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**Gender, class and community in the mobilisation of labour**

In this paper, our discussion relates to the process of integration of women in the industrial workforce of the colonial Madras textile industry and its implications for societal attitudes to the woman worker and cultural changes it ushered in.

The culture of work that was emerging was in many ways transitional, straining against its traditional moorings of caste and gender relations, as modernity, influenced by ideas of equality of gender, common citizenship and other such values that pulled in a different direction. Women, to a large extent, were much affected by these trying times as, at one level, they were integrated into the workplace and workplace politics, while, at another level, there were attempts to restrict them to the confines of time and space traditionally theirs. These created crises of their own kind, as we note later in this paper.

We attempt to trace the construction of notions of gender, community and class among the cotton mill labourers, and their interconnections. The emerging cultural practices at the work place, including notions of gender, are situated in the context of the dispersion of contemporary social values. When we discuss caste religion, we situate them in the varying orders of meaning that it generated for the workers and the management and the social implications emerging from such codification, including use of caste- and religious-community-based grouping to be used to break strikes. And towards the end of the paper we discuss the perceptions of the state and its insti­tutions, the unions and their practices as also the various other factors regulating workers' lives ‑ in sum, social control over the workers, and their re­sponse to it.

In the case of women, though there were moments when their identity as workers created space for them to be actively involved in the shaping of the rights of workers in workplace politics, there are also innumerable other instances — the demand for equal wages, the expectation that higher paying jobs would be reserved for men, or women living up to their traditional expectation of passivity and continuing to work even as men went on strike — when their interests clashed with those of their men counterparts creating fractures within the emerging consciousness of the workers as a class. In the context of colonial India the emerging consciousness was also fore-grounded in the mindset of caste. Thus at times gender and class were not as important as the caste factor in the rallying together of the workers.

The management utilised the issue of female workers (blacklegs to the workers on strike) being threatened, molested or accosted by strikers to lodge complaints with the police accusing the workers on strike of rowdyism and unruly behaviour. Deeply embedded in such instances, and routed through them, were social­ly ascribed values of women's honour, respectability and patriarchal protection. In a similar vein, when unions complained of women workers facing indignities inside the mill, similar principles were operative, in addition to legitimate concern for the individual rights of the women. These are also pointers to the values, ideas and perspective of the times on the gender question, which we discuss in this section.

The relationship of power, amenable to abuse, between the maistri (recruiter-cum-foreman) and the woman worker and the expectation that women would continue to bear the burden of domestic work, even as they toiled at the factory during the day, are other themes that are examined.

We also examine the militant role played by women in union activity and their gradual involvement in the national movement as well.