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From the Mill to the Streets

-A Study of Retrenchment of Women from Ahmedabad Textile Mills

THE textile mills of Ahmedabad were founded at the turn of the century and since then have grown, prospered and dominated Ahmedabad's economic and social life. The 65 textile mills today give direct employment to about 1.5 lakh workers and indirect employment to lakhs more. Over the last two years the industry has been going through a crisis and so far 14 mills have shut down, leaving about 40,000 workers unemployed.

Until 25 years ago, textile mills were practically the only industry in the city but since then small-scale industry has been rapidly growing and in 1931 accounted for one third of the industrial labour force, employing about 75,000 workers.

Ahmedabad, like all other big cities, has an unorganised workforce covering a range of activities from petty trades to home production to casual labour. This sector constituted 46.5 percent of the work force in 1971, out of which 50,000 were estimated to be women, and about one third of these women belonged to scheduled castes or harijan community.*

Harijans in Ahmedabad can be divided into three main subcastes, the vankars or weavers, the chamars or leather workers and the bhangis or sweepers. The vankars and chamars have successfully taken to trades other than traditional ones. Both these subcastes have a relatively higher education rate and have benefited somewhat more from the reservation policy. Most of the extremely small, newly emerging harijan middle class belongs to these two subcastes. About 50 years ago, many women of these communities used to work alongside the men in the textile mills but as the number of women in the mills decreased the majority of these vankar and chamar women drifted into the unorganised sector.

Women in the Work Force

The workers in the textile mills are fully organised into one union. Their wages range from Rs 600 to Rs 1,200 per month. They have all the legal benefits of provident fund, gratuity, ESI and so on. Most live in *pukka* houses, many of these houses provided by government schemes. Often, their children have white collar jobs and many workers are partners in small businesses. There are less than 3,000 women workers, that is, less than two per cent of the workforce.

The workers in the small factories are still building their unions and there are many rival unions fighting for a hold in this sector. Their wages range from Rs 8 to Rs 25 per day and they work from eight to 12 hours a day. Depending on the strength of their union, they get some or none of their legal benefits. About 12 per cent of the workforce is female.

The unorganised sector has no unions worth the name. The workers earn from Rs 2 to Rs 12 per day but the employment is very insecure and they suffer from the constant threat of unemployment. They live mainly in the slums, and have a high rate of indebtedness. There are over 50,000 women workers in the unorganised sector.

This picture of Ahmedabad city reveals the low status of women in the workforce. Most women workers are concentrated in the lowest paying, most insecure and most exploitative sector whereas the organised mill sector has absolutely and percentage wise the least number of women. If we further analyse the position of women workers, we would find that they are concentrated at the lowest economic levels within each sector.

The picture in Ahmedabad is part of a national trend. Most women who are

*The Indian economy can be divided into the organised and unorganised sectors. The organised sector comprises all public sector establishments, all services under central, state and local government and occupations in public undertakings and non-agricultural private sector establishments which employ 10 or more persons. The workers in this sector are governed by certain laws and regulations that provide a framework of requirements, procedures and conditions which ensure them a greater degree of legal protection than other workers obtain.

The unorganised sector is then negatively defined as the working force which is left out of the purview of the above definition, In contrast to the organised sector, there is very little data regarding conditions of employment in the unorganised sector. Likewise, conditions of work are not governed by rules and regulations. This leaves the workers without protection under law. Yet the majority of women are employed in this sector. Only six per cent of the female work force are employed in the organised sector while[1] 94 per cent are in the unorganised sector.

Within the female work force the work participation rate of scheduled caste women is generally higher than the average. According to the 1971 census, female scheduled caste participation in the work force was more than double the general rate.

employed are self employed or casual workers and very few are wage earners.

Industrialisation in India began around the middle of the last century and by the first decade of this century cotton textiles, jute textiles and mining emerged as the three dominant nonagricultural industries. From the beginning, women played an important role in building these industries, and by the 1920s women constituted about 20 per cent of the workforce in cotton textiles, 15 per cent in jute products and 38 per cent in collieries.

The young girl in Ahmedabad's mills learned her mother's trade, and after some time she was enrolled as a worker in the mill. This method of recruiting through the mother was such an accepted part of mill life that women affixed their mothers' names rather than their fathers' or husbands' names to their own. Thus Ratanben was listed in the mill as Ratanben Motiben Farmer after her mother, Motiben. This custom was later changed and women recruited after 1955 affixed their husbands' names. Kankuben, who joined the mill in 1960, is listed as Kankuben Gandabhai Rathod after her husband Gandabhai.

A woman whose mother was not working in a mill learned the trade if she married into a mill family, and worked alongside her husband or mother-in-law.

Throwing Women Out

The 1930s saw a shift in the attitude of these big national industries towards their women workers. While big industries were still struggling to grow they welcomed women workers and used their labour to the fullest. However, once they had acquired a powerful hold in the economy they no longer wanted the women workers and began to expel them till in the 1970s the percentage of women workers was 2.5 in cotton textiles, 2 in jute textiles and 5 in collieries.

The decline of women workers took a different form in each industry. In cotton textiles, the decrease was gradual with a few hundred workers laid off each year. The jute industry, however, saw a sudden and sharp decrease within a short time span. From 1950 to 1956, for example, there was a decrease of 16,000 women workers, the female workforce declining from about 37,000 to 21,000.

A sudden decline means a great deal of suffering for a large number of unemployed workers. Slower decline means suffering for some workers every year and a slow choking off of opportunity. However, whether the decline be slow or sudden, the long term effect is the same - closing better opportunities to women and pushing them into the lowest paying, most insecure, least dignified jobs.

When the textile industry was still very young three quarters of a century ago, women constituted a substantial section of the workforce. The 1911 census, for example, counts 7,629 women in the Ahmedabad textile mills. This was 18.6 per cent of the work force of 40,847 workers.

The industry grew steadily in the following decade and the 1921 census shows an increase in the total work force as well as in the number of female workers. Interestingly, whereas the total work force had grown by 15.5 per cent from 40,847 to 47,346, the female work force had grown at a faster rate of 26.3 per cent, from 7,629 to 9,649.

The decade from 1921 to 1931 saw a consolidation of the industry as well as a rise in union activity. This was perhaps the decade of the most militant labour action in the history of the Ahmedabad textile mills. In spite of the labour militancy the industry grew. The female work force was 18.3 per cent, a substantial percentage of the total work force.

1931 to 1941 was a period of dramatic increase for the industry. The major part of the increase was in the first half of the decade. The labour force nearly doubled during the four years from 1931 to 1935, when it grew from 53,776 to 97,218. The female work force also grew but by a mere 646 - from 9,848 to 10,694. Here, the discrimination against recruitment of women workers becomes increasingly evident. Whereas the labour force grew by over 80 per cent the female work force grew by a negligible 6.6 per cent.

In the factory

The rest of the decade saw a further rise in the total labour force but the female work force declined by nearly 600 workers. Thereafter, there was a steady decrease in the percentage of women workers, from 7.9 per cent in 1941 to 5 percent in 1951 to 3 per cent of all textile workers in 1971.

Phoney Reasons

There are two main types of reasons suggested for the decrease in women workers in the industrial sector. One is

protective legislation and the other is technological change.

There have been a number of laws enacted to protect the woman worker against serious risk or bodily injury, hard labour and the double burden of motherhood and work.

For example, the Factories Act, 1948, and the Factories And Mines Act, 1952, prohibit handling of excessively heavy weights by women. The Mines Act prohibits employment of women underground. According to a tripartite committee set up in West Bengal, the decline of employment in the jute industry was mainly due to the limitation of the maximum load that a woman can carry. According tc the present rule, a woman can lift a maximum of 65 pounds whereas jute rolls weigh 80 to 100 pounds. One wonders whether any real representative of women workers was present when the limit was fixed or whether the trade union and the government made any serious attempts to make the owners adjust to this limit, other than their just throwing out the women.

Trade unions and government, in their anxiety to "protect" women, forgot at the same time to protect their means of livelihood. They cured the headache by cutting off the head.

