

**CONDITIONS OF WOMEN WORKERS IN
COTTON MILLS : A Case Study of Madras,
Madurai and Coimbatore (1914–1939)**

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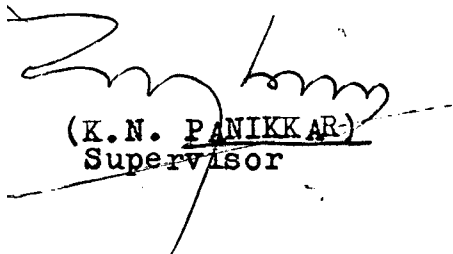
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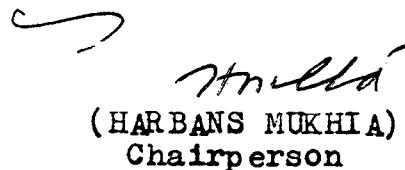
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Certified that the dissertation "Conditions of Women Workers in Cotton Mills: A Case Study of Madras, Coimbatore and Madurai, 1914-1939", submitted by Ms. M.V. SHOBHANA WARRIER, is in fulfilment of 8 credits out of 24 credits for the degree of Master of Philosophy of this University. This dissertation has not been previously submitted for any other degree of this University or any other university and is her own work.

We recommend that this dissertation be placed before the examiners for evaluation.


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C O N T E N T S

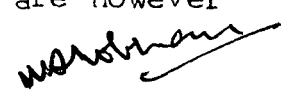
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CHAPTER I
INTRODUCTION

The object of our study is the conditions of women workers in the Cotton Textile Industry of Madras Presidency in the first half of the present century. The underlying purpose is to trace the general historical features of women assuming the role of primary producers in a system of production characterised essentially by wage-labour. Admittedly, in this task, we have been constrained by the nature of our source-material, the time at our disposal and, not the least, the limitations of our own historiographical talents. Nevertheless, we make an attempt to make our way through the several layers of complexity that envelope the subject, viz., the compendium of ideology - itself in flux under the influence of transition to new conditions of production - which renders the sexes unequal, the particularities of capitalism in regard of gender inequality and the environment of nascent industrialisation under the watchful eye of a colonial administration.

It is a truism to say that women have been an integral part of the economy of society since its inception. But, over time, their existence at work has been shaped by different conditions in different stages of historical development. Industrial Capitalism the world over opened avenues to the women in a qualitatively different manner.

By separating, to a large extent, the home from the workplace and situating some section of women at the workplace, it provided women with the potential scope for easier and wider access. It paved the way for expression of discontent in different forms and generated in them an awareness of their oppressed, exploited situation. Initially, under the influence of the Enlightenment, the call for giving women equal rights was raised by Feminists like May Wollstonecraft, etc., who spearheaded the ideological battle for property rights and voting rights for women in the 19th century.

Most organised efforts, utopian as well as revolutionary, to liberate humanity from a demeaning social order since then have paid special attention to the women's question. Radicals ranging from Robert Owen and Charles Fourier to Marx, Engels, Bebel, Clara Zetkin and Lenin have given us valuable insights into the subject.

The 20th century has witnessed the mobilisation of women into larger and larger spheres of active public life. The suffragette movement, the Russian Revolution of 1917, the two world wars, all these have lent impetus to the women's question in their own ways. Women have functioned as the most malleable segment of the reserve army of labour, welcomed to the workplace when men are called away to wage war or prove too innumerable or expensive to

meet the labourforce requirements of the day and, alternatively, shooed back into the beckoning folds of the family when conditions dictate a cut in the workforce.

Increasingly, women themselves have come to the fore, both as part of and outside socio-political movements, to question the structures of gender inequality. Intellectual enquiry of the problem, at the theoretical and empirical levels, has been an important part of their effort. Simone de Beauvoire's The Second Sex evoked interest at large.

We present below a briefly annotated list of some of the major works that have contributed to our study.

Michele Barrett's Women's Oppression Today breaks new ground in defining a theoretical approach to the women's question. She combines aspects of women's oppression along with a study of the exploitative structure of the society. Her attempt is to bring Marxism and Feminism closer, and to study women's oppression in a more complete sense within the social system of oppression and exploitation. The study is an analytic account of various works of women's studies, and provides the clearest presentation available of the Marxist Feminist perspective. She cautions against reductionism of all kinds in approaching the problem either of economy or gender and argues for a more complete, complex study of the problem. However, her emphasis on the role of the family as the principal centre of gender ideology

presents some problems.

Undoubtedly, the ideology of gender is cultivated and bred in the sphere of the family. However, it is our opinion that the family is, in fact, in each phase of history, representative of the whole society in the sense that the social formation structures the family in a way most compatible to it. In other words, gender ideology has to be located in the entire configuration of societal structures and the dynamics of social production.

There are many theoretical works approaching the woman's question differently ranging from Shulasmith Firestone's Dialectics of Sex, in which she tries to displace the category of social classes to understand class as male and female, to works of Juliet Mitchell et al premised on psychoanalytic theory. It was, however, Kate Millet's Sexual Politics which saw sex as a status category with political implications involving 'power structured relationships' in which one group of persons - Women - were controlled by men, which seriously evoked response and challenge from various quarters. According to Millet, consent in society to female subordination was secured through socialization under a primarily patriarchal society. It followed that the need was for a 'sexual revolution' to liberate humanity. Thus, she poses the problem of women's liberation as being independent of the

larger context of social production. This trend of perceiving women's liberation was also part of a tradition that developed in understanding women's history.

There are a number of articles studying conditions of women workers in industries most of which are regional studies, e.g. Angela John's study of women workers in coal mines England, Jan Lambert's study on sexual harassment in the 19th century cotton industry. These are all microlevel studies pertaining to analysing and placing women's position in these occupations.

In the Indian context, a very early and significant contribution to the literature on women is Neera Desai's Indian Women Today. It is a comprehensive survey of the development of Indian society and its consequent ramifications having a bearing on the status of Indian Women. Its significance lies in this, that it is one of the first well researched historical reconstructions of the changing position of women in India covering the influence of a tradition of religion from the vedic period to now, culture, society and institutions shaping them to their present mould. However, it is a very general study of the deteriorating status of Indian women from pre-British times to Independent India. A small section has dealt with the condition of women workers and their utterly decadent conditions of existence, their unequal position in wage slavery

and the implications industrialisation had in increasing the burden of work for them.

The bulk of contemporary Indian literature on women, however, is not on the women workers but rather revolves around themes such as the relationship between women and nationalism, women and social reforms and women in literature. Kumari Jayawardana, Feminism and Nationalism In The Third World Countries (Prague 1982) and C.S. Lakshmi, Face Behind the Mask, (Delhi 1984) can be cited as examples. The first is a study of the issues around which women were mobilised during the national liberation struggle and the negative consequences of the women not raising their own problems for a revolutionary transformation. Being focussed on social reforms, nationalism and Indian women in the struggle for national liberation, this work has little to say specifically on the impact of the struggle for national liberation on the women worker's state of exploitation. The second book, C.S. Lakshmi's Face Behind The Mask, makes a sensitive analysis of the roles assigned to women in Tamil literature. Her conclusion is that a traditional, submissive stereotype of womanhood is perpetuated by most of the women writers, which she attributes to their middle-class background and the whole environment in which their consciousness was structured - a male dominated patriarchal society wherein women merely saw themselves as images of male perception.

Most of the work done on labour in India has, consciously or unconsciously, ignored the effects of modern industrial work on the lives of women workers and has been preoccupied with the study of labour unions and strikes.

Radha Kumar in City Lives: Condition of Women Workers in the Cotton Mills of Bombay, 1919-1939 attempts to evolve methods to make women the subject of discussion. However, the focus on women soon gets diffused and the study veers to being one on labourers in general.

Another study is that of Eamon Murphy on Madras Presidency, Unions in Conflict 1919-1939, (Sussex 1982). The author emphasizes that what he wants to highlight is not the importance of caste in the working class movement in terms of lobbying for union control, but how the traditional caste-stratified social structure impeded, at various levels, the growth of class consciousness in the various unions he makes a study of. But in the process, the work appears to have been unduly preoccupied with the caste factor in the mental make up and consciousness of the labourers at the expense of the oppression of the factory system. Though it is a discussion of the evolving consciousness of workers, his analysis is not very convincing. This is so because it is not possible to comprehensively capture the consciousness of workers in colonial India by resort to their classification on the basis of affiliation to caste and political party, as Murphy has

attempted to. There were other mediating factors as well.

It is noteworthy that the reconstruction of history premised on an analysis of the unions in operation in these areas as pursued by Murphy, misses out the active role played by women workers as activists during protests and strike picketting: according to Murphy women were not actively involved except for stray incidents as they were tied down to familial duties assigned by society. In fact, our evidence suggests quite the contrary. It was not as if because of the women's primary role as wife/daughter/mother, they were absolutely non-participatory in the labour movement. Although it is not possible to construct sequentially year by year, mill by mill, their active involvement in protests and strikes (given the limitations of the source material consulted), we do have quite a rich record of women protesting against the inhuman conditions of work at the cotton mill. What is noteworthy is that despite the limitations posed by the ideology of familial responsibility and social norms, consistently, attempts were made to resist and challenge the oppressive apparatus at work by these women workers. That is to say, these women experienced oppression but were not subsumed and swallowed by it and, in fact, tried to reinterpret and change it in their own way.

Scope of the Present Work

Because we find that most works of an historical nature tend to ignore the problem of women labourers, there is considerable scope for a study on the conditions of women workers as part of the workforce. The choice of the subject, the worker woman, is based on the need felt to investigate the commonality in 'oppression' of the woman worker, as not only a woman but as a worker equally, the premise being that the two are integrative as both the woman on becoming worker as also the worker being woman faced multiple problems, quite a few of which were dissimilar to those confronting their male counterparts. With industrialisation, the workers are the most oppressed larger category in society within which the women workers are placed at the lowest rung of the social scale. The study would entail, on the one hand, defining the empirical details of their entrée into the work force, and, on the other, exploring the social implications of such a development.

The first task would require us to examine the following: The women's share in the workforce, the conditions governing their entry and exit as workers, their wages as compared to social requirements and the wages given to male workers, the types of work given to them, other conditions of work, their marital status and the extent of their participation in the struggle of labour against capital.

Following this, the question of social implications could be studied in its particular aspects, which fall broadly into two categories: (a) those dealing with the impress of traditional society on women as workers, and (b) the implications of women becoming modern industrial workers for traditional society.

The manner in which tradition defines women workers' role in society, the articulation of gender subordination through new forms such as lower wages and sexual exploitation at the work place, the obstacles to the unionisation of women workers could come under Category (a).

The significance of women acquiring independent earnings, the changes in the family structure and women's role within the family consequent on women becoming workers and the far-reaching implications of women workers acquiring proletarian consciousness and organisation would constitute the other set of questions to be investigated.

The examination of the above cited questions would converge on a study of the development of the consciousness of proletarian women. It would seek to throw some light on how traditions and customs of Indian society impeded the process of women acquiring the freedom to play a role outside the limited repertoire of mother, daughter and wife assigned by society and obstructed women overcoming the limitations of these roles themselves.

However, we have not been able to do full justice, in the present study, to all the questions posed above, owing to the limitations of the source material accessible to us. For example, the marital status of the women workers, the changes in the relations in the familia(plane and the caste-wise break-down of the female work-force are some of the important issues that we have not been able to deal with, adequately or at all. The commonplace tendency of government documents to either subsume women workers in the general labour force being dealt with, or, in accordance with the male-dominant perceptions of society, keep them outside their purview altogether (the family budget series for Madras 1936, is a case in point as it excludes women workers) presents obstacles to our investigation, often insurmountable.

The present work has been divided into the following three chapters, apart from this introduction and a post script.

EMERGENCE OF WOMEN IN THE WORKFORCE

The historical context of the study, that is, the development of industries in Madras Presidency in a colonial setting and, further, the development of cotton mills in the three areas under review - Madras, Madurai and Coimbatore. Along with it, the composition of the workforce in terms of sex, and the origins of labour in these industries.

CONDITIONS OF WORK

This deals with the conditions of work at the mills and the special problems women workers faced on becoming part of the modern industrial workforce as also the special facilities availed by them, the wage structure, the various pieces of legislation introduced during the period 1914-1939 and, specifically, the Madras Maternity Bill of 1934.

STRUGGLE OF LABOUR AGAINST CAPITAL

In this chapter, we attempt to locate the space women workers used to protest against their exploitative conditions of work and their emerging consciousness of its oppressive nature. The modality of attempting it has been to take up incidents of protest of various kinds in which the women were participants, such as for increased wages, against sexual harassment as also poor conditions of work at the mill. In this, both organised actions through the union and spontaneous protests and strikes have been dealt with.

We have relied, primarily, on two kinds of sources, apart from the Census reports. These are "The Hindu" Newspaper from 1915-1939 and Government sources. The Government sources comprise

- a) Government Orders of the Public, Law, Development and Labour Departments of the Madras Presidency as well as some secret files;

b) Native Newspaper Reports for the period 1914-1939; and

c) Strike Enquiry Committee Reports of Madurai (1930), Coimbatore (1938) and Madras (1938).

Besides, the Report for Madras Presidency Administration of the years 1914-1939 also yielded some useful material.

