traces the arrival of the talented *tawaiifs* (courtesans) of Lucknow and Delhi in the city of Bombay. She traces their flourishing careers and contribution to the film industry on the one hand, and to the national movement on the other hand through fund raising and other means of support to leaders such as Gandhi who remained uncomfortable with their less than respectable status in polite society. And yet, as the city changed along with the changing political landscape, the urban spaces of Mumbai have been reconfigured to gradually obliterate certain forms of women's labour and the spaces they occupied—such as that of the courtesans and their dwellings.

Part III focusses on labour from the margins and opens with a chapter by Shaileshkumar Darokar titled 'Dalit Women, Dehumanized Labour and Struggles for Dignity'. Based on research in the labour camps in Mumbai (municipal quarters of sanitation workers), Darokar concludes by stating that manual scavenging as largely women's labour cannot be eradicated till such time that caste itself, following Ambedkar, is annihilated. This is so because this occupation is implanted in the caste hierarchy and will persist till such time that the caste hierarchy remains



intact. Ranjana Padhi's work on the lives, struggles and labour of women in the subsistence segments of Indian economy titled

'Subsistence Under Siege' gives us a glimpse of the besieged lives and labour of women in subsistence farming who have mostly not found representation in studies by economists and policy makers. This is to a certain extent because of the fact that production and consumption is both within the household, blurring the thin line that divided

household labour from productive labour. Being outside the pale of cash economy, the challenges that these women face need serious feminist engagement.

'Gender, Caste and Abjected Space' is a chapter by J Devika that focusses on the history of 'slum women' and their work in Kerala. Based on her study of the Kudumbashree self-help groups for women in Kerala, J Devika argues that while this project provides a frame for the political mobilization of women, it stays within the broad terms of Brahminical patriarchy. She argues that such efforts could become more meaningful if imbued by an understanding of the fact that caste and gender are structural and intertwined and nor mere normative structures that have separate existence. It is this insight that she suggests should be infused into the welfare or else, the spatial locations housing these women would not just be discriminated against or marginalized but will be rendered abject, an idea that she borrows from the works of Julia Kristeva.

Sunil Mohan and Rumi Harish leave the reader with many complex questions as they examine the meaning of 'queering' labour. Their chapter 'Queer, Labour and Queering Labour' wonders whether gender roles are shaping the forms of labour or is labour determining gender roles. They contend that the situation in contemporary India is such that the bulk of work available to marginalized communities is either under-recognized or not recognized as labour at all. This calls for an active re-imagination of policy and practice, institutions and processes. 'Engendering the Disability-Work Interface' by Renu Adlakha is a valuable contribution towards thinking about the crucial role of disability as a variable while theorizing about women's labour, needless to add that it is significant while making

policies with regard to the same. She writes that disability cuts across class, gender, nationality and generations and could happen to any woman at any time in her life, resulting in loss of employment. However, the fact is that in almost all policy at the macro level, disability remains invisible while discussing women's labour. She draws the readers' attention to new ways in which disability, information technology, and flexible work arrangements in the wake of globalization are impacting women with disability and their search for employment. This is a new horizon that needs much more careful thinking and research. Socio-cultural stereotypes render women with disabilities unfit for both traditional roles within the reproductive zone as well as that of the wage earner. Hence, she rightly argues that the need of the hour is to make visible the large quantum of labour undertaken by women with disabilities in our society—both at home, in fields and elsewhere.

Part IV of the book is dedicated to looking at women's labour in contemporary India—set in novel contexts full of new challenges and experiences. Bindhulakshmi Pattadath's ethnographic field work titled 'Changing Meanings of Home: Migrant Domestic Work and its Everyday Negotiations' conducted in Dubai and Sharjah records the labour and lives of the migrant women domestic workers who travelled from Kerala to the UAE. She argues for an alternative history and economics of migration to be imagined that accords centre space to the lives of the migrant women workers who undertake complex migration trajectories in search of employment as domestic workers, far removed from the conventional image of the men who migrate and women who join the men. She comments on how the 'home' emerges in their narratives often as a broken home or a home that they have lost or as a commodity to be exchanged to facilitate travel—very different from the popular imagination of moral panic associated with women who leave home in search of work. It is also true that very often the 'home' travels with the women and is a dynamic space and imagined differently at differently points in their migration trajectory.