Another often cited reason for decrease of women workers is that women are an extra cost to owners because of the maternity benefits and creche costs that the latter have to pay. This argument, however, cannot be substantiated as the total expenditure under the Maternity Benefits Act between 1961 and 1971 during which time there was a substantial decrease of women workers in the organised sector, is negligible. For factories, the amount paid under the Act varied between 7.27 and 11.77 lakhs as compared to over 1.75 crores under ESI. "As for the other welfare provisions, for example, creches and sanitary facilities, the expenditure involved is negligible. Many employers do not provide separate toilets or restrooms. Where they do exist, the arrangements are inadequate. Creches are very often only a room without proper arrangements."

Similarly, a study done by the labour ministry in 1964 on the reasons for the decline of women workers in cotton textiles states that retrenchment shows a positive correlation with change of technology, not with maternity benefits paid.

In spite of the lack of a factual basis, the workers in the textile industry firmly believe that maternity benefit payments and provision of creches are the main reasons for expelling women workers. It is unfortunate that the union officials and the workers, both male and female, accept this justification without protest. This easy acceptance indicates a two-fold betrayal of women workers' interests. First, it shows an acceptance of the supremacy of profit over the needs and welfare of the workers. Second, it accepts that women should completely bear all the responsibility of maternity and be penalised if they fail to do so. This is to assume that a woman's role as a mother is her individual problem and must not interfere with her role as a worker. If it does interfere, she will be punished.

Technological change is another reason for decline in women's employment. The report of the committee on the status of women cites it as the single most important factor for the trend. The report adds: "The initial adverse impact of more sophisticated technology in industry on the employment of women had been a global trend." In cotton textiles, the introduction of new spinning machines and high speed winding machines resulted in displacement of women. Similarly, new methods of surface screening and coal handling in collieries caused retreuchment of many women workers. Generally, as the industry modernises, it produces new technology needing a higher level of skill and pays correspondingly higher wages. At this stage, women, who are considered fit only for manual work, are displaced, and the decline begins.

This idea of new machines replacing women workers is repeated in a resigned and melancholy tone by union officials. Technology is made out to be a demon god whose hunger is satisfied only by the sacrifice of women workers. Or is it that industry's choice of capital intensive technology inevitably results in rationalisation? Do our unions and progressive forces, unable to fight the growing monster of unemployment, save their own skins by throwing out the women workers as its first victims?

Main Questions

We have already discussed reasons for the displacement but to halt the decline we must know how it is happening, who is involved, what are the mechanisms and behaviour patterns responsible. We must try and answer the following questions:

1. Who are the groups and interests responsible for the decline?
2. What is the ideology, reasoning, philosophy at work?
3. What are/were the mechanisms and behaviour patterns at work?
4. How do/did the women react and feel ?
5. What is happening/has happened to these displaced women?

The answer to all these questions will vary from area to area, industry to industry, period to period depending on the economic, social and political situation. We will confine ourselves to the situation in the Ahmedabad cotton textile mills and the decline in women workers since 1925.

We will concentrate mainly on the point of view of the women workers and their male counterparts. We choose this method because first, we are strategically placed for maximum accessibility to how the workers feel, what they did, their aspirations and hopes and disappointments. Second, since the main aim of the study is to facilitate organisation of women workers, it is

fitting that we see the world from their point of view.

Union History

In 1917, Gandhiji led a 22 day strike of weavers which resulted in a 35 per cent bonus for the workers. From then on, the idea of a union was in the air, and finally in February 1920 spinners in one mill got together and formed the throstle workers' union. Over the next five years, 12 other occupational unions were formed. All these unions were federated into the TLA, known in Gujarati as Majoor Mahajan. The membership of TLA has continuously increased over the last 60 years. Today, with its membership of 90 per cent of the textile work force, it is the only effective union in the Gujarat cotton textile industry.

Relations between TLA and AMA (Ahmedabad Millowners' Association) evolved through different stages over the 15 years from 1920 to 1935. Under the inspiration of Gandhi, the leaders of TLA had, from the beginning, been closely associated with the nationalist movement led by Gandhi. Ahmedabad, where Gandhi lived at Sabarmati Ashram for seven years, was a centre of nationalist activity during this period.

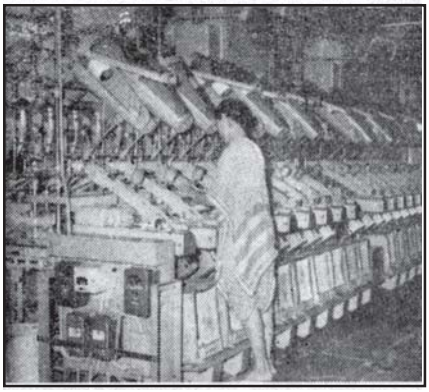
This first stage of relations between TLA and AMA coincided with the first phase of Gandhi's non-cooperation movement. It was marked by confrontation between workers and owners, leading to seven major strikes and 26 minor ones in the years 1920-23.

"Gandhi, in his talk to the mill owners' association in January 1920, linked the workers' problems to the problems of the nation. He asked the mill owners to help both the workers and the nation...in a speech to the workers soon after, Gandhi asked the workers to continue to strike to obtain their basic rights."

During the depression of 1923, the union called for a general strike against a wage cut. Unfortunately, the strike was a failure and workers had to agree to the wage cut without any demand being fulfilled. TLA's defeat in this show of strength resulted in a drastic decrease in membership. TLA then withdrew from its strategy of confrontation.

During the next stage, 1923 to 1928, since TLA did not raise wage demands, there was practically no interaction between AMA and TLA. Instead, TLA concentrated on other areas of workers' welfare. It opened over 20 schools for workers' children, and a cooperative savings and lending society, a hospital and dispensary, and fought against abuse of workers by jobbers.

The AMA underwent a change of policy in the period 1923 to 1928. Before 1923, mill owners were hesitant about supporting the nationalists. But when imported goods from Japan and Lancashire began flooding the market they found that they needed the nationalists' support. The trauma the industry was facing made them perceive the role the colonial government was playing in supporting the Lancashire interests. Not only did Ahmedabad mill owners express nationalist sentiments but they also actively participated in politics. In 1936, they passed a resolution condemning the arrests of Nehru and Gandhi, and decided to boycott the elections to the legislative assembly.



At the machine

The participation of both TLA and AMA in nationalist politics served as a bridge between them. 1928 to 1933 saw a new stage of their relations—the development of arbitration. The arbitration awarded a wage increase to workers. As a result of the award, membership figures between January 1928 and May 1930 increased by over 90 per cent.

The major office bearers of TLA and AMA were active first in local, then in state and later in national politics in the Congress party. TLA was able to combine nationalist sentiments with its representation of labour and firmly establish itself as a major union. Its position was made practically invulnerable in 1947 with the assumption of power in Delhi by the Congress Party.

Union Sacrifices Women

One of the issues that has come up again and again for negotiation has been the issue of rationalisation, new technology and retrenchment.

During the 1920s, Japanese cloth entered the Indian market, providing stiff competition to Indian textile mills. The Japanese mills, since they had new technology, were more cost effective. For example, in 1928, there were 63 weavers per 100 looms and six spinners per 1,000 spindles in Japanese mills whereas Indian mills had 100 workers per 100 looms and 15 spinners per 1,000 spindles. Hence from 1920 onwards the mills were trying to bring in new machines.

The move was resisted by TLA on the ground that it would lead to large scale unemployment. They said: "While discussing the question of rationalisation employers and the people of their line of thinking are very enthusiastic about the conditions prevailing in Japan. Such propagandists place only one side of the picture while conveniently forgetting the other side which is peculiar and inherent in the objective social and national conditions in Japan which makes rationalisation there not only inevitable but advantageous to all concerned. It is a question whether such objective and social conditions exist in this country and particularly in our province. If rationalisation is allowed to proceed here without check, we shall be adding to our vast problem of rural unemployment another relating to urban population. Organised unemployment relief in other countries mitigates the hardships arising from unemployment. Till we make some

similar arrangements here, the speed of rationalisation should not exceed the capacity of the industry for reabsorption of those thrown out of employment in consequence."