CHAPTER II

EMERGENCE OF A WORKFORCE

Pattern of Development of Cotton Mills - Origin of Labour - Composition of workforce

This chapter seeks to discuss (a) the pattern of industrialization in the region considered, i.e. Madras Presidency, (b) origin of labour, and (c) the composition of the workforce. Such an attempt involves the study of the changes in the pattern of industrial development between 1914-1939 and especially, the factors that contributed to the development of the cotton textile industry in Madras, Madurai and Coimbatore. Alongside a study of the origin of labour for work in the cotton mills would help us understand why the cities grow in the areas studied as it did, the gradual settlement of towns on villages and their transformation to industrial units. In Madras Presidency towns, with an emergent settled working populace with their own living quarters - the slum known better as the 'cheri' - assumed a nature of permanence as the locale of working class settlement by the end of the period of study. And, the composition of the workforce which entails (a) the workforce in major industries, and (b) in the cotton mills would help us reconstruct quantitatively as to what percentage the womenfolk constituted

in the workforce of Madras Presidency in general and the cities of Madras, Madurai and Coimbatore in specific. And, these empirical details would be useful in analysing the changes in the workforce between 1914-1939 and the implications the expansion of the cotton mill industry had for women workers - whether they were well integrated as a permanent component of the workforce or were marginalised because of technological innovations and expansion of cotton mill industry in this region.

The development of modern industry in Madras took place in a colonial context and therefore this factor played a decisive role in shaping the pattern of industrial development. It was undoubtedly a phase of partial development - with the establishment of certain industries encouraged and at times aided by the colonial state, e.g. hide and tanning, textiles, tea industry, armanent factories etc.¹ The urban townships of Madras, Madurai and Coimbatore grew along with the development of these industries. The policies of the colonial state, pressures from foreign and indigenou capital, labour market, raw material resources, and market were the main forces which influenced the course of industrial development.

1. Imperial Gazetteer of India Provincial Series, vol.I, Madras, 1911, p.498.

In the Madras Presidency during the early twentieth century, partial industrialization under the aegis of the colonial state was initiated by both foreign and Indian capitalists. Initially most of the cotton mills were owned by British capital - Stanes in Coimbatore, Harvey in Madurai and Buckingham and Carnatic of the Binnys in Madras.² Very few were Indian owned - Choolai under Gujarati and South India Spinning Weaving Mills under Parsi management.³ Most of these cotton mills developed in the latter part of the nineteenth century. The labour employed in industries of these towns - Madras, Madurai and Coimbatore came from the neighbouring rural areas and were gradually incorporated into the urban setting.⁴

Except for a few tanneries near Madras town and some cotton ginning and pressing industries as also in a few mica mines at Nellore, the Presidency lacked any major industrial base unlike Bombay or Calcutta.⁵ This

2. The House of Binny, Bicentenary Year Publication, Madras, 1969, p.103.

3. Ibid.

4. Gupta, R.C., Labour and Housing in India, Bombay, 1925, p.41.

5. Imperial Gazetteer of India, Provincial Series, vol.I, Madras, 1911, pp.498-99.

is because the process of industrialisation was late in this region.

Pattern of development of
Cotton Mills

The foundations of the cotton industry in Madras Presidency was laid by the Binny enterprise in 1876 which began as a managing agency under British capital. "The decade of 1876-1886 had seen the successful foundation of Binny's small textile empire - a development undoubtedly beyond the widest dreams of the founder.⁶ In the 1880s two other cotton mills were started in Madras under Indian management - the Southern India United Spinning and Weaving, a Parsi management, and the Madras United Spinning and Weaving under Gujarati Enterprise better known as Choolai.⁷ In Madurai the founding of the Madurai mill in 1889, by the Harvey management, marked the beginning of modern cotton mill industry. And, in Coimbatore in 1888, the establishment of the Coimbatore Spinning and Weaving Mills, a Stanes Enterprise, spearheaded the growth of textile mills in this region.⁸

6. The House of Binny, Bicentenary Year Publication, Madras, 1969, p.102.

7. Ibid., p.103.

8. Ibid.

Different factors influenced the development of the cotton mill industry. Handloom industries in both cotton and silk was a flourishing occupation and trade of the Tamils right through the medieval period and continued to have considerable market in the nineteenth century also. With the influence of industrial capitalism under colonialism with the large market available for cotton goods it was but natural that an expansion of cotton mills would take place with availability of capital for investment. This occurred as we noted above in the last quarter of the nineteenth century. The mills also produced yarn for the handloom industry and they proved to be cheaper than the handspun yarn which they gradually replaced.⁹ In fact, later on, a number of mills concentrated on production of cotton yarn and this was the case especially in some of the mills in Coimbatore (e.g. Sri Ranga Vilas in Peelamedu).¹⁰ The Binny's B&C Mills in Madras developed and sustained itself on government uniform cloth contract especially in the post 1914 period.¹¹

A large number of mills were opened in the post-depression period in both Coimbatore and Madurai which

9. Development Department, G.O.-2866, 31.12.1937.

10. Coimbatore Mills Strike Committee Report, Madras, 1938
p.106.

11. The House of Binny, Bicentenary Year Publication, Madras, 1969, pp.176, 177.

had easy access to the cotton belt of South India - the Tinnelvely tracts, as also the necessary labour base and capital to invest.¹² Indian mills increased in number and expanded their production during the inter-war period.¹³ In the Madras region, this was the period in which indigenous Indian capital came to the fore in establishing new mills, e.g. Sarada and Saroja mills in Coimbatore, and Rajah and Mahalkshmi mills in Madurai.¹⁴ The number of cotton mills in the Madras Presidency in 1911-1912 was fourteen with a total number of 386,424 spindles and employees numbering on an average, 22489, of whom 2574 were women and 4065 were children.¹⁵ By 1937 there were 47 cotton mills with 1,134,122 spindles and 5,856 looms.¹⁶ By the third decade of the twentieth century, especially in the newly established mills a large number of looms, greater mechanisation and measures to increase productivity

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12. Coimbatore Mills Strike Committee Report 1938, pp.104-5.
13. Morris D. Morris, "Growth of Large Scale Industry" in Dharma Kumar (ed.), Cambridge Economic History of India, vol.II, Cambridge, 1982, p.604.
14. Development Department, G.O. 889, 2.7.1932.
15. Report on Administration of Madras Presidency, 1911-12, Madras, 1912.
16. Development Department, G.O. 2866, 31-12-1937.

were introduced as an outcome of which these mills not only thrived in a period of economic crisis and trade depression but could expand easily later on.

The nexus of colonialism and industrial capitalism in the Indian subcontinent assumed certain forms specific to it. In Madras Presidency the process of industrialisation - partial that it was - was not only uneven in its spatial distribution, but also centred around a few industries - cotton textiles, cotton ginning and aluminium vessel making, tanning etc. in our period of study. In Madras, Madurai and Coimbatore it was mainly the cotton mills that developed fast in the period from the first World War to the second. But this growth was challenged by free, in fact, unfair competition from Japanese yarn and textile, superior in quality because of better technology and more importantly, availability at cheaper rates.¹⁷ The price advantage enjoyed by imports could be accounted largely to the British policy followed during the period of not only not offering protection to the colony's textile industries, but also overvaluing the Rupee. Only after the severest years of the Depression had passed did the British begin to give Indian industry some protection, an outcome of which a number of mill owners were forced

17. Development Department (confidential), G.O. 869, 19-7-1933.

to adopt measures to economise production by way of technological innovations, wage cuts, retrenchment of "excess" labour and sometimes cut in production in times of economic crisis, e.g. the period between 1927-1933.¹⁸ To understand the microcosm of textile industries and their development, it is crucial to study what factors contributed to their expansion or posed a barrier. Undoubtedly, the reason why this industry expanded, in spite of impediments as cited above, is that it not only had a wide indigenous market but also could face the challenge of foreign competition by working on higher counts, better quality and adopting a number of measures for overall efficiency.¹⁹

The colonial state intervened in the course of industrial development by introducing various legislations. In the second decade of the twentieth century, by when unionization of workers in the form of unions like the Madras Labour Union in the B&C Mills and the Madura Labour Union of the Madura Mills had taken place the government promulgated legislations on trade disputes and trade organisation procedure and rules. Hence the Workmen's

18. Morris D. Morris, "Growth of Large Scale Industry" in Dharma Kumar (ed.), Cambridge Economic History of India, vol.II, Cambridge, 1982, pp.522-23.

19. Ibid., p.619. Also Department of Industry and Labour. L-1923 (7), 1934, N.A.I.

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Compensation Act of 1923, Trade Union Bill of 1926²⁰ and the Trade Disputes Act of 1929.²¹ These legislations were made keeping in view the developments in the labour movement - increasing unrest, disturbances and strikes. As the leadership of most of the trade unions was drawn from social reformers and political activists and not necessarily from within the workers themselves, the trade union bill had a provision "that no outsider should hold any office in the trade unions."²² This was precisely what the management in the B&C Mills in Madras wanted to get B. Shiva Rao off their backs. As both in Madras and Madras the leaders of the union George Joseph and B. Shiva Rao respectively in the second decade of the twentieth century were not workers themselves. However, the provision was not successful as most of the leaders continued to be either social reformers or leaders of various parties. However, the government continued to intervene through its hold on policy making in the industries throughout the period.

20. Madras Native Newspaper Report, Swadeshi, 2-2-1926.

21. Sen, Sukomal, Working Class of India - History of Emergence and Movement 1830-1970, Calcutta, 1977, p.291. Also Report on Administration of Madras Presidency, 1924 and 1926.

22. Madras Native Newspaper Report, Swarajya, 2-2-1926.

Origin of Labour

In Madras Presidency, as is true of other areas, the labour for industries was drawn from the villages circumscribing the towns. In fact, the cities of Madras, Madurai and Coimbatore grew out of clusters of villages.²³ All of them by the end of the period under review became major industrial areas of south India. Most of the factories recruited labour for their units from the villages adjoining the towns in which they were built.²⁴ The workers therefore had a live contact with their villages and went there whenever they had the opportunity. Besides, in Madras Presidency there were no migrants from outside the province and also little migration between the natural divisions.²⁵ This was unlike the process of settlement pattern of cities like Bombay and Calcutta which thrived a lot on migrant labour from the hinterland.²⁶ Hence in Madras it meant that there was some

23. Imperial Gazetteer of India, Provincial Series, vol.III, 1911, Madras, p.247.

24. Public Works and Labour Department, G.O. 2746L - Madras Government Memorandum to Royal Commission on Labour, 1929.

25. Gupta, R.C., Labour and Housing in India, Bombay, 1925, p.41.

26. Morris D. Morris, Emergence of an Industrial Labour Force in India, Bombay, 1954, p.63.

homogeneity among the workers at least in their belonging to a particular region or village. And it continued to exist because of their proximity to the village.

The outcome of such a live relationship between the urban settlement pattern and its rural satellite is multifarious for the labouring class as a whole. It probably had, both its positive and negative aspects. The positive being that the workers in times of crisis could retrace their steps back to finding work in the agricultural sector and could easily cart some additional resources from their villages.²⁷ And in the interest of the future generation of workers, the women workers were taken to their villages to avail native conveniences and observe traditional customs before child birth. This meant that, there was no total break in the life of the city worker on becoming part of the modern industrial unit. And, therefore, into the new urban world of the cheri, the male/female worker carried with them a backlog of tradition through which they perceived the universe - be it marriage, child birth, death or festivals. For example, the celebration of the coming of age of daughters was celebrated with gaiety even in Madras city by the

27. Development Department, G.C. 1050, 21-4-1938.
When there is a lockout in Madura the workers return to their villages where paddy harvest gives employment at the time.

worker extravagantly spending around Rs. 50+.²⁸ Similarly another example of upholding traditions among the worker is the example of labourers spending Saturday afternoons at Hari Katha performances in Madras in 1918.²⁹ Henceforth solidarity in the cheris was forged by a multiplicity of mediating factors - caste, clan and religion besides class.

The negative aspect of the close links the workers had with the villages, was the mill management's shrewd and calculated exploitation to break workers solidarity through kinship ties, community ties and communal ties. This was especially easy in a place like Madras where cheris were clearly divided on caste and community lines. There were Paraiya cheris, Adi dravida cheri, Nayadu cheri and Muslim cheri. And during strikes conflict was encouraged between these lines.³⁰ The modality of recruiting workers to the mills through the maistri led to the control of the workers by the maistris from their particular community or region - a Nayadu or an Adi-dravida because of filial ties. Such communal affinity and

28. Rao, B. Shiva, The Industrial Worker in India, London, 1939, p.134.

29. Wadia, B.P., Labour in Madras, London, 1921, p.104.

30. Law (General) Department, G.O. 1957, 21-1-1921.

consciousness was engendered and encouraged by the labour department as also the police in their dealings with the workers problems either of strikes in the workplace or political activism in the National movement.³¹ For example, the Adi-dravidas were used to break a strike in the Madura mills in 1930. And similar tactics were used by the Buckingham mill authorities of Madras in 1920 to break the strike spearheaded by the Madras Labour Union.³² But through involvement in industrial work, through protests and strike solidarity, through unionisation, gradually forms of working class consciousness developed, though at points mediated by caste influence in deciding their political linkages.

Though the woman worker could expect a steady demand for her labour, her access to work was defined by traditional notions of womanhood. Therefore, in the textile mills we find them mostly confined to the work of the winders, reelers and waste pickers with a few of them getting work in the ring frame department as spinners though very rarely as weavers.

Though in pre-capitalist societies women laboured in the fields alongside their male counterpart, there

31. Law (General) Department, G.C. 1957, 21-11-1921.

32. The Hindu, Puhanthope Disturbances, Committee of Enquiry, Aug. 13, 1921, Madras.

TABLE -1

NUMBER OF OPERATIVES IN FACTORIES OF MADRAS PRESIDENCY
FOLLOWING UNDER THE IFA, 1911

Year	Total no. of operatives	of which		
		Women	Boys	Girls
1912	-	8587	4557	1152
1913	-	13264	4223	1777
1914	-	14176	4488	1926
1915	-	13591	4277	1805
1916	-	15799	4818	2577
1920	-	17523	5432	2822
1921	95294	18938	4569	2478
1922	-	20356	4775	2549
1923	-	23101	4485	2322
1924	-	25429	4722	2390
1925	-	26884	4006	2422
1926	127411	27096	3746	2095
1927	134074	30860	4253	2455
1928	136973	32095	4091	2275
1929	143217	35036	4319	2328
1930	142549	34982	4269	2086
1931	137377	33761	4094	2388
1932	132960	33212	6246	
1933	137775	34189	6235	
1934	146779	37195	6312	
1935	162745	39655	6495	
1936	170800	44115	8141	

Source: 1912-1916 - Dept. of Commerce and Industry, F-April 1-17
Part B, 1918.

