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TEXTILE INDUSTRY: INDIA'S SECOND LARGEST EMPLOYER, BUT WHAT'S REALLY IN FOR THE WORKERS?

DR. HALIMA SADIA RIZVI
PROFESSOR & HEAD
DEPARTMENT OF ECONOMICS
JAMIA MILLIA ISLAMIA
NEW DELHI

ISHA JASWAL
RESEARCH SCHOLAR
DEPARTMENT OF ECONOMICS
JAMIA MILLIA ISLAMIA
NEW DELHI

ABSTRACT

The seeds of Indian Textiles were sown early in Indus Valley Civilization and constituting one of the essential needs of human beings, demand for textile and clothing shall never come to a halt. Currently textiles industry is of critical importance to our national economy since it is the second largest after agriculture in terms of providing employment opportunities. Moreover, this sector absorbs a sizable number of people belonging to the weaker sections of the society in general and women in particular. Hence, advancement of this sector has direct bearing on our development and nation building. Notably, a substantial number of firms in this industry cater to the global retail giants. However, in the wake of enormous competition on account of global integration the employers attempt to cut costs wherever possible which in turn affects the overall working environment in this industry. This paper, thus, tries to explore the working conditions of workers engaged in this sector with the help of various studies conducted so far. Consequently, the study concludes that working conditions are inhumane and dismal. Employers prefer contractual labourers who are paid less than legal minimum. Women workers who are majorly employed in this industry fall prey to sexual exploitation, economic discrimination in contrast to their male counterparts and absence of facilities of toilets and crèches. Studies bring out cases of child labour where children are treated like slaves. Overall, the working environment is stressful, over-tiring, unhealthy and hazardous.

KEYWORDS

Textile industry, hrm, working environment.

INTRODUCTION

The legacy of Indian textiles can be traced back to the use of dyes and printing blocks around 3000 BC (Chandra, P. 2006). Also, evidence from the Middle East suggests textiles trade from Indus Valley Civilization existed as early as 2350 BC. The archaeological surveys and studies discovered spindle and cotton stuck to silver vase some 5000 years ago, revealed that the spinning and weaving of cotton was known to the Harappa civilisation.

During the medieval period, the Muslim conquest of India considerably impacted India's culture on one hand and witnessed increased foreign relationships on the other. It was during this time period that India's trade relations with Europe became active. The first mass fashion market in Europe was engendered by the bulk import of Indian cotton cloth after 1660 (Horwell, V. 2004).

By the 17th century India became the world's largest economy and its textiles were celebrated worldwide. In fact, India was the world's chief producer of cotton textiles and the leading exporter of textiles to Britain. The increased desirability of chintz (multi-coloured Indian prints on cotton) in Europe led to the formation of East India Company in 1600 which in turn was mainly responsible for textiles export from India to Europe (Trentmann, F. 2009).

The British textile industry remained small and competitively insignificant against its Indian counterparts throughout the 17th and first half of the 18th century (Broadberry, S. et.al. 2005). The combination of block-printed or hand-painted, yet washable and cheap cloth was unachievable in the West but possible in India due to its organisation of agriculture, sophistication in natural dye chemistry and low but not exploitative wages for skilled craftsmen (Horwell, V. 2004).

Nevertheless, with Industrial Revolution, the productivity of Britain's labour in the production of cotton textiles increased dramatically. Consequently, by the end of the 18th century British textiles increasingly displaced those of India's from their home markets and subsequently took over Indian markets as well.

With the colonization of India, India's textile industry rapidly declined until it became a net exporter of raw cotton. At the end of the 19th century, the once leader in the export of textiles started to import textiles that it needed. British government policies left India technically impoverished. Thus, India's economic decline which corresponded with the collapse of the Mughal Dynasty and the beginning of the British Raj in the mid-19th century not only showed a down fall to its leading textiles production and exports but the downfall of the country as a whole.