TLA tried to meet the pressure from employers not merely by resistance but by positive suggestions for improvements within the industry which might enable it to avoid retrenchment. In the TLA's view, "Rationalisation properly understood connotes more than what has been understood by the employers. Most of the textile employers in the province misrepresent the word rationalisation and use it as a synonym for reducing the number of workers employed, all other factors remaining constant. Rationalisation, we believe, has much broader and wider significance and includes all forms of industrial reorganisation and scientific management, resulting in better efficiency, cheaper costs, higher wages and lesser strain. The first step the textile industry ought to take is to standardise production. After rationalising in the direction we have mentioned above, it will be the proper time to consider the advisability of pushing schemes of rationalisation as far as the number of workers are concerned."

Between 1922 and 1935, however, the textile industry was expanding from 56 to 84 mills and so it was possible for mills to rationalise and still not retrench workers. However, as the rate of growth slowed down, new technology inevitably meant retrenchment.

TLA was able successfully to resist retrenchment in the weaving department and even as late as 1940 employers were complaining that "It was not possible to make any effort even as an experiment in rationalisation, owing to a lack of sufficient response from labour."

However, the spinning department was a different story. There were many women spinners and TLA's scruples about avoiding unemployment were considerably lax,as far as women were concerned.

In 1935 the TLA and MOA signed an agreement called the Delhi Agreement. The clauses 5 and 6 dealing with rationalisation say:

5. "The principle of rationalisation is accepted subject to the safeguards that the process of rationalisation would be carried out in such a manner as to avoid unemployment among the existing employees of Ahmedabad mills exept in the directions indicated in the clause below. Suitable machinery will be created for the proper regulation of the process.

6. Unemployment incidental to rationalisation will be confined to:

1. Married women whose husbands are benefitted by the rationalisation process.

2. Persons whose connection with the industry is of less than a year's duration."

The union sacrified its women workers to the principle of rationalisation. The Delhi Agreement clearly states the position that rationalisation should avoid creating unemployment except for married women and, since most working women are married, unemployment is all right for women. In fact, the Delhi Agreement was only a formalisation of what had been going on for the eight years prior to its signing. It was the TLA's formal acknowledgment of what it had tolerated in practice since 1926.

TLA justified the Delhi Agreement by saying it was only women who were retrenched. In response to a question put by the Textile Labour Inquiry Committee about unemployment caused by rationalisation, the TLA stated: "...rationalisation was confined to the spinning section only to a limited extent. According to the terms of the said agreement roughly 2,000 persons have been displaced...Most of the workers displaced were women workers."

Gospel of Women's Unemployment

The sacrifice of women workers had somehow to be justified within the union and among the workers and so a set of values was evolved which continued in fora 1975, when the beginning of the women's decade forced some new thinking in the labour movement. First, the union preached that the woman's place was in her home "I remember a big meeting of women workers—spinners, reel winders, all were there", recalled Ratanben, a spinner in her 40s. "We all had a dinner together and then we had *bhajans*. T Vasavada saheb (one of secretaries of TLA) gave a speech. He said: 'Why are you working in the mills? You should be at home, looking after children. Your men come home tired and you are not there to serve them. My advice to you is that all of you should leave the mills.'"

Jethabhai, a spinner and member of the TLA executive committee during the late 30s and early 40s, says: "We often discussed retrenchment in the committee. In fact, it was one of our major concerns. Of course we felt that women should not have to work, and should look after their men and children at home. Usually, if it was a man's case, we would try to save him employment, though often, We had to oppose the mill management. But when it came to a woman whose husband was working, we usually advised that she should be retrenched. With proper compensation, of course. However, often, there were cases of widows or women who had no means of support. In such cases, we were compassionate and tried to see that she continued to be employed at the mill."

This attitude towards women was explicitly expressed in a resolution passed by the representative council of the throstle spinners' union as early as 1924. The resolution says: "Many mills have already closed down some machines and other mills have also decided similarly to close their machines. This council therefore resolves that wherever workers have to be retrenched, if there are women working in that department then the married women should be retrenched in preference to the men. The representative

council of TLA recommends the above procedure of retrenchment."

The reasons behind this decision are explained by TLA newspaper Majdoor Sandesh: "The above resolution was passed unanimously by the representative council of throstle department. In the present circumstances every worker brother will understand the need for this resolution. If it is necessary to reduce the number of workers in any mill due to rationalisation then the important question is which workers to reduce? If a man is retrenched and he is the sole earner in his family then the employment of the whole family is lost and it would face starvation. And if in a family a man and his wife are both working and the man is retrenched then how bad will that look. So wherever possible, it is necessary not to retrench men."

The union visualises two possible situations—either the man is the sole earner in the family or both man and woman are earners. The union does not acknowledge the existence of women who are sole earners in their families nor that of men who do not support families. Unfortunately, there are no studies to indicate the proportion of women who were single earners in their families in Ahmedabad mills at the time but a study done in Bombay around this time shows that the situation could not be ignored. "Roughly 30 per cent of the women workers were married to men working in the cotton textile industry, slightly over 30 per cent were married to men employed in other enterprises and almost 40 per cent of them were widows."

It was unfortunate that the union chose to retrench women. The Ahmedabad family budget survey shows that most women workers were from poorer families with incomes of less than Rs 50 a month. Retrenching such women made poor families even worse off. Further, what about cases where men, though earning, did not support their families? How common were situations like Asiben's: "My husband was in the spinning department and I was in reeling in the same mill. He earned much more than I did, but we never saw a paisa of his money. As soon as he got his wages he would go and start drinking. If I asked him for money he would beat me and say: 'Spend your own money. You are earning enough.'"

Women do heavier, less skilled work

Laxmiben says : "My husband had a disease in his lungs. If he went to work one day he would feel weak and start gasping for breath. So, although he was a permanent worker he went to the mill hardly 10 days in a month. If I had not been working what would we have eaten?"

It was widely propagated that women would not be able to run the new machines. As Nathalal, a spinner in New Manek Chowk mill said: "The new spinning machines are much too complicated for women to run. How can they learn it? The bobbins are too heavy for them and the work is too strenuous. You see, the work you can do depends on your body build and mental strength. For example, we harijans can do spinning but weaving is done only by patels and Muslims. They have a different body build, they are much stronger, you see. We are thin and weak. It is the same with women. They cannot do heavy or complicated work."

After the passing of the Maternity Benefit Act, women were blamed for needing maternity benefit and hence harming the profitability of the industry. This is a very common belief among workers even today. In every one of my interviews, whether with female workers, male workers, union representatives or union officials, the answer to my question: "Why has the number of women been decreased in the textile mills?" was "Because the employers had to pay maternity benefit."

"Women were decreased because owners had to pay so much extra for them. They have to pay for every pregnancy in addition to giving them three months' leave. Then there is the extra cost of the creches. There were many women in the mills so they needed big creches. And they had to pay for the ayahs. And also for separate latrines. Naturally, with so much extra expense, who would want to keep women?"

Voiceless in the Union

These rather anti-women values pervaded the whole textile working class. The TLA is organised in such a way that decisions from the top percolate down to individual workers through a whole system of representatives who also

bring up the feelings and expectations of the workers. For every 250 workers there is one representative and every 50 representatives elect one member of the working committee. The working committee then elects the whole time executive committee.

The representatives as also the working committee have a general meeting every month. During these meetings, major decisions are explained and reactions sought. Major issues are discussed. Apart from the monthly meetings, representatives often meet formally and informally among themselves and with TLA full timers. The *Majdoor Sandesh*, a biweekly, also explains union policy and invites reactions.

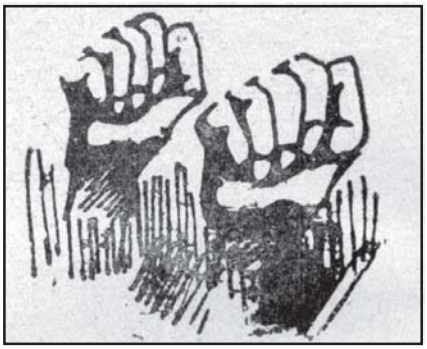
Although there were some women in the representatives' body they were few in number. In departments where there were women and men, men were preferred as representatives. The women representatives were rarely encouraged to speak. "I remember Shaikh saheb (one of the secretaries) would tell us to cover our heads and be modest in public", recalls Revaben, a representative in the 40s and 50s.