1916-24 - Development Dept. G.O.880, 17.6.1925.

1925-28 - Public Works and Labour Dept. G.O.321L, 1.2.1930

1929-1931 - Development Dept. G.O.886, 2.7.1932.

1932-1936 - Development Dept. G.O.1455-57, 29.6.1937.

TABLE II
COMPOSITION OF WORKFORCE IN ALL INDUSTRIES OF A CATEGORY

		COIMBATORE				MADRAS				MADRAS			
		1913-14	%	1936-37	%	1913-14	%	1936-37	%	1913-14	%	1936-37	%
Adult	Male	3281	64	18171	56	19575	87	21469	92	1652	66	9318	57
	Female	1125	30	11095	34	674	3	347	1	406	16	4863	29
Adolescent	Male	-	-	2208	7	-	-	687	3	-	-	697	4
	Female	-	-	535	2	-	-	-	-	-	-	259	2
Children		723	6	200	1	2296	10	989	4	465	18	1350	8
Total	5129	100	32209	100	22545	100	23492	100	2523	100	16487	100	

Source: Compiled from IFA 1913-14 - Judicial dated 24th July 1914, N.A.I., and
IFA 1936-37 - Development Department, G.O.1455-57, 29.6.1937.

was a qualitative change for them when they were employed in the modern cotton mills. This is so because, (a) unlike agricultural work which well complemented domestic work, factory labour created a disjuncture between the home and the workplace and (b) it gave them an opportunity to become conscious of their rights as individuals of the exploitative conditions they found themselves in and provided a potential opportunity for them to be independent.³³

Composition of the workforce

From the available data it appears that over the period there was taking place greater industrial development in all the three cities. In the category A industries³⁴ whose computation in the form of percentage is given beside are those units engaging more than ten people with some machinery. These are Arsenal, Gun Carriage, Iron works, and foundaries, leather works, municipal works, cement works, coach building, engineering workshops, tramway workshops, non-steam printing press and of course the cotton spinning, weaving and other mills.³⁵

33. Marx, Karl, Capital, vol.I, Moscow, 1954, p.490. For theoretical understanding.

34. These are the large industrial units as defined by the Indian Factory Act employing more than 100 people.

35. Indian Factory Act 1911, Report for Madras, Judicial 24-7-1914, N.A.I.

In all these industries in Coimbatore it increases from 5129 in 1913-1914³⁶ to 31609 in 1936-37, in Madras from 22545 to 23492 and in Madurai from 2523 to 16487.³⁷ This is a six-fold increase in Coimbatore and 6½ fold increase in Madurai which gives us a fair idea of the pace of industrial development in these two towns. As can be seen from Table-I, except for Madras, where there is a decrease in the percentage of women in the workforce from 3% to 1.4% between 1913 and 1937, there has taken place greater enrolment of women in the workforce. In Coimbatore it rose from 30% in 1913-1914 to 33% in 1936-37 and in Madurai from 16% to 19.5%. In actual numbers in Coimbatore it rose from 1125 women in 1913-1914 to 11095 women in 1936-37 and in Madurai from 406 in 1913-1914 to 4853 in 1936-37 while in Madras there was a fall from 674 in 1913-14 to 347 in 1936-37. This is significant from this angle that the period being one of expansion of industries in Madras Presidency³⁸ is also indicative of the fact that the process of industrialisation was largely incorporative of female labour in the industrial workforce at this stage.

36. Ibid.

37. Development Department, G.O. 1455-57, 29-6-1937.

38. Department of Industry and Labour, L-1823(7), 1934, N.A.I. Also Development Department, G.O.-2059, 23-8-1938. Southern India Mill Owners' Association Letter to the Government of Madras, p.2.

TABLE - III
COMPOSITION OF WORKERS IN COTTON SPINNING AND WEAVING MILLS, 1913-14, 1936-37

		COIMBA TORE				MA DRAS				MA DURA I			
		1913-14	%	1936-37	%	1913-14	%	1936	%	1913-14	%	1936-37	%
Adult	Male	1644	63	13386	62	9582	80	9711	86	715	52	7308	57
	Female	560	21.5	5506	25	489	4	174	1.5	274	20	3326	26
Adole- scent	Male	-	-	2145	10	-	-	531	5	-	-	595	5
	Female	-	-	520	2	-	-	-	-	-	-	258	2
Children		401	15.5	196	1	1905	16	844	7.5	393	28	1303	10
Total		2605	100	21753	100	11976	100	11260	100	1382	100	12790	100

Source: 1913-14, Judicial, 24th July 1914, N.A.I.

1936-37, Development Department, G.O.1455-57, 29.6.1937.

In the cotton spinning and weaving mills during the same period, we find once again that except for Madras where there is a drop in the percentage of women in the workforce, there has been greater employment of women. Between 1913 and 1937 in Coimbatore there was a decline in the percentage of adult male in the workforce from 63% to 61.5% and an increase in adult female from 21.4 to 25.4% and of course the displacement of children by adolescents.³⁹ However, in Madurai during the same period the male workforce percentage increased from 52 to 57% and the female from 20 to 26%. The increase in percentage of women in the workforce in Madurai by 1936-37 is because of their displacing the child labour, against which legislations had come about in Madras.

Over the period 1913-1914 to 1936-37 the number of women in all industries rose in the three cities - Madras, Madurai and Coimbatore - from 7.4% of the workforce to 22.6% and in the cotton, spinning and weaving mills from 8.2 to 19.7%,⁴⁰ which is a tremendous jump. The main reason for this is the massive expansion of cotton spinning and weaving mills in the vicinity of Madurai and Coimbatore as also the more obvious reason, the undue exploitation of the cheap source of labour

39. Computed from Table II.

40. See Table II and Table III.

that women constituted in the workforce.

As per the census of 1921 the general feature is an almost reduction in the proportion of women workers, except in mining, transport and professions compared to the situation obtaining a decade ago. In the textile industries too an enormous fall was registered in the number of women employed in mills or cottage industries.

Table IV
TEXTILE INDUSTRIES⁴¹

Occupation	Year		Variation %
	1921	1911	
All textiles	195954	292076	-32.9
Cotton spinning weaving & sizing	102595	194350	-47.2
Cotton ginning	5700	12548	-54.6
Silk spinning & weaving	8958	15452	-42
Weavers unspecified	31833	-	-

From a comparison of the number of women employed in cotton spinning and weaving mills in 1913 and 1921, we find that in fact there has been reduction in women employed in the mills, as from a share of 40% in the workforce in 1913 they comprise a mere 16% in 1921. This

41. Census of India, vol.XIII, Part I, 1921, p.179.

Table V

WORKFORCE IN COTTON SPINNING AND
WEAVING MILLS IN MADRAS, 1913 & 1921⁴²

Year	Male	%	Female	%	Children	%	Total
1913	1192	36	1323	40	795	24	3312
1921	17454	66	4205	16	4615	18	26324

was probably so as the new mills in Madurai and Coimbatore had not yet been commissioned, and there were only few mills operative, as an outcome of which more male workers were engaged as may be seen in the Table V above. Besides the Factory Commission of 1908 as also the Indian Factory Act of 1922 added certain restrictions to employing women and children thereby adding to their problems to securing work in the mill. As this did lead to 'Preferential recruitment of male labour to large scale industries'.⁴³ The Factory Act of 1891 compelled employers to give women workers an hour and a half rest while men were allowed only half an hour,⁴⁴ the IFA of 1911 reduced women workers hours of work at the mill to eleven and the Act of 1922

42. Judicial Department, 24-7-1914, N.A.I. and Development Department, G.O. 263 (MS), 2-2-1923.

43. Das, R.K., Factory Labour in India, Leipzig, 1923, p.204.

44. Rao, B. Shiva, op. cit., p.211.

prohibited night work for women. Such benefits were impediments to the employment of women in large scale industries.⁴⁵

However, over the quarter century or so between 1913 and 1937, there was a slow increase in the number of women employed in the workforce both in industries in general as also the cotton mills in particular. Numerically speaking in Coimbatore the number of women in mill work increased from 560 in 1913-14 to 5506 in 1936-37, in Madurai from 274 in 1913-14 to 3326 in 1936-37 while in Madras alone there was a decrease from 489 women in 1913-14 to 174 in 1936-37.

Concluding Remarks

We find that between the period 1914-1939 the cities of Madras, Madurai and Coimbatore the textile industries formed the major basis of their development as industrial centres of great importance in South India. The number of cotton mills increased from 16 in 1914⁴⁶ to 47 in 1937.⁴⁷ A number of cotton mills owned by Indian entrepreneurs of large scale were set up in the

45. Boserup Ester, Women's Role in Economic Development, London, 1970, p.113.

46. Report on Administration of Madras Presidency, 1914-1915.

47. Development Department, G.O. 2866, 31-12-1937.

inter-war period especially in Coimbatore and Madurai. Hence as in many other areas of India, the period witnessed the gradual expansion of the cotton mill industry in the face of the non-protectionist economic policies of the colonial government as also the challenge from the competitive prices of Japanese yarn and cloth in the domestic market.

During the period the workforce in the cotton mills of Madras, Madurai and Coimbatore combined increased in leaps and bounds from 15963 in 1913-14 to 45803 in 1936-37. And, as we have seen, the employment of women workers also increased over the period from 8.2% of the workforce to 23% which is a significant development. But a drawback of the source material is that we do not have any idea about the marital status of these women workers to be able to comment on the category of women who assumed work in the mills, except that most of the workers had been of agricultural workers who came to work in the mills because the remuneration was a little more. It is also very clear from Table I and II that except for the Madras mills where women were not more than a mere 1.5% by 1936-37, they constituted a quarter of the workforce.

From our evidence it appears that most of the labour in the cotton mills of Madras were recruited from the villages around the towns in which they were

situated. And, therefore, the mill workers continued to have an organic link with the villages and so into the cheri household of the worker were carried a backlog of traditions, customs and attitudes. These, in the use of Adi-Dravidas as blacklegs, were utilised by the management at times with police support to break combinations of workers in protests and strikes and create dissensions within them.⁴⁸

The entry of women as workers, mostly unskilled labour in the mill was itself an uneven process with certain areas like Madurai and Coimbatore using them as a cheap source of labour while in Madras they were gradually excluded as may be viewed in Table I. Different factors operated at times to lead to their exclusion or inclusion as ingredients of modern mill work. The value system of the time, the culture of the area through traditions and customs impinged on developing a material culture in the mill which helped endorse the Maistris domination over the female worker easily of separate categories of work for male/female workers and viewing women as dependents thereby making it easy to exclude them from work when necessary as we shall see in chapter IV.

48. Also noted by Arnold David, Police Power and Colonial Rule, Madras 1859-1947, London, 1986, p.169.

CHAPTER III

WOMEN AT THE WORKPLACE

Conditions of work-wages -
Legislations for workers -
Madras Maternity Benefit Bill, 1934

Gruesome and unsanitary conditions of living was of course one part of the worker's life but the conditions at the workplace was in no ways better. Crude machinery under undue stress of overusage, poor lighting conditions and unhealthy ventilation system in the cotton mills were reasons contributing to the short lifespan of the workers. Uneven industrial development along with limited investment in the Indian colony by both British and Indian entrepreneurs meant that the instruments of production were not necessarily well taken care of, and undue exploitation made of it affected production. As a result the machinery was rusted, overused and poorly maintained and the poor labourer bore the brunt of it. Accidents, cotton dust, poor ventilation along with insufficient wages doomed the workers and reduced their state of existence to the lowest possible level.

Industrialisation simplified the process of production but it also produced a whole set of new problems for the workers. The industrialist tried to maintain the mill production with the motive of optimum profiteering through

minimum possible expenditure. But in the process basic conditions of work, safety measures and adequate wages were not provided for which the workers had to wage continuous struggles. This fight was on issues relating to conditions of work which is the theme of this chapter.

In this chapter, the aspects we will examine are: (a) conditions of work, (b) the wages, (c) the various legislations, (d) the Madras Maternity Bill of 1934. This entails an analysis of working conditions in the mills, a comparison between male and female workers' wages and the factors determining the differential bargaining power of male and female workers. To enumerate the various legislation made during the course of the period and to examine its implications for the female workers is an important part of this. This would help us understand whether welfare measures like Maternity Benefit Bill and other Factory Acts had positive impact on conditions of work for women. And more importantly whether women workers had specific problems as workers. If so, how was it tackled? How did the legislations, specifically those for women affect women workers. For example, did the Maternity Benefit Bill of 1934 and the Indian Factory Act, of 1922 help improve the condition or adversely affect them. These are some of the questions that will be discussed in detail in this chapter.

Conditions of Work

The parameters that defined the conditions of work for women workers had the added dimension of vulnerability on their belongingness to the female gender. It is therefore important to find out what additional constraints they faced at the workplace. Like their male counterparts they were forced to long hours of work with hardly any interval. It was strenuous and especially so in the mills where there was no provision made against the high degree of humidification along with poor light and bad ventilation system which was highly unhealthy.¹ There was no provision of rest rooms, separate latrines or even the most basic necessity - adequate drinking water. In fact, in Coimbatore in 1927² when the mill workers went on strike, the only demand which they managed to get from the authorities, was provision of adequate drinking water. Along with these hardships faced by workers at large, the additional problems for women workers, was lack of facilities for looking after their children, while they were absent from home or facilities in the form of pregnancy with pay were not available to them for quite some time.