'Factory Girls' is the title of a very evocative chapter written by Madhumita Dutta based on experiences of young women who work in a factory run by a global corporation. The author draws the reader's attention to the multiple layers of relations that are produced within this context as the young girls learn to navigate their families, social structures, modern factory

and desire for love, marriage, friendship and solidarities. Thus, the relations that are forged are not just that of 'production', but linked to the everyday contexts in which these young women lead their lives. Based on the study, the author concludes that factory employment is not just about wages, but about the many possibilities that it offers these young women to create new networks of social relations thereby gaining some degree of control over their bodies and selves.

Nandini Manjrekar's chosen site in 'Researching Women Teachers in New Times: Preliminary Reflections' is the school—not from the vantage point of girl students but from that of female teachers. Manjrekar writes about the need to examine the impact of reforms in the education sector in recent times on female teachers' sense of self and professional identity. We learn that education as a sector that offers employment to women is getting increasingly segmented and differentiated—from government-run child welfare centres, small private schools, government schools, expensive private schools and international schools—the terrain is vast and very dissimilar—thus producing very different kinds of experiences for the women who labour in this sector. It is this aspect that requires further study, at a time when neo-liberal forces have initiated a drastic revision of the philosophy and organization of school education across India.

Sandali Thakur in the chapter titled 'Women's Art, Women's Labour' draws upon ethnographic vignettes from Mithila, Bihar. The argument offered is to move away from a strictly 'aesthetic' approach towards understanding art and instead proposes that art be looked at as being embedded in a context—a social, cultural and political context. Of course, it cannot be reduced simplistically to its context, nor can it be glorified as something transcendental. The aura around art sometimes masks the labour and hard work that the women put into the beautiful art work that they produce. The women of Mithila who produce the art should be seen as engaged in work or artistic labour as argued by Thakur, since they not only produce aesthetic value, they are also producing a commodity with its own circulation networks in the capitalist economy. Unless this is done, the women who produce art from this region would not be in a position to negotiate and claim fair prices for their work.

This section has a very refreshing and novel chapter that is a conversation between the editors and the leading scholar of Gender

and Sexuality, Svati Shah. The format of the chapter is easy and open ended and creates a different kind of possibility for the reader as it enables a glimpse into the formation of ideas and arguments rather than receive only the fully formed ideas. Svati Shah who offers us the pioneering concept of 'sex for work' speaks of the thinking behind this idea and how this changes our understanding of sex work itself.

The concluding part of the book is dedicated to exploring the labour of women who organize and work with women's trade unions and welfare programmes run by the state—labour that is often unnoticed. Sreerexha Sathi's work explores the labour of the women in India's largest welfare project—the Integrated Child Development Services as Anganwadi workers. Women employed in this sector have been subjected to the worst kinds of onslaughts as a result of globalization and neo-liberal principles of management of NGOs, etc. Their work is characterized as 'voluntary' resulting in poor wages and an overall devaluation of their labour. The author alerts us to the fact that the women working in this sector do not see their work as voluntary and see it as employment that should fetch them reasonable wages so as to ameliorate their lives and that of their children and families. Sujata Gothoskar writes about the vexed relationship between women and trade unions in the chapter titled 'Women's Relationship with Trade Union—the More it Changes...?' The title of the chapter is telling as it discusses the absences, silences and omissions of women workers drawn from Dalit and Adivasi communities. The fact that women are a small part of organized labour works to their disadvantage in being represented within trade unions. Increasingly, women within the informal sector with distinctive problems and challenges are finding it difficult to unionize given the repressive measures adopted by the state and industry in collusion. However, it is heartening to end an account of this book by mentioning that women workers are not prepared to be browbeaten and have found creative ways of challenging the regime of capitalism and patriarchy organized around caste/ability/age, religion and so on.

This is a timely volume and brings together a vast array of meaningful research. One wishes to see the addition of a section addressing the struggles of women labouring in the non-traditional livelihood spectrum such as cab drivers, masons, electricians and so on.

Krishna Menon is Professor at the School of Human Studies, Ambedkar University, Delhi.