INDIA'S TEXTILES INDUSTRY: CURRENT SCENARIO

Textiles and clothing form the basic necessity of life hence its demand will never be out of order. With respect to India, its textiles industry has an overarching presence in the economic life of the country. Presently it contributes nearly 14 per cent to industrial production, 4 per cent to the GDP and 17 per cent to the country's export earnings (Annual Report 2011-12, Ministry of Textiles).

Very importantly, this sector is India's second largest employment provider after agriculture. It employs over 35 million peoples directly which in turn contains a huge number of SC/ST and women.

This sector is comprised of the following major sub-sectors:

- Cotton/Man-Made Fibre Textiles Mill Industry
- Man-Made Fibre/Filament Yarn Industry
- The Wool and Woollen Textiles Industry
- The Sericulture and Silk Textiles Industry
- Handlooms
- Handicrafts
- The Jute and Jute Textiles Industry
- Textiles Exports

The segment of Jute Industry plays an important role in the National economy of India by generating employment for 0.37 million workers in organized mills and about 4.0 million farm families (ibid). Additionally, a substantial number of people are engaged in jute trade. Moreover, India has an overwhelming global presence in terms of production of raw jute and jute products. Evidently, India accounted for 60 per cent of world's production of jute and allied fibres in 2007-08 (ibid).

With regards to Silk, India stands to be its second largest producers in the world. In turn, sericulture and silk industry provides lucrative occupation to about 7.25 million people in rural and semi-urban parts of India (ibid). Moreover, it employs a sizeable number of workers from economically oppressed sections of the society particularly the women.

Coming to the decentralized powerloom sector, apart from meeting the clothing needs of the country, this segment holds an essential position within the textiles industry with regard to production of fabric and generation of employment opportunities. It provides employment to 57.44 lakh persons and contributes 62 per cent to India's gross production of cloth (ibid).

Handloom industry is another extremely important segment of textiles industry where handloom weaving directly or indirectly engages over 43 lakh weavers and allied workers. Strikingly, 95 per cent of world's hand-woven fabric is produced in India (ibid).

Handicrafts industry is yet another segment which apart from generating huge foreign exchange also creates tremendous employment opportunities for artisans and craftsmen in rural and semi-urban areas. Even though, suffering from constraints like being unorganized, this sector is crucial for sustaining not only the prevailing set of millions of artisans spread all over India, but also for the progressively increasing large number of new players in the crafts activities (ibid).

The wool and woollen textiles industry may perhaps be rural based but is export oriented. However, wool is the only natural fibre in which India finds itself to be lacking and consequently India contributes only 1.8 per cent to total wool manufacture of the world (ibid).

Over the years Ministry of Textiles has taken several initiatives in order to improve and enhance the competitiveness of this sector. With the view of giving a boost to the growth in exports and investment in this industry, many schemes have been implemented. For instance, Technology Upgradation Fund Scheme (TUFS) which was launched in April 1999 for five years and extended till March 2007 attempted to ease up the working capital requirements by bridging the gap between the cost of interest and the capital component (ibid). Restructured TUFS was approved to be launched from April 2011. Other schemes such as Scheme for integrated Textile Parks, Development of Mega Cluster, Integrated Skill Development Scheme, and Technology Mission for Technical Textiles etc. were devised (ibid).

Textile Workers' Rehabilitation Fund Scheme which came into force in September 1986 provides for interim relief to textile workers in case they are rendered jobless due to the shut-down of a related unit (ibid). Assistance is extended only to eligible workers so as to enable them to get another job. Assistance continues if workers undertake a self-employment venture, and ceases if he gets a job in another registered or licensed undertaking.

In order to promote gender justice the Government of India in its 11th Plan implemented five schemes for the upliftment of the handloom sector and welfare of the weavers particularly the women (ibid). Also, in the 11th Plan, the Catalytic Development Programme consisting of various sub programmes was implemented by the Central Silk Board (CBS) for the benefit of female workers (ibid).