In Madurai mills when women workers were harassed by the maistri (the headmaistri) on account of their having

-
1. Indian Factory Commission Report, 1908, p.46.
 2. Department of Industry and Labour, L-878(14), 1928, N.A.I.

joined the worker's union, they made a representation to the manager. However, no action was taken against the head-maistri.³ In Coimbatore cotton mills in 1938 according to the labourers' union's petition when women protested against the conditions of work and poor wages and demanded the examination of accounts they were made to stand in the hot sun for more than an hour.⁴ What is even more gruesome and cruel to note was a precondition laid down by the Rajalakshmi mill management for employing a woman worker - a promise not to have children for the first five years of their employment.⁵

When the members of the Royal Commission on Labour interviewed women workers in Madurai, they complained that there was no place in the factory where they could sit peacefully and have lunch. "When we eat lunch the watchman drives us away because the European must not see us eat all over the place".⁶ Besides this women did not have enough or even some facilities to look after their children who need feeds. Though there were provisions to allow women to feed their children the supervisors generally reprimanded and shouted at them by asking - "Why have you been so long

3. Madras Native Newspaper Report, Desabhaktan, 14th April, 1920.

4. Development Dept., G.O.-2059, 23-8-1938.

5. Ibid. (Though this was denied by the mill management).

6. RCL, vol.VII, Part II, London, 1930, p.59.

over it?"⁷ Besides the women on leaving work during the period of confinement had to pay Rs.4 to Rs.5 to the maistri to obtain the job once again. This was stated by workers all over the country to the officials of the Royal Commission on Labour in 1929.⁸ The premise for an increment for women spinners in the Rajah mills of Madurai was dependent on the discretion of the management, which meant that it was of immense importance to be in the good books of the maistri.⁹ What this entailed may be guessed from the number of protests against the maistris lodged by women workers to the Royal Commission on Labour in 1929. Another problem which women workers faced was the domination of the maistri/supervisors at the workplace who coerced them to work hard. They at times used bad words, calling women workers immoral etc. if their productivity came below the expectations of the supervisors in the mill.¹⁰ Varadarajulu Naidu, addressing a labour meeting in Madurai appealed to the management to appoint a public employing agency so that the present malpractice in the mill would be rid of. "He alluded to a certain case that happened in the mill,

7. RCL, vol.VII, Part II, London, 1930, p.60.

8. Ibid., p.148.

9. Ibid., p.61.

10. Development Dept., G.O.-1384, 30-5-1938. "Madura Mills Enquiry Report and Award", p.4.

of a woman falling prostrate at the feet of a maistry for a slight fault of hers."¹¹ Therefore suggestions for female maistris in departments dominated by women workers were made by the Labourer's union. As most of the women workers were appointed in the mill through the maistri from whom they even loaned money when in need, it made them quite indebted to him. In fact, because of this system of recruitment women had to keep good relations with the maistri as after the period of confinement they depended on him to get back to work. Such was his importance that they could not but at most times try to be in his good books.

That, women were employed for long hours, between 5 a.m. and 6 p.m. had certain consequences. The hardship under this system was aggravated by the practice that children and women not infrequently remained in the mill until such a time when their relations were free to accompany them to their homes. This was because popular feeling was against the practice of permitting women to go out alone at night.¹² Its outcome was the total period of absence from the home for the women was between 14 to 14½ hours.¹³ After this, the women had

11. The Hindu, June 11, 1930.

12. Indian Factory Commission Report, London, 1908, p.46.

13. Ibid. Similar conditions have been observed in England by Engels F. in Condition of the Working Class in England, pp.134 and 166.

domestic duties to render in the form of cooking, feeding and looking after the family.

The consequences for the women from participating in the modern textile mill was a combination of the domestic role along with the one of a worker at the mill. But, for most women workers, who generally came from a rural background where they already had a dual role of working in the fields, along with managing the household, all this new role amounted to, was the displacement of one kind of work with another - the agricultural by the industrial. The difference is immense as the agricultural work was well integrated with the domestic work of the woman labourer and therefore not very inconvenient. But the industrial work clearly delineated the workplace from the home and did not provide facilities like creche, restroom etc. initially. Unhealthy unsanitary work conditions and stinking cheris combined to make life difficult for women workers, but also proved harmful during pregnancy. To ensure the safety of the social reproduction of labour, the world over, capitalism resorted to innumerable measures to protect the women worker and children. In Europe this came about in legislations in the second decade of the twentieth century which take adequate steps in this regard.

The Wage question

During the period under review a very important aspect of our study is the evolving perceptions regarding

the wages of workers in the textile mills. The outcome of the active involvement of various political groups - theosophists, women's Indian Association, Congress, Justice Party, Congress Socialists as also the labour unions and the colonial government - was the emergence of certain concrete ideas regarding what changes ought to be introduced to enhance the living and working conditions of workers, especially what their wages should be.

In Madras Presidency after an initial rise in wages towards the end of the second decade of the twentieth century, a number of mills introduced wage cuts after 1926.¹⁴ After this there was a decline because of the depression. This manifested itself in decline in the rural wages too.¹⁵ And the thirties witnessed a period of low economic development, with a major recession in the cotton mill industry in the face of non-protection and therefore stiff competition from Japanese yarn and textiles in the market.¹⁶ In one mill the cut came in 1926 and in another seven mills in July, August or September 1933. There had been a decrease of 12½% in half the mills which responded

14. Public Works and Labour Dept. (Ms.), G.O.-121 L, 15-1-1930.

15. Public Works and Labour Dept., G.O.-1586 L, 28-7-1932. Also Table-VI.

16. Development Dept. (confidential), G.O.-1242 (Ms.), 10-5-1939.

Table-VI

AVERAGE DAILY RATES OF WAGES IN FACTORY OF MADRAS
PRESIDENCY

Class of Labour	1930	1931
Weaver (men)	1 - 0 - 10	0 - 10 - 11
Weaver (boys)	0 - 7 - 11	0 - 5 - 2
Spinner (men)	0 - 12 - 7	0 - 10 - 7
<u>Unskilled labour:</u>		
Field coolies (male)	0 - 8 - 0	0 - 7 - 0
Field coolies (female)	0 - 5 - 2	0 - 4 - 5
Female coolie (ginning mill)	0 - 5 - 2	0 - 4 - 10
Male coolie (")	0 - 8 - 3	0 - 7 - 4

Source: Indian Factory Act, 1931 Report. Development Dept., G.O.-886, 2-7-1932.

to the questionnaire by Madras Government to the mill management.¹⁷ Between September 1933 to 1934 there were massive cuts in the already low wages of the workers in the cotton mills all over Madras.¹⁸ And this slackness in wage rates continued upto the end of the period under

17. Dept. of Industry and Labour, L-1823(7), 1934, N.A.I. (Government investigation on wage cuts in cotton mills in Madras Presidency).

18. Ibid.

review, which witnessed a number of cost reducing measures in these mills.

Minimum wage

In 1929 in the Legislative Council a resolution was introduced advocating a minimum wage for skilled and unskilled labour along with a committee for enquiring into labour employment among skilled and unskilled workers and their minimum wages.¹⁹ However, it was viewed, that since standardisation was itself a difficult task to achieve, the fixing of a minimum wage was even more difficult, if not impossible. This was the point of view of the Commissioner of Labour who in fact saw it as inexpedient and against the interest of labourers. In September 1930, the corporation workers of Madras in their representation to the corporation too demanded the fixing of a minimum wage for men and women workers.²⁰ By 1937, in Coimbatore which witnessed a climax in the form of widespread strikes, in the cotton mills, the press communique stated that the strike committee demanded a minimum monthly wage of Rs.20 for men, Rs.20 for women and Rs.15 for boys.²¹

19. Public Works and Labour Dept., G.O.-2806, 5-10-1929.

20. Dept. of Industry and Labour, L-878, 1931, N.A.I.

21. Development Dept., G.O.-2711, 6-12-1937.

Such a move is significant from two angles. First, it could at least have made amendments to the absolutely depressed wage structure of the time. This was so not merely by the economic crisis in this period but also, long term factors, in which low wages paid to certain categories of labour in general and women labourers in particular plays an important role. Secondly, the raising of this demand may be viewed as the ability of the worker to comprehend the difference in wages as between men and women and between adults and children as a general depressor of the wage structure.²² And, therefore the need to get a minimum lower limit fixed for all categories of work. Thirdly, the workers probably saw in such a measure a means of preventing the management from a policy of substituting male labour by other categories of labour available at cheaper rates.

Living wage

By the 1930s the idea of a living wage for the worker assumes importance. In a study of Bombay mill workers made by Radha Kumar such an idea of a family wage is discussed. It is through this family wage concept, according to her, that the management of Bombay mills successfully sold the idea of a woman's wage as supplementary

22. Dobb, Maurice, Wages, London, 1928, pp.123 and 126.

and the male wage as primary.²³ In Madras, right from 1917 when G. Slater & Co. carried out a survey of worker's living and working conditions, the inadequacy of the wages earned by the worker to lead a reasonable life had been pointed out.²⁴ By 1930 this assumes great importance. In 1930 in a dialogue between the chief Inspector of factories and the commissioner of labour, we begin to get ideas recognising the need for a living wage for a working class household from the labour administrators. This is seen to be necessary not merely for the welfare of workers, but also so that, there would not be too many troubles and strikes by workers.²⁵

Equal wage

Another interesting insight we get, is regarding perceptions of the productivity of male and female labour. The basis of wage discrimination between male and female worker was rationalisation by the mill management of the irregular attendance, irregular hours of work and lesser productivity of female workers. Hence the socially constructed gender perceptions of the male-strong female-weak

23. Radha Kumar, City Lives: Women Workers in the Bombay Textile Industry 1919-1939, unpublished Dissertation, CHS, JNU, 1982, pp.73-78.

24. The Hindu, "Cost of Living in Madras", Jan. 18, 1917.

25. Public Works and Labour Dept. (Ms.), G.O.-1101, 3-4-1930.

dichotomy was creatively exploited by the entrepreneur to his advantage and proved to be disadvantageous to the female worker.

The Coimbatore Labour Union took up the issue of unequal wages. In 1936, when the long drawn out mill strikes ensued in the cotton mills of Coimbatore, at a labourer's meeting, the resolution put forth by the strike committee reads as follows - "Men and women workers be assigned equal wages."²⁶ Another prime example of such an ideological position of parity or equality between male/female wages is to be found in the (December 1937) Coimbatore Labour Union's demand in its memorandum to the management.²⁷ Strong protest against unequal wages was lodged and it was suggested that women be paid as much as their male counterpart as they worked as much. Therefore, in this Presidency unlike in Bombay, where Radha Kumar's work opines that since women worked in different departments from men there did not arise the demand for equal wages,²⁸ in fact there was a demand from the workers unions for equal wages, vehemently so by the late 1930s. Though the concept of a living wage for the worker was

26. The Hindu, Jan. 3, 1936.

27. Development Dept., G.O.-2711, 6-12-1937.

28. Radha Kumar, op. cit., p.vi.

evolving, there were contradictory ideas of equal and minimum wage also evolving; gradually the family wage became the dominant idea no doubt but its implementation, we may note, did not go unchallenged.

Wages of Women workers

The Women's Indian Association of Madras conducted an enquiry into the condition of women workers in 1926 and the conclusions were - the women got low wages and most of them were indebted. Of the 23 women examined in the B&C Mills of Madras, only one woman was out of debt. Of the remaining 22, 5 borrowed at 25% interest, 9 at 75% interest and 8 at 150%.²⁹ The general conditions were observed as being unsatisfactory. The living as also the working conditions were primitive, with no private sanitary arrangements, rest house or room to feed small children. This survey along with the evidence on wages women workers received gives us a fair idea of how impoverished they were.

Thus, there is a clear cut distinction of men and women workers in the factories not only in terms of the kind of work they were engaged in, but also in the remuneration for their wage slavery. From Table-VII it appears

29. RCL, vol.VII, Part II, London, 1930, p.144.

Table-VII

WAGES IN COTTON TEXTILE INDUSTRY OF MADRAS

		(monthly)					
		Madras		Madurai		Coimbatore	
		Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female
1906	Coolies	Rs.7	Rs.4	-	-	-	-
1908	Coolies	Rs.7	Rs.4	Rs.7	Rs.4	-	-
1910	Coolies	Rs.7	Rs.5	Rs.7	Rs.4	Rs.7	Rs.4
	Weaver	Rs.20	-				
	Spinner	Rs.8				Rs.6.8	
1912	Coolies	Rs.7	Rs.5	Rs.9	Rs.4	Rs.7	Rs.4
1918	Roving dept.	Rs.8-Rs.10					
	Women workers		Rs.7-Rs.9	-	-	-	-
1921	Coolies	Rs.8-Rs.12	Rs.6-Rs.8	-	-	-	-
1926	Reelers	-	Rs.18	-	-	-	-
1928	Spinners	-	-	-	-	Rs.19	Rs.12
1930	Reelers		Rs.10-Rs.15 to Rs.4-Rs.6				Rs.9-Rs.10
1934	Reelers						Rs. -6-0
1937	Spinners					Rs.11-8 to 18	Rs.11 to 13
	Waste pickers						Rs.6

contd...