In the working committee there were usually not more than five women and none in the executive committee so the women's point of view was rarely represented in the decision-making bodies. The values which excluded women from the workforce were being constantly spread through the workforce by the TLA network.

Pressures on Men

The strongest pressures perhaps came on the male worker whose wife or daughter or mother was also in the mill. There were constant assaults on his male ego, or his sense of "fair play."

Jaisinghbhai, whose wife was retrenched in 1945, says: "Our *mukadam* in the mill often told me: 'Why are you making your wife work? You had six children and two have died. If your wife doesn't stay home and look after the children, what will happen to them? They will not be healthy. They will get bad habits. Are you not enough of a man to earn for your family?' It was all right for him to talk. He had a partnership in a contract as well as a regular job so his wife could afford to sit at home. But still



I used to feel bad. When my wife had her last pregnancy she was in hospital and when she got better I did not let her go to work."

Then, of course, there was the lure of money. Every worker who was retrenched was given Rs 3,000 to Rs 7,000 in the 30s and 40s. This was increased up to Rs 12,000 in the early 60s. The husband, being the controller of his wife's income, received the money if she was retrenched.

Manilal says: "We were heavily in debt. I had gotten my youngest brother married, the roof of my house was leaking and I had no money to repair it. So we were a poor family with nowhere to turn. So once, when my wife had gone to her village for a wedding, I filled out her retrenchment form and made her sign it when she returned. We got Rs 7,000."

The union officials, the union working committee and representatives, and the individual male workers all united to sacrifice the employment of women workers.

The women workers were sacrificed to rationalisation. Many employed women were retrenched, women *badli* workers were laid off and potential new entrants were turned away. The individual woman worker saw her employment ebb away. But few women workers were aware of this as an industrywide phenomenon. Each woman saw her suffering as an individual mishap and most of them tried to deal with it at an individual level.

Lone Struggle

A woman worker generally has a world view limited to her immediate surroundings. The double burden of home and mill absorbs all her time and energy. Her world is confined to her home and her work. Her home is her housework, her relationships with husband, immediate family, extended family and neighbours. Her work is her department, her coworkers and her immediate superior. Her dealing with the company are confined to the *mukadam* and an occasional saheb.

Her knowledge of the union is limited to the representative who collects the regular subscription, occasional visits of the union inspector and infrequent visits to the union office to make complaints. Unlike the men, women workers do not congregate in tea shops, public *chowks* or outside the mill gates. They do not attend union meetings nor are they encouraged to do so. So they do not hear the mill gossip, do not see the trends. Policy decisions and agreements between union and owners do not filter down to them via any grapevine.

From the 1930s onwards the atmosphere in the industry became progressively more anti-women. Decisions were taken at the higher levels to preclude women from the mills and this decision was conveyed to the union structure and the mill managements. But the women could not detect this as a change in atmosphere. When a woman was dismissed she saw it as an individual misfortune in which the mill or her family was to blame. Either the mill did not want her or her husband asserted his right over her and prevented her from working.

The woman worker saw the union as a helpless bystander who, in spite of collecting her subscription, could not rescue her either from retrenchment by management or from victimisation by her husband. The union told her that the mill's decision to retrench her was

justified and that it could not interfere in the "internal" dispute between her and the mill. It also told her that her husband had complete right over her, that she was first a wife, then a worker.

The individual woman worker could not realise that the "cold" atmosphere she faced when she tried to fight for her job was not an accident. She did not realise that there was a deliberate policy to exclude her and that there was an alliance between the mill, the union and the male worker to keep her out of the mill sector. There was no one who would explain to her. No one who would speak for her. No organisation, no union to voice her needs. So each woman struggled alone and inevitably lost.

Women Not Wanted

Babuben was born in a *chamar* family of construction workers in Vadodara around 1930. She was married at the age of 12 to a mill worker and came to live with his family in Ahmedabad.

"My in-laws were all mill workers and as soon as I came to Ahmedabad, my husband started taking me to his mill—Bordi mill. I began to learn work in the reeling section. Many of us were underaged and if the inspector came, the *mukadam* would tell us to go and hide in an inside room, or he would send us out of the mill.

"In those days, it was easy to get work. If one mill stopped giving work you could go to another. I worked in Bordi for two years. Then they closed the reeling section and gave the reeling out on contract. So I was at home for a few days. Then one of the women who lived in my *mohalla* took me with her to Dholka mill where I worked a year or two. Then that mill shut down and I moved to Chaudasi mill.

"I worked there two years in reeling and then Pannalal Sheth, the owner, died in an air crash so they decreased our work. I was getting five annas for a small bundle of thread, four for a big bundle. I was earning about Rs 250 a month. It was good money for that time.

"After I left Chaudasi mill, I was at home for a while and I went back to Vadodara. My father-in-law came to fetch me and when I returned I started working in Laxmi mill where he was the supervisor. I worked in Laxmi mill in the reeling section for eight years but they never made me permanent. Why ? Well, it was because of my father-in-law. My supervisor was Nathu, a Muslim, and he always used to take Rs 25 or 30 as a bribe to make anyone permanent. Of course, I would have given him that but then, one day, he saw my father-in-law bringing my rice to the mill. He asked someone: 'Why has Master brought Babu's rice?'

So then he came to know that I was the supervisor's *bahu* and he said : 'I cannot take Rs 25 from you. It will look bad.' So he never made me permanent. Of course, in those days, it didn't matter so much because there were not so many *badli* workers.

"Once, I went back to Vadodara for two months. When I returned, my supervisor said: 'There is no work for you right now.' So I went home and again went back to the mill the next day. Every day, he would tell me: 'There is no work.' Then I went to the saheb. I said: 'I have worked for eight years. Please give me work.' But he said: 'There is no work now. When there is work we will call you.' I went to Majoor Mahajan and noted a complaint but the inspector said to me: 'You are only a *badli* worker. If the mill has no work for you we can't do anything.'

"I went regularly to the mill for two months but there was no work. One day, the saheb said to me: 'We do not need you. We don't need women in the mill.' So I stopped going. If someone tells me I am unwanted how can I keep going? My husband never stopped me from going to the mill to look for work. But he would say : 'Why are you wasting your time? They'll never take you back. They don't want women in the mill anymore. Never mind, we'll find some other work for you to do.' But I never did get another job in a mill."

Declared Incapable

Babuben was a *badli* worker and could easily be dismissed by the simple method of not giving her work. But Jhaverben was a permanent worker.

"I am from the harijan community from Bijapur in Maharashtra. My father used to beg but he was very keen on educating us and I studied upto eighth class. After marriage, I moved to Ahmedabad and got a job as a teacher. But my husband, who was a mill worker, didn't like it. He said: 'How can my wife

be higher than me?' So he made me leave the school and took me with him to his mill, Aryodaya Ginning, where he was the *mukadam.* He taught me how to be a doffer.

"I was in Aryodaya Ginning for a couple of years and then I joined Bharat Suryodaya as a doffer. In 1941, I became a spinner in Bharat Suryodaya. I was about 17 years old then, and I was handling a single spinning machine. Later, when the double one came, I handled that too.

"I had 10 children, and all of them died except one. They died of smallpox. I spent so much money on doctors. I pawned all my jewellery but nothing saved them. I would work till my seventh month, then I would come back to work a month after delivery, and would put the child in the mill creche. I only got maternity benefit for my last two children— Rs 14 and then Rs 28.

"In 1962,1 had to leave the mill. I was not yet 40 years old and I had worked 21 years in the mill. I was earning Rs 60 every 12 days and my dearness allowance was Rs 100. My husband ? The whole mill knew his bad habits—he was notorious for drinking. I never saw a paisa of his money. But now he is dead. I don't want to say negative things about him.