Now let's look into the working conditions of the labourers in this prestigious industry.

INDIA'S TEXTILES INDUSTRY: WORKING CONDITIONS

As already stated India's textile manufacture is the second largest employer of the country which gives way to gainful employment avenues to millions of workers. Therefore, for all round development and nation building, progress and development of this sector is of crucial importance. Moreover, a substantial number of units operating under this industry are export oriented catering to the retail giants such as that of the US and Europe.

The era of globalization has without a doubt provided tremendous opportunities for human advancement but at the same time it has imposed intense global competition. As a result, employers adopt flexible labour policies, low working standards and less secure forms of employment in order to gain cost advantage and sustain themselves in the cut throat global competition. In fact, in developing economies a large part of the labour force is employed in the informal sectors where despite the hazardous working conditions the scope of security of employment and income is minimal, thus rendering them and the ones dependant on them highly vulnerable to risks. In fact, the early social protection schemes failed to provide a comprehensive national scheme for about 93 per cent of India's workforce which exist as unorganized labourers and in turn contribute about 60 per cent of Indian gross domestic product (Sakthivel S. et al, 2006).

This can be clearly evidenced through the study conducted by SOMO and ICN May 2011, which reported increased flexibilisation of labour in the Indian Textiles and Clothing industry. Nearly 60 to 80 per cent of workers were reported to be temporary in this industry since this gives advantage to employers to deduct costs in salaries and keep these workers away from forming unions.

Tamil Nadu is India's booming cotton manufacturing hub which consists of nearly 43 per cent of large mills and 80 per cent of smaller ones (SOMO, ICN May 2011). The study also reports increased feminisation of workers since female workers are meek and reliable and most importantly, they can be easily exploited economically through payment of lesser wages in contrast to their male counterparts. Notably, females are most attracted by the Sumangali Scheme where the garment producers promise a lump sum amount up-to rupees 40,000 at the end of three years (ibid). The economically backward, illiterate and debt ridden families find it lucrative to arrange for their daughters' marriage through this money. Moreover, three times healthy meal, accommodation, leisure activities and education is also promised during the course of work.

However, the report brings out the realities in contrast to the promises which is too harsh to digest. 10-20 per cent of Sumangali workers were found to be child labourers (ibid). The residential workers under the Sumangali system had to compulsorily live within the factory premises and every measure is taken to restrict them from contacting the NGOs. On the health front, headaches, insomnia, tiredness and stomach aches were found to be common ailments owing to undue excess work and stress that emanates from constant abuse and scolding from supervisors. Work space filled with cotton dust due to hopeless ventilation system and hot and humid weather make the working conditions worse.

Further, in many cases the promised lump sum amount was found to be not paid. On one hand, workers who leave before the contract period were not paid the saved up lump sum money and on the other hand many were fired just before the completion of the contract period to avoid such payment. Women were found to regularly work for 12 hours a day and that too without receipt of overtime payments. Moreover, the per day wage rate which ranged between rupees 60-110 which was way below than the legal minimum of rupees 171 rupees in the textile sector of Tamil Nadu (refer Table 1).

TABLE 1: WAGES PAID TO WORKERS UNDER SUMANGALI SCHEME VS. LEGAL MINIMUM WAGES

Period	Daily Wages	Wages during the period
1-6 months	60	10,800
7-12 months	70	12,600
13-18 months	80	14,400
19-24 months	90	16,200
25-30 months	100	18,000
31-36 months	110	19,800
	81,800	
Food and Accommodation	-15	-16,200
Lump sum on completion 50,000 (between 30,000-50,000)		
Total amount earned in 3 years working under Sumangali Scheme		115,600
Daily minimum wages in Tamil Nadu mills and garment sector	171	
Total earning in 3 years minimum wage, not calculating the extra wage benefits		184,680

Source: "Captured by Cotton: Exploited Dalit girls produce garments in India for European and US markets", SOMO-Centre for Research on Multinational Corporations and ICN-India Committee of the Netherlands, May 2011.