	Madras		Madurai		Coimbatore
contd...	M	F	M	F	M F
1938 Reelers					
Unskilled				Rs.15 to 16to	
Labour				Rs.8 to 10	Rs.12-5
Spinners					Rs.7-8-0

Source: 1906 - Prog No.15 - 1906 (Factories) N.A.I.; 1908 - Judicial 29 July, Commerce & Industry, N.A.I.; 1910 - Commerce & Industry, 1193, 6th August; 1912 - Factories, No.1-14, Nov.A. N.A.I.; 1918 - The Hindu; "Enclosure of Choolai Mill hands demands", June 28, 1918;
1926 - Industry and Commerce, Labor. L-878 (16), N.A.I.;
1928 - RCL, vol.VII, Madras Presidency, pp.243 & 327, London, 1930;
1930 - Industry and Commerce, L-878(16), N.A.I.;
1934 - PW&L . L-2507, 20-11-1935, T.N.A.;
1937 - Development Dept. - 2711, 6-12-1937, T.N.A.;
1938 - Development Dept. - 989, 11-4-1938, T.N.A.
& Development Dept. - 2246, 9-2-38, T.N.A.

that the lower limit for the male wage seems to be the upper limit for women workers in some sections of the mill work. From an analysis of the evidence available we can certainly make points against the justifiability of differential wage rates for male and female spinners. In Coimbatore wages differed for female from male spinners, being Rs. 12 and Rs. 19 respectively despite no difference at all in the work done.³⁰ It is clear that the difference is based primarily on a social factor - the internalised values of female being weaker, fragile and less able than men. This fact seems to have been used to economic ends by industrialists all over the world, and the area reviewed was no exception. Though the productivity level of women workers are not available separately as industrial productivity is accounted for the unit as a whole, it is clear from the fact that the demand for equal wages was raised that it was in no way lower. Besides if so, women received lower wages, as in the departments where women worked in large numbers - the reeling department - wages were assigned on piece rate basis.³¹ In fact, in this department, there exists evidence of some women being better than their male counterparts. "A woman of average

30. RCL, vol. VII, Part I, London, 1930, pp. 243-44.

31. Development Dept. (Ms.), G.O. 1384, 30-5-1938.

abilities and regular attendance earns between Rs. 15 to 16. A man earns less because he is less skillful."³² Our evidence suggests that the argument that women were poor workers, and worked less hours and hence were poorly paid in relation to her male counterpart, does not in fact hold good as female reelers in Madura mills were better than their male counterparts.

Factory Legislation

With Industrial Capitalism came legislation introduced by the government to regulate work in the factories and for generating consent among the workers. The Indian Factory Act of 1881 marked the beginning of the colonial government's endeavours to influence labour regulations and industrial management in India by British laws and practices. This Act defined what a factory unit was and what were the various measures that were binding on an industrialist to operate a factory. There were clauses to protect young children from overwork but not much of mention of measures specifically for women workers.³³ Therefore, there were requests from the Indian Medical department for the need to incorporate women also as a category to be protected from overwork, night work and

32. Ibid.

33. Legislative Department Proceedings, 1881, N.A.I.

long hours.³⁴ These were to be included by the government in due course, in a number of Acts. The fact that India was a colony of the most industrialised nation in early twentieth century had great consequence not only for the course of industrialisation that took place but also for legislation in the pattern as enacted in Britain regarding working hours, terms of employment and conditions of work. These legislations were the outcome not only the extension of the logic as applied to England, to legitimise the state in the eyes of the Indians as the supreme benign sovereign, but also because of pressure coming from the industrial lobby at Dundee. For example, in 1876 the Dundee Chamber of Commerce drew the attention of the Secretary of State for India to -

- "(1) injustice of competition with home textiles permitted by the laxity of Indian Factory Act as regards the long hours of work during which machinery is operated by women, young persons and children may be wrought - 22 hours by women and young persons, 15 hours by children as against 10 hours at home.
- (2) Adequate want of systematic inspection.
- (3) evils naturally incident to and experienced in this

34. Ibid.; also in Engels F., Conditions of Working Class in England, pp.161, 182. Similar conditions of work of women in English factories are made.

country of employment of women and young persons during long hours and all night has been sufficiently considered in permitting under the provisions of the shift system a new industry so to develop itself."³⁵

Therefore, a number of enquiries were conducted in the various Presidencies of India. The enquiry conducted in Madras came to a conclusion that -

- "(1) night labour is far from being injurious in an Indian climate and that it is probably wise to work as much as practicable by night. Wherever possible to secure enough light for the purpose of good lighting to minimize the occurrence of immorality in night work.
- (2) with reference to the length of hours women can be employed, it was pointed out that section 5 of the Indian Factory Act prohibits the employment of women for more than eleven hours and children for more than seven hours for the day, while at the same time fixed intervals of rest are prescribed."³⁶

Thus, by the 1891 Factory Act there was an attempt on the part of the government to restrict the number of

35. Home Judicial/A/405-458/February 1896, N.A.I.

36. Ibid.

hours a woman could work in the factory as also the provision of rest hour for the women workers. The enquiry in Madras found that both women and children were generally irregular and given to taking breaks, holidays without leave and that their conditions of work was as a rule better than their own surroundings at home, as also that their work in the factory is much better for their health than their earlier occupation. It is added in the report that women engaged in factories in Madras were by no means overworked and the entire absence of complaints on their part is viewed as evidence of satisfaction.³⁷ What is interesting is that absence of protest is not seen as the inability of the worker to do so because of the possible fear of losing work, an eventuality she/he could ill-afford.

In 1908 the Indian Factory Commission further advocated measures to curb the "over-exploitation" of women in industries. Henceforth a suggestion was mooted that the working hours of women should be identical in all respects to those fixed for young persons...³⁸ The limits of work time were to be between 5 a.m. and 7. p.m. for women. The reason for reduction from 8 p.m. as used to be the norm till 1905 was, if women were working till 8 p.m. they would

37. Ibid.

38. Indian Factory Commission Report, 1908, p.48.

wait till such a time as their male relations became free from work to accompany them. Therefore women workers spent almost 14 to 14½ hours at the workplace. The Indian Factory Commission felt that if women were left a little earlier, it would be in the interest of women worker's health as also the health of workers at large because women would be able to discharge their domestic functions well.³⁹ However, the Factory Commission excluded the category of ginning mills from the ban on employing women and children at night for 12 hours.⁴⁰ The reasons given were, firstly, that most of the women employed in these mills were middle-aged and therefore did not have moral problems as younger women and, secondly, that most of the employees were women in these departments.⁴¹ Hence it would not be difficult to get women to work in these industries. The Commission was absolutely against the employment of women as cotton openers as they felt that women's attire was not suitable to work here as "it catches the cotton fluff" and therefore they are more prone to accidents."⁴² The impact of all these observations was the enactment of the Indian Factory Act of 1911 whereby

39. Ibid., p.46.

40. Ibid., p.64.

41. Ibid., p.47.

42. Ibid., p.64.

there was reduction of hours of work for women to eleven along with an hour and a half rest time.

The Factory Commission in 1908 in Madras Presidency found tacit acceptance from C.B. Simpson and Binny Co., Madras, the policy of grouping young persons and women in the same class.⁴³ What is to be borne in mind is the advantage such a clubbing together would entail - a notion of women's work being less productive than that of a male worker - the segregation of sexes providing a firm basis for differential wages. Besides, as the Factory Act demanded that women workers be granted one and a half hour's rest time, the employers of B&C Mills in Madras gradually began displacing women workers by young persons on half time basis.

The next Act of consequence for women workers, was the Act of 1922, whereby the government excluded women and children from all heavy work. Act II of 1922 demanded complete prohibition of night work of women workers.⁴⁴ The Act recommended fewer working hours for women, more creches for small children and a sizeable maternity allowance for women. The consequence was replacement of female labour in heavy industries by male labour which was nowhere near scarce and the outcome for women was unemployment. Later too, there were recommendations for a shorter working

43. Ibid., p.304.

44. Development Dept., G.O. 263 (Ms.), 19-2-1923.

day of 8 hours for women by the chief Inspector of Factories to the Commissioner of Labour in 1930.⁴⁵

This was made in the light of the incidence of high infant mortality, as a measure to help bring it down.⁴⁶ Fewer hours of work, if implemented with the benefits prescribed for the women workers, would obviously have reduced the profitability of employing women for the entrepreneurs. The effect of this Act on loss of employment for women workers is difficult to gauge from the source material available. In Madras the Choolai and the B&C Mill authorities by this time were vehemently against the employment of women. In B&C Mills they gradually completely eliminated them while in Choolai they limited them as far as possible to exploit the cheap resource of female labour. For example, in the new mills in Coimbatore like Sarada, Saroja, Lakshmi, Pankaja, as also the Maturai Mills and Menakshi Mills, women continued to find a place for themselves in the workplace.

Madras Maternity Bill, 1934

"Bills are an outcome of real desire on the part of enlightened gentlemen to put down evil practices

45. Public Works and Labour Dept. (Ms.), G.O.-321L, 1-2-1930.

46. Ibid.

and prays that the government will attach much weight to the advice of the honourable members in the legislative council."⁴⁷ The context of the above statement was not maternity benefit but rather the marriage age bill introduced in the legislative council by Jambulingam Mudaliyar and Ratnasabhabati Pillai in 1898. Similarly, an attempt was made through members of the legislative council in various presidencies to introduce a bill for maternity benefit. It was championed by social reformers like N.M. Joshi, V.J. Patel and V. Ramaswamy, Mudaliyar Avargal.

"The length of time that women abstain from work after confinement varies considerably in different parts of India. Religious and social customs prescribe certain periods varying from 10-40 days, during which a woman cannot return to her ordinary avocation after confinement..."⁴⁸ However, women belonging to a lower caste did not easily conform to these rules especially if working, as economic circumstances along with customs determined the length of absence on account of child birth. According to G.M. Broughton an interval of two to three weeks or months elapses before the women come back to work. While in Bombay women leave a fortnight

47. Madras Native Newspaper Report, 'Sasilekha', Feb. 8, 1898.

48. Law (General), G.O. 846, 15-7-1921.

before and return a fortnight after child-birth.

In Madras, maternity benefit was first introduced in the Basel Mission in the 1920s. The scheme was first proposed in the Draft convention passed at the first International Labour Conference held at Washington in 1919.⁴⁹ The Royal Commission on Labour in India expressed the need to implement such a benefit scheme on the ground of social justice and humanitarian principle - "the general standard of living being so low, there be a greater value attached to the health of women worker and her child at a vulnerable period in the lives of both. Legislation is necessary to make it compulsory in respect of women workers."⁵⁰ It was on this basis that V. Ramaswamy Mudaliar Avargal introduced the Maternity benefit Bill in the Madras Legislative Council in 1932. The government soon enough legislated on it and presented the Madras Maternity Bill of 1934.

In advanced capitalist countries legislation came against employment of women before child-birth and providing of maternity benefit as shown in Table-VIII beside.

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49. Dept. of Industry & Labour, L-1150 (e), 1924, N.A.I.
50. Dept. of Industry & Labour, L-1806 (1), 1932, N.A.I.

Table-VIII

INTRODUCTION OF LEGISLATION FOR PROHIBITION OF
WORK DURING PREGNANCY AND MATERNITY BENEFIT IN
SOME COUNTRIES⁵¹

Countries	Prohibition of work	Maternity Benefit Scheme
Denmark	1901	1915
Austria	1885	1888
France	1908	1913
Germany	1878	1883
Britain	1891	1911
Italy	1902	1910
Norway	1892	1909
Sweden	1891	1912
Switzerland	1877	1911
Madras Presidency	-	1934

The Government in colonial India preferred to entrust the task of providing maternity benefit scheme to voluntary associations. In fact, the first step in this direction was to foster their growth. Besides this, it felt the need to do so through registered trade unions. The urgency of the need was realised in the Enquiry Report of the Royal Commission on Labour in India in 1928-29. This came about in Madras in 1934 as the Maternity Benefit Bill.⁵² However, most factories including the cotton mill management evaded payment of the benefit by resorting

51. Dept. of Industry & Labour, L.1156 (14), 1927, N.A.I.

52. The Bill was similar to the one passed in Bombay Presidency. See Appendix 1.

to loopholes in the clauses of the Bill.

There was not in fact much cooperation from the managements of the mills in implementing the benefit scheme. In fact, initially, one of the more conservative mill owner had stated clearly to the chief Inspector of factories that, if such a legislation was introduced, women would be dispensed with in his mill.⁵³ And in fact, the South Indian Chambers' Memorandum could not see any reason as to why such compulsory internment was asked for and wanted the penalty on employers not to exceed Rs.100 in place of the proposed Rs.500.⁵⁴ In Madras the Choolai mill management dismissed two women workers in an advanced stage of pregnancy in 1926, but had to reinstate them on account of pressure from the Madras labour union.⁵⁵ Despite given legal permission to absent themselves for child-birth, women on returning for work, sometimes had to pay Rs.5 to Rs.10 as bribe to get the job back.⁵⁶

Given plenty of scope to manipulate and utilise the loopholes in the Maternity Bill of 1934, very few women

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53. Public Works and Labour Dept. (Ms.), G.C.-1101L, 3-4-1930.
54. The Hindu, Maternity Bill South Indian Chambers Memorandum, June 26, 1934.
55. The Hindu, Madras Labour Union, April 21, 1926.
56. The Hindu, Choolai Mill hands grievances, Jan. 12, 1927.

workers actually concretely benefitted by way of enjoying these benefits. Coming to the question of maternity benefits the replies to the questionnaire in Coimbatore in 1938 show that the amount of benefit given by the mills was meagre given the number of women employed on an average being 6458.