"One day, our factory manager called the nine women of our section and said: 'You are running the double spinning machine. Now the *chaukadi* machine is going to be installed so you will have to leave.' We felt very bad. We said: 'Saheb, please give us some other work in some department.' But he said: 'There is no other work. If you can run the *chaukadi* you can stay otherwise you must leave.' We said we would run the *chaukadi.*

"When I saw the *chaukadi* I was amazed. I had not seen such a machine even in my dreams. Such huge bobbins! In the double machine, I could carry 25 bobbins, but in this one, I could not even lift four. I tried to learn it on my own but it was difficult. The threads kept breaking and I could not fix them. After three weeks, I got a warning from my

Women sorting junk

mukadam that my work was not up to the mark.

"I went to the saheb. I wrote him a petition. I said: 'Saheb please give me work in another department. In *jharoo,* bobbin, anything. I am ready to do the most menial work.' But he said: 'If I give you work what about the other eight women ?' I said: 'Saheb, they can manage somehow but my home situation is very bad. My husband does not earn. He is a drunkard. If you make me leave, where will I go?' But the saheb would not answer my petition.

"Then I went to the Majoor Mahajan. I often used to go to Majoor Mahajan for complaints— if the cotton was too bad or if the *mukadam* scolded us. I had very good relations with Jaisinhbhai and Bhailabhai, the inspector. I always filled subscription and told others to fill subscription. My department wanted me to stand for election as a Majoor Mahajan representative but my son, who was studying in ninth class, forbade me. He said: 'If you become a representative you will have to hear the complaints of all the workers. If they are unsatisfied they will come and fight at our house.' So I did not stand.

"Majoor Mahajan has been very good to us. Bhailabhai brought electricity and water into our *chali*. Even today if someone says anything against Majoor Mahajan I say: ' It is only after Majoor Mahajan came that workers' condition has improved. Before that we were miserable.' So many people had to suffer to build the Majoor Mahajan. When I firstt joined the mill there was a very active worker who was a Majoor Mahajan representative. Once he go beaten up by millowners' ruffians just ouside the mill gates. Majoor Mahajan was not allowed to collect subscriptions inside the gates but we would go and fill subscription secretly. If the saheb came to know he would show us the gate. First we were only a few, then we grew from two to three to four to 50 and now the base is firmly planted and now we cannot be removed.

When I went to Majoor Mahajan to complain that I was being dismissed, they said: 'Can you run the *chaukadi*?' I said: ' No, threads keep breaking and I can't fix them.' They said: 'If you can't run the *chaukadi* we can't do anything for you. According to the law, you must leave.' So all doors were closed to me.

"Next month, I got another warning from the mill. I knew that if I got a third warning I would be dismissed. So rather than be humiliated by a dismissal I sent

in my resignation. They had a big party for me on the day I left, and garlanded me. They gave me three big boxes of sweets and I left, honoured and respected. I got Rs 5,000 as gratuity.

"I never got another job in a mill. We were about nine women and 13 men who left the mill. The men got jobs elsewhere. But none of us women got another job."

Not only was Jhaverben retrenched but she was blamed for her retrenchment! She was told to run a machine she had never seen. She was not given any training. She was discouraged when she made the attempt, called a failure and made to resign.

Husband's Role

Some women, however, refused to leave in spite of such discouragement. Ratanben was confident that she could run the four sided spinning machine but she encountered another unexpected obstacle.

"I was born in Ahrnedabad. I am about 50 years old. Both my mother and father worked in the mill but my father never gave any money in the house so we lived only on our mother's earnings and we were very poor.

"I used to go with my mother to Swadeshi mills to look after my baby sister and brother in the creche while she was working. The reeling section was near the creche and sometimes I would go there and learn reeling. One day, the *mukadam* saw me and gave me a job there. I was 12 or 13. I worked for two years when one day the saheb, who was a Parsi, came to our section and said: 'We need workers in the throstle so come along.' I protested that I didn't know that work but he said: 'You will learn.' In a week I had learnt doffing and later how to run the spinning machine.

"I was married into a mill worker family in Ahrnedabad. My father-in-law was in throstle and so was my husband. My mother-in-law died a year after my marriage. My father-in-law was often ill. He drank a lot and ruined his liver.

"I continued working in Swadeshi mill after my marriage. In my section there were 22 men and eight women spinners, and five men and five women doffers. The wage was Rs 9 every 15 days for doffers and Rs 20 for spinners.

"At the time when my fifth and last child was to be born, the *chaukadi* was coming in. Already two women from our section had left because they could not run the *chaukadi*. In those days, they were reducing the number of women workers. Women work harder and better than men, but the mill has to pay Rs 200 or Rs 300 for maternity so they don't want women. Of course, I never got that much money. For my earlier pregnancies I got Rs 28 and then, Rs 42. I would work up to the first week of my eighth month but I could not work any more after that because for doffing you have to support the basket on your stomach.

"During my fifth pregnancy I went on leave in the eighth month. After I had been on leave for about two weeks one of my colleagues came to visit me. She said: 'Ratna, they have put a permanent worker in your place.' If a permanent worker is put in your place, it is bad for you because the permanent worker can claim a right to your place if he works there for six weeks. So I went to the mill and met the *mukadam* and protested: 'You must put a *badli* worker in my place.' But the *mukadam* protested: 'A *chaukadi* machine will be coming. Can you run it?' I said: 'Yes, I can. You will only have to give me some time during the day to feed my baby and then you see how well I run the machine.' I had a long argument with him. It was my right! Finally, he put a *badli* worker in my place.

"Next month, I had a son in the hospital. I was rather weak from that pregnancy so I stayed home for a longer time. Then one day, I felt better so I thought it was time to return to the mill. Next day, I got up early, cooked the meal and got ready to go, with my baby and my tiffin. 'Where are you going?' asked my husband. 'Back to work', I replied. 'You are no longer in the mill. I have given in your resignation.' I was stunned. I had fought so hard to stay in the mill. I started crying. I called my mother and my sisters to reason with him. But he was adamant. 'She should stay at home and look after my children', he said, 'already, two have died because of her neglect.' I cried and cried, I beat my breast and tore my hair. All the neighbouring women tried to reason with him.

"At that time, he had left the mill and was working as a peon in Vadilal Hospital. 'How will you manage on Rs 60 a month?' my mother asked him. 'I have no vices and no extra expense and no debts', he replied, 'For a while, we won't live so well but my salary will increase. And Ratan can try to manage the house with more thrift.'

"Then I went to Majoor Mahajan. That was the first time I had ever been there though I used to pay my subscription most regularly—four annas every 15 days. The inspector in Majoor Mahajan took out all my papers. He said: 'All your resignation papers are here. Your husband said you were not well and gave in your resignation.' I said: 'You didn't take my signature.' 'Your husband's signature is as good as yours', he replied.

"I also went to the saheb in the mill. He said: 'You are a crazy girl. Why have you left a good job?' I said: 'Saheb, I didn't even know. My husband gave in my resignation. I don't want to resign, Please help me to stay.' But the saheb said: 'It's too late now. All the papers are passed. There is a permanent worker in your place. Even your provident fund and gratuity are ready to be withdrawn.' I cried a lot and abused my husband. But what could I do? All procedures were complete so I helplessly countersigned the forms and left the mill. My husband took Rs 7,000. I got it and put it in the bank."

Harijans First

The women workers did attempt to resist their retrenchment with whatever means were available to them. They could either struggle with confrontation tactics or they could use whatever legal or negotiating machinery was available.

However, the means they had were very limited.

Confrontation in some form has always been inevitable when struggling for an issue. Even TLA, the bastion of industrial peace, was founded by a strike and led many strikes in its early stages.

The 1930s and early 40s were years of labour unrest in the textile industry in Ahmedabad. The communists who had been active in Bombay industry since the 20s began to organise in Ahmedabad in 1933 when they formed the Mazdoor Union and began publishing a paper called *Kamdar.* They actively led many strikes. Especially well known is the strike of 1933 around the Delhi pact. The AMA had promised to standardise wage rates but not only did they not do so, they made clandestine wage cuts, especially in the weaving departments. The communists organised a strike in 37 mills and 30,000 workers participated.

In spite of so much unrest and the atmosphere of struggle, the women's issue was never considered important enough to be taken up by the TLA or the communists. Although the communists actively opposed some sections of the Delhi Agreement the retrenchment of women was not considered a controversial issue.