Interestingly, after the release of this report, working condition improved in four firms in terms of rise in wage and final amount paid to women workers under the Sumangali scheme, more freedom in movement, better food at canteen and less workers per dorm in hostels (Kumar, B.A. 2012). However, more serious issues of bonded and forced labour, child labour, overloaded working hours, unsafe and unhealthy working atmosphere and physical and sexual abuse of women were reported to still persist.

Ana van Es - de Volkskrant(2010) investigation brought out two miserable cases of the working conditions at the export oriented KPR Mill plant in Indiampalayam. At the age of 14 years Chitra started working in the spinning mill of this plant. Once employed, she was rarely allowed to leave the factory boundaries. Further, in contrast to 3450 rupees per month wages of girls as stated by the KPR mill administration, Chitra revealed the receipt of a maximum earning of rupees 1300 per month. Also, she worked for 12 hours a day and felt too exhausted to avail any recreational or educational facility arranged by the employers. Nevertheless, shockingly only four computers were available for thousands of girls in the name of arrangement for provision of computer lessons. Even though unbearable heat and humidity made it difficult for Chitra to work but she never gave up. This was because of the amount of rupees 30,000 that was promised to her after three years of her work with which she had planned to pay her dowry. Even though at the end of her contract she received the promised amount but by then she had developed breathing problem due to the cotton fibres she inhaled over the period of time. Those 30,000 rupees were spent on her operation to extract the fibres from her bowl and to add to her misery, her fixed engagement was called off.

The second case is of Lakshimani, who worked as a cleaner in the same mill. But she could not work after 18 month of her service since she could not bend her fingers and became visibly disabled. Even though the cause of disability was unclear but Lakshimani claimed the chemicals used for cleaning to be the culprit. Moreover, she was not paid the amount of 15,000 rupees which she has saved and accumulated till then.

Karnataka is another state which has considerable presence in the textiles and clothing sector. A study conducted by CIVIDEP (2009) in Bangalore's garment industry in factories which cater to apparel giants like Tesco, Wal-Mart and M&S revealed deplorable working atmosphere. More than two third of the labourers were reported to women in Bangalore's garment industry. Further, workers were found to forcibly perform 22 hours of overtime work on monthly average basis in order to meet the production targets (ibid). Awful abuse and terrible shouting from supervisors resulted in case these targets were not met. This in turn created extremely stressful environment. Evidence of various forms of gender discrimination was also noticed during the conduct of the study. Also, female workers, no matter how much insulted they felt, were reported to undergo sexual harassment quietly in order to keep their jobs. Workers were reported with high incidence of job insecurity since most of the interviewed workers had signed no contract during the time of their appointment; and those who did had little knowledge about it. Thus petty mistakes could easily lead to their dismissal. Wages were found to be invariably low which could barely meet a family's regular expenses. Also, backaches, respiratory diseases, piles and anaemia were reported to be common illnesses among these workers.

Further, the Guardian on 28 October 2007 exposed an ironic and horrible case of workings in the textile factory in Delhi where very young children were found working to manufacture apparel for Gap Kids. Shockingly, the conditions of these children were no better than slaves as they were found to be working in filthy condition and dirty sweatshop. Another such instance was reported by the Times of India in 2010 where manifold children were reported to be engaged in the textile markets of Surat. Most of the children worked daily for 10 to 14 hours in unpleasant conditions and earned between 20-50 rupees per day which was much less than the adults. These children belonged to the poor sections and so the opportunity cost of education was too high. Thus, on the face of it, it was a win-win situation for both contractors and children. Late than never, the Apparel Export Promotion Council in 2011 unleashed the programme "Disha" (Driving Industry Towards Sustainable Human Capital Advancement) which aims at eradicating child labour from the garment industry (Mehta, S.G. 2011). The programme is designed to run in a coordinated manner with the Ministry of Textile and conduct supply chain audits along with educating garment exporters to understand global social standards and norms of the International Labour Organization (ibid). But it's a long way to go and auditing and education does not ensure implementation. Also more than 60 per cent of textile and garment production is consumed domestically. So educating only the exporters to avoid cancellation of our shipments abroad will not suffice the purpose.