Table-IX

INDIAN FACTORY ACT, 1936⁵⁷
MATERNITY BENEFITS PAID

District	No. of women	In perenni- al fa- ctor- ies	No. clai- ming M.B.	No. paid M.B.	Oth- ers paid M.B.	Total M.B.	No. De- cided by pro- portion
Coimbatore	11630	8207	171	148	1	3412	3
Madras	347	347	3	3	-	57	-
Madurai	5122	3948	506	383	-	922012	-
Total	46070	30324	1268	938	9	21211	8

Table-X

MATERNITY BENEFIT IN COIMBATORE MILLS⁵⁸

Year	No. of Mills	Av. women/ day	Benefits paid	Amount
1936	11	4021	143	3219.8
1937	16	4654	189	4327.0

57. Development Dept., G.O.-1455-57, 29-6-1937.

58. Madras Labour Enquiry-Venkatramayya Committee Report, Madras, 1938, p.159.

Of the 24 mills employing over 6,000 women only 11 employing around 4,000 women paid any benefit in 1936 and only 16 mills employing around 4,600 women did so in 1937. Therefore 13 mills with 2,000 women in 1936 and 9 mills with more than 1,500 women in 1937 paid no benefit. The percentage of benefits paid being 2% in 1936 and 3% in 1937.⁵⁹

According to survey conducted by T.A. Anantha Iyer⁶⁰, the maternity benefit Bill did not cover most of the women as they did not find themselves within the scope of the Act for they did not qualify the conditionality regarding period of work. Of the 35,000 odd women in factories in 1930 in Madras Presidency, 15,000 were seen to be excluded, of the remaining 20,000 even if 50/1000 is taken as estimate for maternity benefit,^{it} would be a maximum of Rs.24,000/year on the basis of the ratio fixed. This is higher than that seen in an analysis of maternity benefits in Italy in the Industrial and Labour Information dated 18-6-1934 of the International Labour Organisation.⁶¹

59. Ibid.

60. The Hindu, Maternity Benefit, August 8, 1934.

61. Ibid.
Note: Confinements in Italy between 1929-32 vary between 38.1 to 44.7/1000 in the survey carried out for the International Labour Organisation.

The reason for the limited access to the Act was -

(a) Section V of the Maternity Benefit Act, according to which nine months work in the factory preceding pregnancy is a must. Therefore, when a woman worker during pregnancy was absent even for a day she lost the benefit of the scheme. As an outcome, the lacunae was successfully exploited by the management depriving deserving women of the benefit. As observed by the Coimbatore Enquiry Committee, it was in the nature of things for women workers to take a day off or so while pregnant. Besides this there were also a number of complaints from women workers who were not given their compensation by the mill. Though they denied taking leave, the management claimed that absenteeism was the reason behind their ineligibility. Therefore recommendations were made to introduce the personal card system in the mills by the Coimbatore Strike Enquiry.⁶²

It appears from the Madura Award headed by D.N. Strathie, the Commissioner of Labour that the Madura mill management were better than their Coimbatore counterpart. They maintained a creche at each of their factories and made special expensive provisions for the health and treatment of the workers. With 1/6th the total women labourers in the Presidency, they pay more than half the

62. Madras Labour Enquiry - Venkatramayya Committee Report, Madras, 1938, p.161.

total maternity benefits disbursed.⁶³

Thus, the various legislations enacted by the government in colonial India, as far as women workers were specifically concerned, had resolved around a few issues - working hours, maternity benefit, kind of work, rest rooms and creches. They had both positive and negative consequences. This was so because it added further to the disabilities that women workers were seen to have and was used differently by various capitalists to suit their convenience. Though, by itself maternity benefit scheme and reduction in work time were in fact meant for the welfare of women labourers, their consequence directly at times, was dismissal from work or not being given an equal status. The maternity benefit scheme, for example, led to the displacement of female labour by male in some mills where it was possible. Besides this, where there was the need to reduce the number of workers, women were the first group to be retrenched. In Madura mills in September 1937, women numbering 614 were dispensed with.⁶⁴ To the labour leader, S.R. Varadarajulu it was a move by the management to avoid paying maternity benefit. The management's point of view, was that, because of the

63. Development Dept. (Ms.), G.O. 1384, 30-5-1938.

64. The Hindu, "Madura Mill Dispute - viewpoints of workers", October 6, 1937.

introduction of night work to meet the competition, women could not be employed owing to legislation preventing it. Since there were too many women for day work they were dispensed.⁶⁵ Whatever the real reason for the dismissal or retrenchment of women workers, the fact remains that their inability to work at night caused by legislation of the kind, was detrimental in their ability to secure work as winders or reelers. A shorter working hour, enacted, was used to rationalize the lower wages paid to them while, in fact, the reduction in wage was not in proportion to the reduction in working hours.

In some industries we note that the necessary and adequate measures are taken by the employers to incorporate women as a component of the labour force in terms of effective labour management by way of implementing various measures as in Madura with creches and restroom for women workers. However, in some mills, for example, Choolai and B&C Mills, it led to the strengthening of the mill authorities' policy of excluding women as far as possible from the workforce. As a general rule, the implications of such legislation were additional burden on the employer of women workers and therefore the preference to displace female by male. The statement of C.B. Simpson and Binny

65. The Hindu, "Madura Mill Dispute Examination of Manager", October 16, 1937.

Co. Madras in 1908 is - "they had not employed women in their mills since the amended Act made it imperative to give one and a half hours interval during the day."⁶⁶ However, it significant to note that the exclusion of women from the B&C mills came only in 1926. This too, because the women workers joined the Madras Labour Union, to demand their rights on an equal footing with men.⁶⁷ So, when there is elimination of the women workers, or an attempt to do so, a coalition of forces operate - not merely of not being economically viable or socially problematic but also factors such as unionisation and political challenge. Further, the loopholes in the legislation were availed of, as easily then as today, by mill owners.

Concluding Remarks

Undoubtedly from our evidence it is clear that the conditions of work in the cotton mills were certainly tough and in fact hazardous to the well-being of workers. Women faced "direct exploitation by capital via their wage labour and indirect exploitation via vicarious dependence on the wage of the male breadwinner."⁶⁸ A

66. Indian Factory Commission Report, 1908, p.43.

67. RCL, vol.VII, Part II, p.186.

68. Barrett Michele, Women's Oppression Today, London, 1980, p.139.

woman worker not only had the work at the cotton mill to do but also the all comprehensive domestic labour to render. Though this was not a creation of capitalism it did "create a set of social relations in which pre-existing divisions were not only reproduced but solidified in different relations in the wage labour system."⁶⁹ This we have seen in the present chapter affected the time available for women workers in cotton mills to look after their household chores along with work at the mill.

The system of recruitment of labour as we have seen led to the perpetuation of a system of exploitation wherein, the poor worker was also absolutely under the maistris control. For the women workers, this system was even more evil and binding as the degree of their dependence on the maistri was greater because they required his help to get back work in the mill after a period of absence on childbirth.

There certainly was a great deal of variation in the wage structure not only on the lines of work differences but also of gender. As our evidence clearly shows that the women workers received lesser wages for similar work. Apart from this in areas like winding where women were more skillful, wages were assigned on piece rate basis.

69. Ibid., p.182.

This again is an instantiation of the tendency of capital to exploit labour to its optimum in which the women as part of the workforce suffered most. However, it was possible to pay different wages, and assign lower productivity to women workers as over centuries the idea was deeply rooted and ingrained in society at large. It was the 'social construction of gender inferiority',⁷⁰ and the ideology of the female as weaker sex which contributed to assigning women workers lower wages.

Another interesting point about wages is that, though gradually the concept of a living wage or family wage for the worker was gaining currency, there were challenges from the workers unions demanding equal wages for male and female workers which undercut the above mentioned rationale of family wage.

The various pieces of labour-related legislation introduced in the period under review should be viewed as part and parcel of the capitalist state's venture to - (a) rationalize its role and legitimize its existence as a civilizer of a 'barbarian' people - Indians, (b) an extension of the same logic in which these acts were legislated in contemporary England to legitimize its role as a welfare state and most important, (c) for

70. Ibid., p.209.

ensuring the social production of the labour force on whose expansion the next generation of the proletariat is assured. Though legislations were introduced there certainly existed a lack of correspondence between its introduction and implementation, thus reducing its impact and application to a great extent.

CHAPTER IV
STRUGGLE OF LABOUR AGAINST CAPITAL

The experience of authority and domination in the familial sphere of male suzerainty certainly makes an imprint in the shaping of the mentality of women as part of the workforce too. The family structure was one which reproduced the necessary characteristics for the subordination and submission of women to the patriarch. This was as common to the Tamil women as to women anywhere else experiencing such ideological hegemony over them. In the Indian context, the pativrata syndrome and the concomitant symbols of comprehensive female subservience are woven into the fabric of our great tradition. Different currents from different periods influenced social consciousness through culture, religion and ethos to construct and reconstruct notions of womanhood. Images of Sati the sacrificial wife, Sita the devout wife, influenced and shaped mentality at a very general plane of almost the entire society.¹ By the 1920s with the growth of the non-brahmin movement Kannagi also became part to the tradition of ideal woman who was worshipped and respected for all her sacrifices.

1. Lakshmi, C.S. Face Behind the Mask: Women in Tamil Literature, New Delhi, 1984, pp.3, 25.

The period of our discussion, 1914-1939, was one when the national liberation movement was growing strong. By the 1920s the Congress had realized the need to mobilize the immense potential that existed in Indian women. This was especially espoused by Mahatma Gandhi during the course of the Civil Disobedience Movement.² It was done by evoking a spirit of sacrifice in women as shown by Sita or Savitri. Undoubtedly such picturisation of ideal woman would also have made a dent in the worker's consciousness, leading to similar perceptions of women. Besides, the customs, the rituals and tradition impinged on women's right to be independent of her guardian male, be it the father, husband or son. The consciousness produced by everyday social practices therefore did not easily render space for women workers to become aware of the structural oppression they were facing - of class, caste and sex. But despite such constraints we do have evidence of women mill workers trying to transcend these barriers through display of activism in strikes, in campaign for temperance and political protests of the freedom struggle in Madras Presidency.³

2. Home Political 32/I/1931, N.A.I.

3. The Hindu, Madras Mill situation, April 3, 1931.
 Note:- Pichaimuthu Ammal, a prominent Congress leader of Madurai congratulates Madras Mill women workers' active participation on Congress call and asks them to hold on the strike as long necessary.

In this chapter what we attempt to do is to locate the space in which women reacted to the oppression at the workplace. We try to answer the following questions: What were their perceptions of the modern mill work and their wages? What was the level of consciousness of women workers? How participative were they in the labour unions and strike activities? And, ultimately to what extent were they brought into the mainstream by the unions through their charter of demands and movements as an integral and vital part of the struggle of labour against capital in the period under study.

A problem for the study of consciousness is that evidence of protests, strikes and participation in politics cannot be taken as an indicator of the consciousness of women, as different factors mediate between action and development of the thought process generating class consciousness. Nevertheless, the fact of women protesting against various restrictions imposed upon them at the workplace is significant as an indicator of emerging consciousness. The interaction of women at the workplace with their male counterparts, with worker's organisations and unions certainly produced an impact on the female workers. ~~It~~ We do not have a rich source of evidence, whereby we could get a fair idea of how the mill work helped women come out of their homes and actively challenge measures of

the management in regard to the conditions of work. And also what their participation in the political movements of the time meant to them. Because of such limitations it is extremely difficult to make any conclusive remarks on the consciousness of the women workers.

Unionisation of Workers

The process of urbanisation and industrialisation in Madras Presidency contributed to the development of cities where over years of habitation and through generations the working class was developing. Much before unionisation the workers had protested in different forms against the hard, unhealthy difficult conditions of work in the mills.⁴ By the end of the First World War unionisation of workers over their demands first took place in the B&C Mills on April 27, 1918⁵. Then a number of unions came into existence like the kerosene oil workers union, the Public Works Dept. workers union, the Madura Corporation Workers union⁶ etc. The cause of the threatened epidemic of strikes during the period after the first decade of the twentieth century was seen to be the high

4. House of Binny, Bicentenary Year Publication, op. cit., p.114.

5. Wadia, B.P., Labour in Madras, London, 1921, p.8.

6. Public Works and Labour, G.O.-3148 L, 31-12-1928.

cost of food and other necessities of life.⁷ Before the war industrial wages were to a great extent based on a level of bare subsistence, and therefore with the rise in price, the workers unable to support themselves broke out in protest.⁸ In the B&C Mills the average wages for mill operatives and the cost of bare living between 1914-1918 gives us an indication of the great difficulties the workers had in tiding over⁹ the crisis because of price rise. It is here that the genesis of organised labour movement in the Presidency of Madras lay. The 1920s was a tumultuous period of industrial upsurge in this region. In 1930, a number of strikes were waged in Madras. The Madras corporation demanded a minimum monthly wage of Rs.25 for men, Rs.20 for women and also asked for speedy implementation of the maternity benefit scheme.¹⁰ Similarly the public works union too demanded minimum wages for men and women along with provision of facilities like creches maternity benefit and milk for children of women workers.¹¹ An interesting strike is that of the kerosene oil workers who in 1930, on September 18, struck

7. Commerce and Industry (i), Nov. 6, 1919, N.A.I.

8. Ibid.

9. See Appendix-II.

10. Dept. of Industry and Labour, L853(16), 509-A, 8 Jan. 1930, N.A.I.

11. Dept. of Industry and Labour, L-878, 1931, N.A.I.

work opposing retrenchment of 35 women workers in search of cheap mofussil labour.¹² By late thirties the cotton mill cities of Madras, Madurai and Coimbatore witnessed a series of strikes for better wages in specific and working conditions in general as we shall see in which women were extremely active.

Given the combination of colonial domination and societal subjugation, the discontent vis-a-vis existing conditions of work in the form of demonstrations and strikes was not easy. It was mediated undoubtedly by factors of caste and community as also region which was exploited to the optimum by the managements of the mills as noted in an earlier chapter; during strikes to quell labour organisations. Apart from these, the colonial government's innumerable pieces of legislation as has been discussed in chapter III prevented easy organisation among the workers. Thus, two kinds of impediments posed by (a) the regulations of the management as also government and (b) the society, one of immense complexity in fact dividing the workforce in all fashions, prevented easy organisation of workers. In Madras as in other industrial centres there were many legislations introduced during the course of these years - the trades disputes

12. Ibid.

Act, and trade union bill etc. all of which defined the parameters within which the workers could function and express their opinion. So, one finds that these legislations did hinder, easy, free participation of workers in protests of strikes and limited their access, at the same time, thereby increasing the power of capital over labour.