Furthermore, most of the women workers were harijans and in the spinning departments. All the harijans were strong adherents of TLA. The communists were able to organise only among the weavers.

The workers of the mill industry in Ahmedabad have always been divided along caste lines. The workers of the spinning and related departments have traditionally been harijans and the workers in the weaving departments have been Muslims, patels or bhaiyyas from UP.

The spinning departments have been solidly with TLA since its inception. TLA had defined its role as not only to fight for the economic rights of its members but for their social rights as well. It regarded members as "whole human beings" and not just economic animals. Deeply influenced by Gandhi, one of the four basic tenets of TLA was removal of untouchability. It organised continuous programmes of common meals and common prayers culminating in the famous *mandir pravesh* in the Swaminarayan temple in 1948.

Babuben, who was present there, recalls: "TLA led a movement for us. In those days, we were openly called derogatory names like *dhed.* High castes would not eat with us. Then TLA decided this was wrong, and as part of Gandhiji's programme, we had a *dharna* outside the *mandir* gates. All of us harijans sat outside the gates. The spinning departments in all the mills were shut. We sat there all day, hungry and thirsty. The first two days, some ruffians came and beat the men with *lathis* but TLA was with us so we were not afraid. Every day, Vasavada saheb made a speech. Once, Sardar Patel also came. Finally, we were successful and they said they would open the doors to us also." Kankuben says: "We always had to eat separately and the higher caste workers tried to avoid touching us. When we went to TLA meetings the patels and other high castes would sit far from us. Whenever TLA organised a feast the high castes refused to join if we were present. Some patels also left TLA because of us. But the leaders, Nandaji (Gulzarilal Nanda), Vasavada saheb (Shyam Prasad Vasavada) and Khandubhai always sat and ate with us. They organised meetings and told all the workers that untouchability was wrong. They said union strength means worker-unity and among workers no one is high or low. Every six months or so, we would have common prayers and common meals. Today, high castes, low castes, we all sit together and it is because of TLA."

Women Most Loyal

Unions generally complain that they have difficulty organising women but the record shows that women were TLA's most loyal members, as shown in tables 1and 2 comparing the membership

TABLE 1

Year	Total No. of workers	TLA membership	%age
1921	47436	24060	51
1931	53775	24365	45
1941	115999	49268	43
1951	127133	75410	59
1961	140765	104046	74
1971	148242	99019	67

TABLE 2

Year	Total No. of Women workers	No of Women workers in TLA	%age
1951	6227	6089	98
1961	5235	4974	95
1971	4498	3187	71

percentage of women to overall TLA membership. Why is this so? I think the loyalty is a function of both their sex and their caste.

As already discussed, most harijan workers attribute the improvement in their condition to the beliefs and positive action of TLA leaders.

The other reason for the continuous loyalty of women workers is well expressed by Dhanjibhai, who has been with TLA since 1941. He says: "Women are always more faithful than men. We collect subscriptions every month. We have to chase the men but the women themselves come and give it to us. If you do something for them they are grateful and remember it all their lives. Men see the union as just a means that gets them benefits as their family."

There is social pressure too. "There were two women in our *chali* who left TLA and joined Red Flag union", says Ratanben. "We boycotted them. One woman had to get her daughter married but we said.' 'Come back to TLA and then we will give our sons.' Finally, she married her to a boy oul of town but we did not go to the wedding. Later, they left Red Flag and came back to TLA." Nathiben, a retired woman worker, says: "How can we leave TLA and go elsewhere? The leaders have sacrificed

so much for us. Nandaji used to come to our *chalis* on his bicycle every day. Ansuyaben (Ansuyaben Sarabhai) used to hug our children to her and she never minded if she got dirty. Because of TLA we got electricity and running water and *pukka* houses. Our wages have gone up and we have provident fund. After all this, how can we forsake TLA? It is like our mother."

Attempts to Resist

The women workers were thus cut off from the more militant unions and TLA lost its early militancy quite soon. During the early 30s TLA adopted a fairly confrontationist stand and led several strikes. In 1942, TLA actively joined the non-cooperation movement and all militant activity was directed into the nationalist struggle. After 1947, the TLA was closely associated with the ruling Congress Government and gave up all forms of militancy. They proudly state that they have not called a single strike for the last 28 years.

Most of the women workers were in TLA and thus had no experience of struggle. Further, in the TLA philosophy, struggle was regarded as unjustified as they prided themselves on their "peaceful cooperation" with management. The women workers were also subject to social pressures which made them more timid and less outspoken than men. They regarded the company with awe and fear and approached the mill management as pleaders.

Jhaverben, who was dismissed in 1962, still remembers very vividly her major act of protest. During the course of a one and a half hour interview with me, she repeated eight times: "I thought I should approach the saheb. I didn't want to leave the mill. So I talked to my eight colleagues who were also being dismissed and we decided to go together. When we went to the saheb he said: 'I can't help you. You must either learn to run the four sided machine or leave.' Then I went to a man I knew. I told him to write a letter. I wrote: 'I have worked in the mill for 22 years. I have a right to be

in the mill. Please give me a job in another department if you can't accommodate me in the spinning department.' But there was no response." For Jhaverben, even raising her voice and writing a letter to the mill was a major act of defiance which she remembers even now, 20 years later.

An Activist's Experience

The union was, by policy, unsympathetic and unhelpful to the women who had been retrenched. On the whole, women workers were not able to assert themselves within the union. There were, however, some women who were active TLA members and representatives or *membranis* in the union. These women, being a little more aware of the role a union is supposed to play, were able to use the negotiating and legal machinery available to TLA. But this was a long drawn-out and hard struggle.

Asiben says: "When I joined Bordi mill in 1939, my reeling department had about 35 women and 100 men. Slowly, the department began to close down. Around the early 50s, only 10 women and two men were left.

"The mill began to give out more and more work on contract. They said: 'Why should we keep a whole department only for 12 people?' They shut down the department and told us: 'There is no more work. Go home.' One of the women they dismissed like this was a *membrani* called Maniben. So, one day, she called a meeting of all of us. We went to the TLA to register a complaint. First, the inspector tried to convince us not to file a complaint. He said: 'How can they run a department just for 12 people?' Then he said: 'You know the mills don't like to keep women because they have to pay maternity benefit. I will see that you get a good compensation. Why don't you just take it and leave?' But Maniben said: 'We all fill memberships regularly. I am a *membrani* and have worked faithfully for TLA for so many years. You have to listen to us, fight for us.' So the inspector noted our complaint.

"After that, it was such a long struggle. We met all the executive committee members we knew. One of my relatives was in the executive committee. I met him and cried in his house. I said: 'Please help me.' He promised to raise the matter in the executive committee. We also went to meet Vasavada saheb, the general secretary of TLA. All 12 of us met in TLA hall and we went and sat outside his room. Then he admitted us and we told him our problem. He promised that TLA would take up the case. Finally, the case was filed in the labour court.

"The case went on for six years! Some of us lost heart in the middle. The two men and one of the women left and joined the Red Flag union. The case went on and on. Every time there was a hearing we would have to go to court. We also kept on meeting members of the executive committee.

"Then, four years later, we won the case! And the court ordered the mill to re-employ us. But the mill said it would not re-open the department. Again we went to Vasavada saheb. He said: 'If we have won the case we can try to settle you in another department.' By this time, my relative was no longer in the executive committee. But one member, Phoolchandbhai, who lived in my *chali*,

said: 'I know how difficult life is for you. How you have struggled for four years and your husband is unemployed. I will definitely speak in your favour.'

"Maniben also contacted the executive members she knew. Then the topic came up in the committee. We knew it was going to come up. So on the day of the committee meeting we all gathered at TLA and sat outside the door and waited. We could hear voices but did not know what they were talking about. We waited four hours. When they came out, I met Phoolchandbhai. He told me: 'We have decided to tell the mill to stop the contract they are running and to reopen the department. Anyway, the contract is illegal.'

"So, some days later, Vasavada saheb wrote a letter to the mill and a TLA representative came and talked to the manager of Bordi mill. The manager agreed to close the contract when it expired at the end of the year.