Also, the Guardian on 15 October 2007 reported death of three workers within a year at Shalini Creations, manufacturer of garments for a US firm. Where Ms Padmavathi who was not granted immediate leave to go to the hospital and rather abused in return collapsed at the factory gate and died on her way to hospital, Ratnamma lost her baby boy while delivering him at the street of the factory gate since she was not granted immediate leave when she went into labour. This raised considerable concern with respect to the working conditions at the factory. Recently, the Tribune highlighted the wretched working and living conditions of the migrant workers working in the factories in Jalandhar. The news highlighted the case of Manoj Bhagat, a migrant from Bihar who worked at the Shital Fibres- a blanket manufacturing unit. Manoj was reported to not receive the minimum wages and in the midst of a disaster that struck at the factory, Manoj's right leg had to be removed, thus bringing forth the units' hazardous working conditions. Similarly, two textile workers were found dead in the water tank in Shalu dyeing and printing firm at Pandesara in Surat (The Indian Express 2012). Though the news did not clarify the cause of death but the post mortem report of the victims revealed no signs of injury or presence of any poisonous matter.

Coming to the silk industry, India being its second largest global producer, this sector is prevalent in North-East India and particularly in Assam since time immemorial (Goswami 2006). Weaving has been a source of life in every Assami household and is in fact a prerequisite qualification for a girl to get married. Consequently, this industry is majorly inhabited by women. However, in comparison to their male counterparts, females occupy the position of ordinary unskilled helpers in the production process of silk. As a result, women receive less remuneration than their male equals. Globalisation has further deteriorated the working conditions in this sector by enhancing the cases of casual labour, flexibility of labour rights and increase in job insecurity.

Further, the case of Tirupur, the largest export centre for knit wear, shows increased feminisation of work. The expansion of exports after 1985 gave way to subcontracting and informalisation of labour and hence miserable working conditions of women who constitute about 60 per cent of the workforce (Padma 2004). Moreover, this knitwear capital was reported to get suicidal with each passing day in 2010 since more than 400 suicides took place in the same year (Thufail, PT 2010). In general, alcoholism, family conflicts, extra-marital affairs were reported to be the causes behind these deaths. But dejected living conditions and low remuneration were the original causes from which other problems emanated. For instance, Goutam who was reported to be working in the garment industry for nearly 15 years worked for 14 hours a day and received only 200 rupees in return (ibid). Similar were the cases of other labourers who could barely meet their family's needs, ultimately resorted to moneylenders and fell in the vicious debt-trap. In fact, the article reported that suicides among men were twice in number than the women victims. Moreover, the conditions at the workplace were highly shameful since the workers who usually work overtime were provided with no facility of drinking water.

Nevertheless, the situation of women in Peenya industrial estate in Bangalore was found to be equally terrible. This garment based industry is export oriented and women constituted over 80 per cent of the total workforce (Padma 2004). Inadequate number of toilets, absence of crèche and rest rooms add to the misery over and above the average 10-12 hours of work and minimal remuneration. Moreover, women are treated nothing less than garbage at the garment factories in Bangalore. In 2007, death of 25 years old Ammu who worked at the Triangle Apparel factory, Bangalore, was declared to be suicide (Krishna, N. 2007). But her co-workers vouched for some other reasons that led to her death. According to them the victim was not only harassed and abused with obscene language but things were thrown at her and she was violently pushed around (ibid).