And, for the women workers not only the above noted impediments, but also their gender, posed problems. Women in the three cities under review, as in traditional Indian society were viewed primarily as mothers, wives of daughters subservient to the male patriarch. Gender based role divisions of the male superior, female inferior was an integral part of socialisation right from their birth into a family. Therefore when a women worked in a cotton mill, it was not as if the whole backlog of traditions were inoperative. Rather, these forms of subordination was functional on the familial plane for the exploitation and subordination of the women in worker's families. **And** this was in fact another means which the management resorted to, to quell any protest emerging among women workers against working conditions in the mills. There are examples of the maistris/supervisors complete control over the women whom he recruited for work in the 13 mills at Coimbatore. The susceptibility of the women workers to the power of the patriarch in the family proved to be

useful in easily generating consent in the women to the whims and fancies of the maistri. They were subdued by him because their access to their means of livelihood was through him. The relationship established between them was almost the transformation of the patriarch from the family to the mill.

The need to look after the domestic work along with mill work limited women's access to time for political activism. "She gets up before 4 in the morning, prepares food for husband, his paralytic mother, children, herself, finishes housework goes with her husband, in very truth runs with him to the mill 5 miles away... to begin a hard day of labour inside the mills."¹⁴ Thus, a combination of the role of a housewife to that of a worker was burdensome; and had to be grappled with as these were a-priori assigned in society to women since the time when such division of labour evolved. Hence the culturally defined role of womanhood coalescing in motherhood further limited scope for women's involvement in urban work. This was so because after long hours of work at the mill it was next to impossible with their homely duties to attend late evening meetings and deliberations on issues by the union.

13. Development Dept., G.O.-2532, 12-10-1938.

14. Ramabhai, M., "The Women labourers in Madras" in Stri Dharma, July, 1926.

Women in the Union and Membership

Though we do not have evidence of women's membership on any large scale in unions and their active involvement in the process of unionization, it is quite interesting to note that they were members of the union by the late 1920s and 1930s.

Table-XI

TRADE UNION MEMBERSHIP

Unions regis- tered for membership	No. at beginning	No. joined left during		No. at the end	
		1920	1930	Male	Female
<u>1927-28:</u> ¹⁵					
B&C Mills	3948	120	1951	2117	-
MLU	7428	64	52	7320	120
<u>1929-30:</u> ¹⁶					
B&C Mills	2060	169	1361	868	-
MLU	4035	1876	178	5504	229
<u>1932-33:</u> ¹⁷					
B&C Mills	325	63	128	263	-
MLU	3206	100	817	2459	30
Madura Union	1586	728	1889	325	103
Coimbatore Union	102	142	-	244	-
				contd..	

15. Public Works and Labour, G.O.-2546L, 16-10-1928.
 16. Public Works and Labour, G.O.-3031-32, 27-10-1930.
 17. Public Works and Labour, G.O.-477L, 24-2-1934.

contd...

1933-34:¹⁸

B&C Mills	263	116	950	329	-
Madras LU	2489	386	-	2798	77
Madura LU	427	526	382	446	125
Coimbatore LU	-	-	-	219	-

In England Female Chartist Association was formed in the Old Barley on October 17, 1842 under Mary Anne Walker.¹⁹ And, it was only in 1885 that Rev. Henry Williamson formed the Dundee Mill and factory operative unions aimed specifically at involving women mill and factory workers in England.²⁰ Here too they faced problems because of dual responsibilities women workers had, of the home and the workplace.

The first instance of women's activity, participation in union proceedings is in 1918. According to a C.I.D. report on December 9, 1918 at a public meeting of the Madras Labour Union at Perambur barracks addressed by B.P. Wadia, there were 3,000 men and 20 women and it was announced that 100 more women had joined the union.²¹

18. Public Works and Labour, G.O.-15L, 3-1-1934.

19. Frow, Ruth and Edmund, "Women in the Early Radical and Labour Movement" in Marxism Today, vol.12, No.4, April, 1968, p.112.

20. Gordon Eleanor, "Women work and collective Action - Dundee Jute Works, 1870-1906", Journal of Social History, Fall 1987, p.35.

21. Public Ordinary (Confidential), G.O.-388, 3-7-1919.

These women became part of the union, working against the tide - the familial pressure, the management's pressure as also the societal pressure. Instances of their militant fight against manoeuvres trying to prevent their activism in the union is available for both the Madura mills, Madura and the B&C Mills, Madras, which we discuss below.

The Madras Mill Strike April 22-
June 1, 1920

"The reason for the strike is not increased wages or shorter hours of work but protection of honour".²² This had been the general impression in various vernacular newspapers of the period. The immediate reason for the strike was the behaviour of Guruswamy Naidu, the head maistri, with a woman Vellayammal who was dismissed on a flimsy reason of wasting cotton.²³ Thus on 12th April women demanded the dismissal of the maistri and his replacement by a female maistri. This incident was the culmination of a process which irked the mill management - the desire of these women to join the union to fight for better conditions of work.²⁴ "When the women expressed their desire to organise themselves the maistri began a systematic bullying

22. Madras Native Newspaper Report, "Desbhaktan", April 14, 1920.

23. The Hindu, April 22, 1920.

24. The Hindu, "Madura Labour Union", April 22, 1920.

and abusing of the women making their work life miserable and unbearable."²⁵ This strike of women was the first of its kind in the annals of Indian history so far recorded. By April 25th, the workers at large struck work on demands ranging from recognition of the union to dismissal of the head-maistry.²⁶ While the strike was generally attributed to infringement of the women's honour, very few bothered to see that it was essentially attempts to quell the burgeoning attempts of the women to resist their exploitation as workers that manifested as offences against their decency and self-respect as 'good' women. It was left to the Hindu to note the class-basis of the event. The point to note is that the evolving consciousness of women workers - their protest against the maistry's language and attitude was viewed from a traditional angle, as a fight to preserve the honour of the women - their chastity and self-respect. This may be because of the social scenario within which such a protest was staged - one where chastity of women was considered sacred and in whose defence even lives could be lost. And, thereby an analysis of women worker's subordination at the workplace by the maistri was not seen in terms of power in a total sense, but rather as being used to sexually exploit women by calling names, manhandling

25. Ibid.

26. The Hindu, "Madura Labour Union", April 27, 1920.

etc. Thus, the strike was viewed as a battle to maintain the honour of women workers and not as a challenge to the mill management's oppression of women workers by preventing them the right to organise. Such influences, espoused in society at large, were obstacles in these workers transcending boundaries drawn by the social structure through norms, customs and culture to attaining a class consciousness.

In Madura as in the case with issues of this nature, the mill management sided with the maistry and killed the strike with police repression and backlegs.²⁷ By June 1, 1920 almost all the workers were back at the mill. This instance may be viewed as a classic example where women's protest against working conditions is portrayed to be a purely gender question. It was another channel through which sexual ideology permeated and shaped mentalities in the workers and impeded development of consciousness.

Dismissal of Women in Perambur Mills 1926

Almost similar a sequence of events took place in Madras. On July 1, 1926, over 200 women were dismissed by the B&C Mill authorities.²⁸ The reason given by Mr. Kay,

27. The Hindu, "Madura Hill Strike", June 5, 1920.

28. Madras Native Newspaper Report, "Swarajya", July 5, 1926.

the manager, was that since 1911, it was a policy decision of the management to avoid employing women. B. Shiva Rao, the President of the Madras Labour Union rightly raised the question as to why the dismissal came after fifteen years.²⁹ The reasons are apparent - the impudence and audacity of the women workers as reflected in their joining the union. Similar views are expressed by the vernacular paper - Swarajya as to why women were dismissed - "The management started with the women workers thinking that it would be an easy matter to bully the women workers into submission... However the women proved to be more tough and united than the men for they have in a body resolved to face dismissal rather than disown their union."³⁰

To the labour department, it appeared that the dismissal came about because the management wanted to avoid having women on its rolls on account of the lurid stories presented of their conditions of work at the mill by the Madras Labour Union, and therefore dismissed these women.³¹ However, the MLU leader denied having ever presented any such account of the conditions of work of women at the

29. The Hindu, "Madras Choolai Mill Strike", July 6, 1925.

30. Madras Native Newspaper Report, "Swarajya", July 5, 1926.

31. Public Works and Labour, G.O.-2434L, Oct. 16, 1927.

B&C Mills in any of the MLU meetings.³² What this amounts to is this. The union denied the fact that the management sought to affirm - that the dismissal was because the management wanted to relieve women from the sorry state of work at the mill. So, on the basis of our evidence it appears most plausible that these women were dispensed with on account of their political activism, of their association with the union.

Besides, when women workers of the B&C mills became members of the Madras Labour Union, the Managing Director wrote to B. Shiva Rao, the President of the Union, whether he would provide employment for the 250 women workers of the B&C Mills who were to be dismissed on 1st July 1926 on account of joining the union.³³ This intimidation of the women workers was revoked only when the middle class women's organisation like the Women's Indian Association of Madras demonstrated outside Gokhale Hall against the B&C Mill authorities.³⁴ Such an instance of victimization had a negative impact on the consciousness of women workers of the B&C Mills. The women workers soon severed connection with the union.³⁵ Much as women were getting integrated

32. Ibid.

33. RCL, vol.VII, Part II, London, 1930, p.185.

34. Ibid., p.187.

35. Ibid.

into the protest movements of the time, the disabilities imposed on them in society continued to be used consciously or unconsciously by the managements. For example, in the B&C Mills Madras, as noted, it was lurid stories spread on women's problems at the mill that was used by the mill to dismiss women workers from the mill work and thereby deprive them of work. Hence if women dared to be part of the union there was stiff opposition.

Women in Strike Action

During the period, 1914-1939, we do have plenty of instances of women workers either spontaneously or as part of the union, reacting to issues affecting them at the workplace, be it a question of wages, sexual oppression or victimization. The earliest instance in our study has been the strike of women workers in the Madura Mills in 1920 to protest against the behaviour of the head maistri because of their desire to join the union as mentioned earlier. In 1924 there were strikes in Madras where women workers protested against a decrease in wage. From 4th to 6th April and again from 4th to 11th May seventy women workers of the reeling department of Choolai mills went on strike but the management did not accede to their demands.³⁶ Therefore they resumed work without success.

36. Labour Gazette, "Disputes in Madras", June, 1923.

In Malur in 1931 there was a major strike. The reason for the strike was the demands of the union which was not even recognised by the managements. The number involved was 9,000 of whom over 2,000 were women.³⁷ The management tried to dissolve the union but came to logger-heads with the labourers. The astonishing reaction was the spirit of the women workers. "They were willing to hold out for another six weeks if necessary for the assertion of their elementary right to form a union."³⁸ Their discipline at the meetings were perfect and the word of the union was law to them.³⁹ Similarly in the Kalleswara Mills Coimbatore when the management did not keep its promise of reducing the cut in wages from 25 to 15%, on February 15, 1934 women of the reeling section numbering 210 struck work. In the afternoon 230 men of the spinning section struck work in sympathy with the women.⁴⁰ The strike assumed larger proportion with the union taking up the issue and an increase in wages was secured in the settlement made on 23 February. On July 15, 1934, 240 women coolies, of the reeling department of Pankaja Mill, Coimbatore, struck

37. Public Works and Labour (confidential), 1454 L, 30-5-1931.

38. Ibid.

39. Ibid.

40. Public Works and Labour (Ms.), G.O.-1502 L, 15-7-1935.

work demanding an increase in wages for reeling yarn. All returned to work on 17 July, 1935 as the demand for increased wages was complied with.⁴¹

Similarly on calls given by the unions in the mills too, women workers were in the forefront at times. The 1930s was a period of great protests in Madurai, Coimbatore and Madras leading to forming of Court of Enquiry to overcome the conflict. From our evidence, scarce though it is, we can certainly conclude that women workers were quite deeply involved in strike activity.

In March 1931 the Madura Mill lock-out affected over 9,000 workers of whom 2,000 were women. Again in the major textile mill strike in Madura in 1938 there was considerable involvement of women workers in the strike. On February 6, a meeting of Labourers was held in the evening around 7 p.m. where about 3,000 men and 500 women came.⁴² In yet another meeting on 11-2-1938, 500 men and 200 women attended the meeting near Paadyan Mill and on 19 February 1938 in a meeting of Pandyan mill workers who met at Manalvedu two women workers addressed an audience of 250 men and 350 women.⁴³

41. Ibid.

42. Development Dept., G.O.-1050, 24-1-1938.

43. Ibid.

Coimbatore witnessed tremendous industrial disputes between 1936-1939. This was an outcome of the development of organisations among the workers, their greater involvement and last but not least wage cuts, price increase which brought them to the lowest level of existence economically. There were widespread strikes at Saroja, Sarada, Rangavilas, Coimbatore spinning and weaving Lakshmi and Rajalakshmi mills. In these strikes women played an extremely active role. On 5 October 1937, a large crowd of strikers were outside Rajalakshmi mills. Women in large numbers mobbed Abbey Naidu who was taking backlegs to work at the mills. And in three mills in Singanallur, women workers were picketting before the mill gates, armed with shoes and broomsticks.⁴⁴ In Saroja mill a new tactic was adopted during the strike. The picketting leaders dissuaded the women working in the reeling section from going to work and thereby paralysed the work as without them the last process of reeling work could not go on.⁴⁵ This was on 1st March 1937 and the management was forced to bring women labourers from outside the next day. In Sarada Mills, Coimbatore, 65 workers sitting inside refused to go out. They squatted on the road in front of the mill entrance hindering movement of the mill manager's

44. The Hindu, "Coimbatore Mill Workers' Strike", Nov. 3, 1937.

45. Development Dept., G.O.-989, 11-4-1938.

car.⁴⁶ Some women labourers prostrated themselves before the car. However the police let the car go whereupon the labourers stoned the vehicle heavily. This was on 18th February 1938. In Lakshmi mills in the strike on 12-11-1937, the number of males involved were 480, female 320 and night shift workers 350.⁴⁷

Women workers did however face specific difficulties even during strikes. For example, during the strike period in the Lakshmi Mills in 1937, one Rangaswami, an ex-employee of the mill, molested some female coolies proceeding to the mill. Devrajulu Naidu, the manager also reported that on 2-10-1937 a Karumba caste coolie woman was roughly handled by some women picketers.⁴⁸ But this was not corroborated by other evidence by the mill authorities.