"But they did not do so. At the end of the year, they just gave the contract to another contractor. We had gotten ready to go back to the mill when we found they had not done anything about re-opening our department. Then we heard they were engaging another contractor.

'We went back to Vasavada saheb. He phoned up the manager and shouted at him: 'We have made an agreement. How dare you break the agreement?' The contractor was working on the mill's premises with mill machines. So they oiled the machines and we could go back to work. The day we rejoined was such a joyful day. We went to the department, put up a picture of Devi and did her *puja.* Then we did *puja* of all the machines. Then we distributed sweets. We also went to TLA and distributed sweets and I gave a whole box to Phoolchandbhai.

"The three people who had left TLA and joined Red Flag did not get their jobs back. They came to TLA and Vasavada saheb ordered them to write a letter of apology. So they did, and they got jobs as *badli* workers.

At a union meeting

"Those six years were so hard for me. My husband is the only son of his mother and has always been very spoilt. He just refuses to go to work and earn money. So my earnings supported both of us and our four children. In days, I used to do odd work. I would pick paper, I would wash people's clothes, clean their grain. I even borrowed a little and began selling vegetables. My father used to help me regularly. He sent me grain every month and vegetables every week.

"Maniben, the *membrani* gave us all courage. She showed us how to use TLA."

Declining Living Standard

Perhaps TLA believed that by increasing the men's wages and sending the women home to look after the house they would improve the standard of living of the family. This, however, did not happen.

The social reformers believed that women should leave the textile mills and devote themselves to the welfare of the family. They believed that if the women stay home, it would build a strong and stable family life. However, the first prerequisite for building a strong and stable family is a survival income, and in most working class families one wage earner was not enough to support the extended households.

Furthermore, given the working conditions in the mill male wage earner would often lose his health and his income would become irregular. Sometimes he would spend the money on his own pursuits like drinks or a second wife. Occasionally, the death of the male wage earner would cause a complete loss of income. In many families, the woman for all practical purposes, was the head of the household, and in many more, she was an important contributor to the household survival income.

Retrenching of women would cause a definite decrease in the family budget. According to a report on family budgets in Ahmedabad "the average earnings of cotton mill workers in Ahmedabad advanced from 1.4.10 in May 1926 to Rs 1.6.0 in December 1933, or by 5.6 per cent... But...even though the increases continued they are reflected in the figures of family income, owing partly to...reduction in the average numbers of

workers per family... Thus the average monthly income of working class families in receipt of incomes below Rs 90 per month works out to Rs 43.5.0 in 1933-35 as compared to Rs 44.7.2 in 1926... The average daily number of women employed in the cotton mill industry in Ahmedabad was only about 10,300 out of a total of 97,218 workers in 1935 as against 10,600 out of a total of 55,767 in 1926."

As the proportion of working women declined so also the family income and standard of living of mill workers fell.

Better Than Nothing

So, when the mill sector began to be closed to women they could not just go home and look after the family as per theory. They had to work for the family to survive, and they sought work in other sectors of the economy. The occupations that women went into most often were contract labour, paper picking, and occasionally, construction work.

Contract labour has been prevalent in the Ahmedabad cotton textile mills since their inception and is widespread even today. The system works hidden under the organised mill sector and is an attempt by the mill management to get around its responsibility to labour, and earn higher profits by paying lower wages, giving no benefits and making the workers work for longer hours.

Since this system is illegal and surreptitious, there have been few reliable statistics on its size and scope. However, the labour investigation committee in 1943 estimated that 10 per cent of the work force in Ahmedabad was employed by contractors.

The mill generally gave out labour contracts in reeling, opening bobbins, printing, cleaning and waste. The contractor uses the mill premises and machines (usually old, discarded ones) and brings the labour himself. He is rarely officially recorded. As Gelabhai says: "I used to work in spinning in the Swadeshi mills. Then my brother, who is a Majoor Mahajan representative, said the saheb in his mill was looking for a contractor for reeling. So, he and I went into partnership and took the contract. The mill does not record me as a contractor but as a worker. They also recorded my wife and two sons as workers. Then they paid us all a 'salary' along with overtime. That way, they paid us a total of about Rs 2,000 a month. I used to keep about seven women and boys at Rs 6 each per day and I would make a profit of about Rs 600 a month."

The workers in the labour contract are paid very low wages. Even today, the wage rate is Rs 2 to Rs 8 per day. They have to work 12 hours a day and are given no benefits such as gratuity or maternity benefit, and can be dismissed at any time. The women retrenched from the mills found immediate employment in this sector.

A woman picking waste paper from the streets

Babuben, who was retrenched from Bordi mill, went in search of work. "When I did not get work any more in Bordi mill I started going to other mills in search of work. I would stand at the gate at 7.30 a.m. when the shift began and ask all the women going in: 'Sister, is there any work in your mill?' At Calico mill gates, one woman took me in with her, saying: 'You can meet Manubhai Sheth, the reeling contractor.'

Manubhai was happy to have me because I had 16 years of experience and he took me on at Re 1.25 a day. Of course, it was much less than the mill where I was making about Rs 200 a month but it was better than nothing.

"I was the best worker so Manubhai made me the supervisor. But I never sided with the Sheth, always with the workers. After a while I said to him: 'Kaka, Re 1.25 is very low. My sisters' stomachs do not get filled on what you give.' So he made it Rs 1.36, then Rs 1.50 and then Rs 1.60. We worked from 7 a.m. to 7 p.m. If we worked overtime, till 10 p.m., we got Re 1 more.

"I worked 10 years in Calico mill. Then the mill gave the work to another contractor. I organised all my workers and said : 'If another contractor comes he will bring his own workers and where will we go?' The management must have heard of our meeting and were afraid we would agitate. So they called a meeting and took us all to Chandola lake and gave us lunch with sweets. All of us were in a good and friendly mood. Then the manager explained to us that Calico could not give the contract to Manubhai this year and it would give him the contract the next year. In this friendly mood, we promised not to agitate. So we lost our jobs.

"The next year, Manubhai got a contract in Jehangir mill. He asked me to come to work. I said I would go only if my salary was raised to Rs 1.75. The

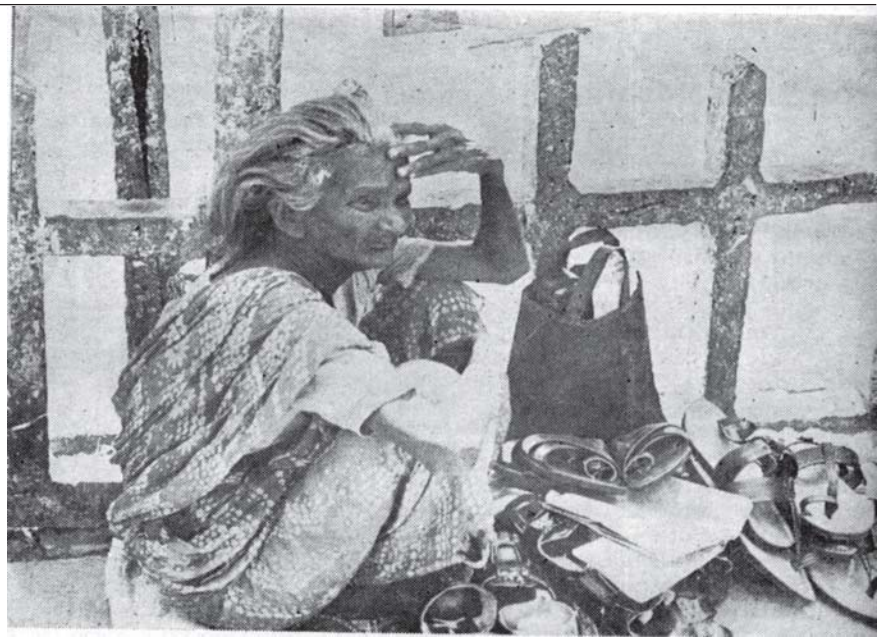
regular mill salaries at that time came to about Rs 300 a month. I worked a while. Then I got pregnant. One day, I slipped on a bobbin, fell on my stomach and began to bleed. My mother-in-law rushed me to the Majdoor hospital and the doctor said I must not work or I would lose the child. After that, I did not go back to the contract. My daughters were eight to 10 years old so I started going out with them to pick paper on the streets."