Workers themselves have time and again raised their voices against the exploitative regime prevalent at the textile units in India. For instance, the 18 months long strike in Mumbai in 1982 joined by nearly 250,000 textile mill workers was a watershed event in the history of labour struggl. Under the leadership of DattaSamant the striking workers pressed for higher wages and bonus and better working conditions. The lacunas of textile mills in terms of use of obsolete technology and low standards of production were out in open as India face competition from China and Pakistan. But, mill owners used this opportunity to occupy the real estate and the then political leaders as well did nothing to relieve the workers because DattaSamant was considered a political threat (ibid). As a result the textile hub in Central Mumbai came to a halt and eventually moved out of Mumbai leaving thousands of mill labourers unemployed. Further, recently reported by the NTUI's labour news, where Reliance Textile Industries in Naroda, Gujarat, witnessed its highest ever revenue and net profit increase to USD 3.6 billion, the company's 5000 labourers went on strike in February 2012 to demand respite from the unfair wage structure and appalling working conditions. In fact according to workers the company's profits expanded ten-folds in the past two decades; however, workers' and artisans' wages remained more or less the same. But to add to the plight of the workers, police force was used to suppress the agitation and the strike was announced illegal thereby putting the workers' leader behind bars. Astonishingly, last year in September when over 2,500 textile workers from 150 textile factories in Ludhiana went on strike to demand rise in wages in wake of rising inflation and implementation of constitution abiding labour laws, the related textile mill owners announced to the Chief Minister of the state that the state was under terrorist attack (Amritpal 2011).

The above evidences depict the gruelling, malicious and hostile conditions of workers in textiles and garment industry of India. Hideous and open crime of child labour in abusive circumstances points towards failure of governments' policy and law to safeguard the future of tomorrow. Moreover, in addition to the disadvantages and exploitation attached to the tag of weaker sex, women workers in these units also face economic disparity, mental trauma and a number of insecurities. Voices, if raised against such spiteful conditions are curbed by the powerful owners through hook or crook. Some argue that these mills have at least aided the jobless, especially those from the wretched segments of the society; but such arguments simply lose their worth in the face of such appalling and atrocious working conditions.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The second fastest growing world's economy's second largest employing sector witnesses to majorly employ women workers belonging to the backward, uneducated and poor segments of the society. Moreover, global integration further enhances the employment capacity of this sector. Thus, on the face of it, India's textiles industry seems to be an important tool for emancipation of women in this male dominated society via empowering them and leading to India's development in the long run.

But, the studies and articles reviewed to understand the working conditions of workers in this industry give a staggering picture of real life situation. Where on one hand employers boast of at least providing employment opportunities to the poor lot of the society; wretched, unhealthy and unsafe working conditions and unreasonably low wages mark the working conditions of workers in general and female workers in particular on the other. Be it the Sumangali system of textiles mills in Tamil Nadu or sexual harassment and gender discrimination in Bangalore's garment industry; women suffer gravely.

Increase in recruitment of casual and unskilled workers as a means to cut cost owing to enhanced global competition leads to huge job insecurity and stress amongst textile labourers. Cases of child labour in garment mills and markets serving in atrocious condition are mind boggling. 12-14 hours of per day workload, wages less than the legal minimum, abuse from supervisors, stress, respiratory and back problems are the common characteristics of the labourers belonging to the firms operational under this industry.

Thus, reasonable and urgent action is imperative to liberate these workers from their inhumane conditions. It is essential to build skills and systems of security, and enhance their bargaining power. But the question is whether our country's policy making will take serious steps towards this cause since better skills and high bargaining power may reduce India's comparative advantage in this sector.

Moreover, female workers should face no wage differentials with respect to their male counterparts and safe working environment along with health insurance benefits are imperative. Awareness and proper implementation of Vishakha Guidelines against Sexual Harassment at the Workplace is of utmost importance. Basic amenities of toilets, accommodation, crèche etc. should be adequately provided. Nevertheless, it is also recommended that the government should adopt social protection policy exclusively for this sector especially targeting the women workers which in turn will help attain the overall developmental objectives for our nation's advancement.

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