In Madura mills in September 1937, the management to accommodate women workers gave a notice that men spinners in the ring frame department would be required to do two weeks night shift and one week day shift.⁴⁹ This was done as the mills were working at night at a time when women could not be employed because of restrictions imposed on night work for women since 1922. Hence,

46. Ibid. Also Development Dept., G.C.-448, 21-2-1938.

47. Development Dept., G.C.-448, 21-2-1938.

48. Development Dept., G.C.-2352, 19-10-1937.

49. Development Dept., G.C.-2153 (Ms.), 21-9-1937.

if the mill wanted to continue employing women labour it could be done only by displacing a larger proportion of male workers from day work to night work. This was not acceptable to the male workers of the ring frame department. On September 6th, the men workers decided to go on strike.⁵⁰ The battle instead of getting pitched collectively against cut in production and wages instead became a divided one - the management successfully alienated the women and the male workers from each other. And women in fact continued to work. A number of complaints from women workers of molestation by picketers were recorded.⁵¹

Women at times because of their gender were not favoured with supplies during strikes. In the distribution of paddy among striking workers of Madura in 1937, women were not given paddy. As an outcome they were keen to join work as soon as the mill opened.⁵² So we find that women were alienated from the section of striking workers needing doles because of misperception of their role arising from contemporary social values where women were not seen to be the bread-winners, instead were viewed as dependents. However, despite these handicaps faced

50. Development Dept., G.C.-2735, 7-12-1937.

51. Ibid.

52. Development Dept., G.C.-2532, 12-10-1938.

both at the workplace as also at home there is evidence of women's active involvement and membership in a pre-dominantly male sphere - the union and strike activity during the period under review.

If one gauges the rise of militancy in the workers' action, the contribution of women workers are immense. They were in the forefront in picketting, in brickbatting and stoning. This denies the substance of statements regarding the submissive nature of Indian women. In fact, in a culture of violent militancy that development in Coimbatore, Madurai and Madras in tumultuous industrial strife, women were extremely active. Though through mobilisation in protests, activation in strikes, political solution to the women's problems at the workplace was sought, their human question remained unsolved, in the sense that they continued to be exploited dually - as a worker and a woman.

Issues of Union on Women

There were a number of meetings specifically called for women labourers. This was especially done regularly by the Madras Labour Union where women from the women's Indian organisation also came and took up special schemes like baby welfare, creche etc. for the women workers. Through such methods women were becoming involved in the labour movement of the city.⁵³ It is astonishing to note

53. The Hindu, May 21, 1926.

their participation in late hour meetings and demonstrations. In 1926 as we have noted before, with the intervention of some women of the women's Indian Association problems of women workers were taken up and discussed in special meetings of women workers in the Madras Labour Union.⁵⁴ On a similar note such meetings also took place in Coimbatore and Madura. In 1939 on May 30, S.R. Varadarajulu on behalf of the Madura Labour union addressed a women workers' meeting. The discussion was on the amendment introduced to the maternity benefits bill and the need to fight for pension for women workers as also a number of other concessions.⁵⁵

Though these unions were predominantly male, they did take up some of the demands of the women workers. The Madras Labour Union, the Coimbatore Labour Union, the Madura Labour Union and the Coimbatore Socialist Textile Workers Union as cited before took up women's issue like the demand for maternity benefit scheme, rest hours, increased wages in general and provision of creches. The Madras Labour Union in Choolai mills in 1929 demanded an increase in wages for women in the reeling department and as wastepickers which had been drastically reduced by

54. Public Works and Labour, G.O.-2434L, 16-10-1927.

55. The Hindu, "Madura Labour Union", May 31, 1939.

the management as there was shortage of work in the mill for them.⁵⁶ In Coimbatore Mills, the CLU in its Charter of demands had a separate section of women's demands in its strikes on September 15th, 1927 which was successful. It was:

- (1) Every pregnant woman be entitled to one month's holiday with wages and one without,
- (2) arrangements for keeping little children for feeding if request will come from the women workers,
- (3) every worker will be given two sets of clothes every year at cost price.⁵⁷

In the workers' movements of the period under review, demands for better wages for women, special facilities of work time and maternity benefit were raised. In fact, in the Madura mill strike of 1930 the union demanded maternity benefit and creches for women workers from a health point of view.⁵⁸ This was because the cotton dust in the mills were seen to be the cause for high infant mortality and so to prevent health hazards for a pregnant women leave was demanded.⁵⁹

56. RCL, vol. VII, Part II, p. 140.

57. Dept. of Industry and Labour, L-878(14), 1928.

58. Public Works and Labour, G.O.-703L, 27-2-1930.

59. Ibid.

A number of union leaders were themselves stressing the need to unionize women and help change their miserable condition. The MLU representative Mr. R. Naidu for example, when describing the women workers in the factories said - "The condition of women workers was more unsatisfactory than those of men because of their domestic work, they are unable to attend meeting and their hardship is greater than men. Their wages are lower and the absence of a woman jobber leads to many complications."⁶⁰ Similarly, B. Shiva Rao, President of the MLU in a public meeting on 8th June in Madras said - "The men at any rate had only the employers to deal with, but the women had to serve their employers and their employees. He wanted men workers to realise that unless they treated their women-folk well at home they should not expect so from their employers."⁶¹ He was clear that the "trade union movement could not grow strong and healthy without women's active participation in union work."⁶² In Madras, when Mr. Naidu was arrested and then released under the restrictions of section 144, he appointed his wife as the President of the Union to carry on the strike plan. His intention was, to work through his wife in organising the

60. RCL, vol.VII, Part II, 1930, p.173. (Madura Labour Union)

61. Ibid., p.186.

62. Ibid., p.412.

movement, what is significant is that despite traditional barriers, a woman was placed in such a position of importance.

Concluding Remarks

From our evidence it appears that there were strikes of different kinds where some issues assumed primacy ranging from demand for increasing wages to protesting against sexual assault of a woman worker. At times as we have noted in the Madura strike of 1920, a complex set of factors ranging from sexual overtures, danger to women's honour as also bad working conditions generated protest among the workers, bringing the women to the forefront. And it was not as if they were merely being led. There are instances of protests which came about spontaneously for wage increase as we have seen in Madras in Choolai in April 1924 or in Madurai on April 12, 1920 to demand the removal of a head maistri who had misbehaved with a woman worker.

That there is scarcity of evidence on women workers at large in protesting against their working conditions is true, but the little evidence that we have is proof enough that they were in no way apathetic to issues of the workers' movement. In fact, they did express their discontent against the hard working and living conditions. Their reaction to the environment which they faced, of low wages, poor sanitation and scarce facilities is startling, if viewed within the general scenario of worker's movement in a colonial

situation. As women workers like their male counterparts had also acquired some consciousness of their right to be treated better for which they did combine with the workers at large-representing elements of trade union consciousness.

The context of the labour movement being a colonial one, it is imperative to make it integral to study its influence on the developing consciousness of workers. It is of utmost importance to keep in mind, the fact that the protest movement and combination of workers emerged with two pronged attacks - (a) from within the backward pre-capitalist patron client based Indian social system as also the challenge, (b) from outside, of a sophisticated colonial set-up with intricate details of regulations, Acts etc. through which it controlled the Indian economy and society. And, to add to it the study being centred on the development of consciousness of women workers, it makes it important for us to keep in mind the traditional notions of the role of women in the family and society. All these factors impeded and mediated the manifestation of consciousness.

POST SCRIPT

In this section, we make an attempt to draw together the different threads describing the particular features that attended the entry of women as workers in colonial South India, and trace the general pattern they produce.

Not very surprisingly, we find that the basic contradictions of the new form of production, industrial capitalism, have pride of place among the factors that condition the existence of women as the primary producers of the new form of production. The drive to accumulate and, therefore, to maximise profit is basic to the dynamics of capitalism. This internal logic of the systems gets translated into practice as the ruthless pursuit of the capitalist to cut costs to the minimum, i.e., to pay the least for each unit of the purchased inputs and to extract the maximum out of whatever is purchased. The chief purchased input being labour power, the capitalist tries to get it at the cheapest rate possible and to exploit the labour so placed at his command to the fullest possible extent. We think it sufficient, in this context, to state that the limiting level in either of the two cases is determined not by technical feasibility, but social viability. The notions of female inferiority we find, are effectively used by the capitalist to these ends.

Lower wages for women workers are predicated upon

the notion of female inferiority, obviously enough. The division of labour which sets aside domestic chores, including child rearing, exclusively for women also fits in well with the requirements of the capitalist system, something which the Indian Factory Commission, as we noted in the Chapter on 'Women at the Workplace', explicitly recognised. The result is that the general notion of the subordinate status of women is integrated into the capitalist value system and reproduced in its every-day practices. These included the exclusion of women from certain better paying occupation, as we have seen, and even their sexual exploitation at the workplace (in our case, strongly suggested by the evidence of the women workers' persistent complaints against the Maistris).

We may note that the state also actively intervened in the reinforcement of received values about women in the new conditions of production. By expressing solicitous concern for the welfare of women and clubbing them along with admittedly vulnerable child workers, in the legislations regulating work at the factories, by tolerating differential levels of wages and occupations for men and women, by championing their 'morality' defined as susceptibility to corruption by the night and the absence of trusted male escort and by accepting domestic work as the exclusive domain of the women for which special allowances could be

made, the state contributed directly to building the ideological framework in which gender inequality was given the forms suitable to the new conditions of production. The role of the state in maintaining the material and ideological condition for the perpetuation of gender inequality included, naturally, its support of the existing social, economic and political order.

We have also seen how gender ideology was utilised, on the one hand, to make women work harder (e.g. through the exercise of the patriarchal authority of the Maistri) and, on the other, to foil their attempts to resist their exploitation (as in the reported case of infringement of women workers' honour and the molestation of women pickets).

The role of the Maistri is a particular form of the articulation of gender ideology in relation to industrial labour, whose origin can be traced to the nature of social groupings prevalent in the time and place of our study, and their continuance into the industrial phase.

The insights that Karl Marx offers on the subject in the first volume of Capital seems wholly relevant. The process of entering the industrial workplace meant, for women, additional misery; The displacement of the previous agrarian existence where work on the farm blended with domestic work and its replacement by a disjunction between

the workplace and the home placed a heavy double burden on the women which constituted a chief component of their additional misery.

At the same time, by becoming an integral, direct participant in social production, new avenues for self-realisation and eventual emancipation potentially opened up for women. To what extent this potential was realised, we have not been able to investigate fully: We have seen that women managed to grow to a quarter of the workplace in the period of our study, that they managed to join the struggle of labour against capital, at times on issues specific to them, even if based on male-dominant perceptions about themselves occasionally. But the changes of female workers has posed constraints as we could not make use of it and therefore does not reflect the use of women worker's wages. Apart from these, aspects neglected are the working class home, the social relations of the workers - the male and the female and the perception of the women workers at greater depth.

The mill work gave women a potential to break free from traditionally imposed curbs on their movement though such a thing did not really occur. In Madras society this was a period of social reforms - of fight against child marriage, of preventing indenture system, of temperance movement, of anti-nautch movement and measures to emancipate

women through education. However, the women workers were a category largely ignored by such reformists, except a few theosophists like B.F. Wadia and Anne Besant. And therefore their problems remained. Though the process of unionisation did involve some women workers in the cotton mills - like in the Madras Labour Union, Madura Labour Union, Coimbatore Textile Workers Union, they were not pulled into the ambit of labour movement. The labour movement did provide a political solution to the problem by raising demands for equal wages of greater need to involve women in workers protests and union demands like maternity benefit, rest room and other such demands but a human solution of their problem by freeing them from domestic drudgery along with mill work remained and remains till today.

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Appendix-I

COST OF LIVING - BUCKINGHAM AND
CARNATIC MILLS, MADRAS

Wages	1914	1918
Carnatic	10-5-6	14-0-9
Buckingham Mills	10-5-8	14-2-2

Cost of Living in Six typical households		
	1914	1918
1. Father, mother & child	13- 9-3	17- 2-5
2. Mother & 2 sons	12-13-4	27- 9-9
3. One man, 3 women & child	25-10-1	32- 4-2
4. 3 men, 1 woman & a child	25-14-11	32- 8-3
5. 2 men, 3 women & a child	28-11-8	36-11-1
6. 2 men, 2 women & 5 children	42- 0-7	53- 9-6

* All indebted

Cost of living includes food, rent, clothing,
no luxuries.

Source: C&I (i) 1919, Nov.6, Filed N.A.I.

Appendix-II

MADRAS MATERNITY BILL, 1934

Section 5 of the Act reads as follows:

5(1) Subject to the provisions of this Act, every woman worker in a factory not being a seasonal one shall be entitled to the payment of maternity benefit at the rate of eight annas a day for the actual days of her absence during the period immediately preceding her confinement and for the four weeks immediately following her confinement as mentioned in sub-section (2).

Provided that a woman shall not be entitled to maternity benefit unless she has been employed in the factory of the employer from whom she claims maternity benefits for a period of not less than nine months preceding the dates on which she gives notice under sub-section (1) of Section 6.

Source: Coimbatore Mills Strike Enquiry Report,
Madras, 1938, p.160.

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