Earning Enough to Eat

Jhaverben did many odd jobs before she joined the contractor. "When I left the mill my son was already married and had two children. The rest of my children had died and so had my husband. My son was earning Rs 150 a month as a peon. It was not enough for all of us so I said to him: 'Son, I will earn at least enough to feed myself.' I opened a little shop selling toffees and sweets. But the people in my *chali* are very small minded. They were jealous of me because I earned a good salary in the mill and they were happy that I had to resign. They wanted me to suffer so they never bought from my shop. They went to the bigger shop across the road. Some days, I did not have a meal to eat. But I never told my son.

"Then, one day, someone told me that the Khadi Gramodyog in Vadaj gives cotton for spinning thread on the *charkha*. So I got a *charkha* and I used to spin every day at home. I did this for a few years but I used to earn barely Re 1 to Rs 2 a day. And every two days I had to go to Vadaj so nothing was left after I paid the bus fare. My son said: 'Mother, it is too much trouble. You don't worry. I will feed you.' So I sold my *charkha* and sat at home and looked after my grandchildren. But with this inflation, and so many children to feed, how could we manage? I was ready to go hungry but I could not see my grandchildren suffer.

"Then a contractor called Bhikhabhai said to me: 'Maji, will you come to Magri mills and open bobbins at Rs 3 a day?' It is within walking distance. There were 12 of us who used to sit from 7.30 a.m. to 3.30 p.m. Once, we were working in the mill when a woman inspector came from Majoor Mahajan. I said: 'If she comes and asks us our problems I will tell her about our pay and working conditions.' We wanted to call her but could not, because the contractor would have seen us. She went away without meeting us. Another time, an inspector came from the labour office, and the contractor made all of us go into a little room, and locked the door. We were afraid because it was very dark inside. He let us out after the inspector left.



End of a lifetime of toil

"When I was about 60, after I had worked six years, the contractor told me to go. He said: 'Maji, |you are old now. If you die in the mill the manager will not give any money for you, and all your relatives will come and make trouble for me. So you should better go.' I said: 'What will you give me ?' So he gave me Rs 60 and I left."

Kankuben was never in the regular employment of a mill. "I and my two daughters and my son and my husband were working for a contractor in Calico mills in the screen printing unit. We joined the mills in 1958. We worked as a team and we earned about Rs 20 a day. We worked from 7 a.m. to 7 p.m.

"Then, one day, in 1972, we came to work and found the door locked. The contractor was not there. We went to his house and asked him: 'Bhikhabhai, why have you not opened the department today?' He said: 'Kankuben, the mill has stopped my contract. They have given all their work to the screen printing factories out in Shah-e-Alam.' Suddenly, our whole family was unemployed. We went to the manager and he said: 'It is too expensive to print in the mill so we have given it outside. There the labour rates are much lower.'

"Then we went and registered a case in Majoor Mahajan but nothing happened. We were starving. Sometimes, none of us ate for days together. Then we opened a tea and biscuit stall. It ran for some time but was not economical. Till today, none of us has been able to find any proper work."

From the Mill to the Streets

Many of the retrenched mill workers pick paper in the streets of the city. There are about 10,000 women picking papers in the city. These women start around 5 a.m. and walk around the city with sacks on their backs. Often, they take small,

active children with them. Each woman has her beat. Some beats are in the middle class area, some in the market area and some in the industrial areas. They walk from 6 a.m. to 3 p.m., an average of 10 kilometres a day. They say it is tiring work. Their backs often ache and since they have to rummage through dirty heaps they get bitten by insects and the occasional scorpion.

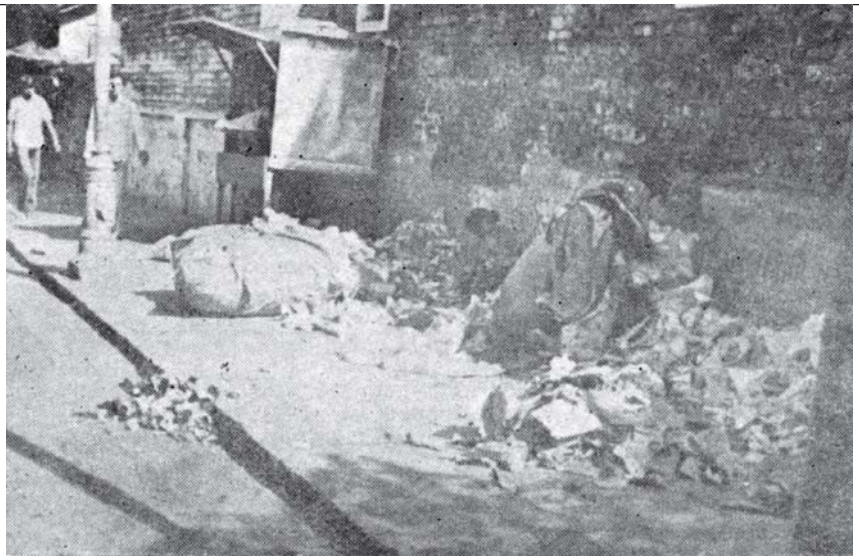
After 3 p.m. the women go home and sort the paper they have picked. They then take it to the paper trader who pays them at a different rate per kilo for different types of paper. They earn Rs 2 to Rs 4 a day in this way. This paper is sent to the paper mill by the trader and the mill recycles it to make it into cardboard and white paper.

Most of the women who pick paper are harijans. Most of the traders who buy it and store it in godowns are Muslims and the paper millionaires are patels or banias. The distribution of work is according to caste, with harijans on the lowest rung.

Since paper picking requires no capital input and since anyone can do it most harijan women have done this work, at one time or another.

Babuben says: "I left the contract when I was pregnant. Then, after my baby was born, I started picking papers. I would go to the middle class areas as well as the labour areas from 5 a.m. to 12 noon. In the afternoon, I would clean what we had picked. If I worked extra at night I could make Rs 6 or 7. I would take my daughter with me. My sons refused to come. My daughter, Chandrika, was my favourite. She is very intelligent and has done BA.

"Even when she was in school and then in college, she would come to pick papers. In the morning, she would come with me and go to the college in the afternoon. She would run ahead, saying: 'I will work so that my Babu does not have to work so hard.' I was lucky to have such good children otherwise how could we have made both ends meet?



Woman collecting junk

"Picking paper is a real come down for me. When I was in the mill we used to look down on the paper pickers. We would say: 'We are mill workers. We earn a good salary. These paper pickers have to wander around. They are dirty.' When I first had to start picking paper I would try to make my *ghunghat* long so that no one could see my face. I was so ashamed. Today, too, I am degraded. How low I have fallen!"

Many Faces of Inequality

During the 1920s and 1930s the ruling elite and the middle classes acquired a new social attitude towards the family, in which women were seen primarily as wives and mothers, homemakers rather than workers. This attitude began to percolate down to the working class through their union. At the same time, there was pressure on the union to bring in newer technology and retrench workers. The new social attitude allowed the union to sacrifice women workers to the pressure of new technology.

The inequality between women and men in our society expresses itself differently in the various spheres of our life. In the economic sphere, inequality is manifested in the form of a segmented labour market where women are trapped into unskilled, unorganised, insecure, low wage work. If there is to be a social change towards more equal relationships women must be introduced into the more skilled levels of the labour force. Equally important and perhaps more urgent is the need to stop the displacement of women from the spheres where they already have a base. ❐

(This is an edited version of a monograph prepared for Lokayan. Copies of the full document areavailable in English, Hindi and Gujarati from Setu, Ahmedabad.)

Phoolan Devi

I have been tonguetied many times
while the world shouted a niagara upon
-my silent stone, shaping me to a round
smoothness without edges.
Dissolving in clay,
1 shall surely give way
one day. My words
shall roll like rocks
towards sudden chasms.
Uprooted trees will be
my exclamation marks, and when
the sentence ends
you shall hear the world's
wet, pleading whisper.

Vasantha Surya