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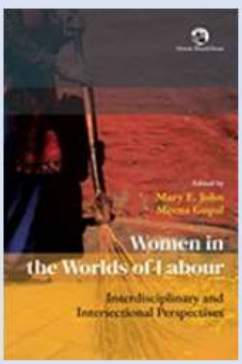

Multiple Worlds of Women's Labour

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WOMEN IN THE WORLDS OF LABOUR: INTERDISCIPLINARY AND INTERSECTIONAL PERSPECTIVES by Mary E. John *Orient BlackSwan, Hyderabad, 2021, 468 pp., 1095.00*

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*Women in the Worlds of Labour***,** originating in a conference on the same theme in 2014, brings wide-ranging critical and theoretical approaches into conversation with one another. While not claiming to be comprehensive, the editors lay out the analytical and historical importance of an interdisciplinary and intersectional perspective on the subject. In the introduction, they suggest that certain commonsensical views on women's labour have gained credence due to the lack of in-depth examination of the implications of statistical findings and other crucial factors. The critical value of the qualitative ethnographical approach has also often been forgotten. As growing precarity marks workers' lives in India, women have organized themselves with far greater energy in recent years against the state and capital nexus, whether it be in Munnar, Bengaluru or New Delhi. 'Women, they are saying, must be fully recognized for the workers that they are', write John and Gopal. The introduction stresses the critical importance of building bridges, not simply between different disciplinary perspectives, but also between activist insights and the academic world.

The first section of the book titled 'Conceptual Perspectives' consists of four essays looking at the historical relationship between Marxism and feminism on the issue of women's work, the question of class and the care economy. Mary E John's essay, 'Marxism, Feminism and the Political Fortunes of Theories' is a largely conceptual history of the theoretical and political relationship between Marxism and the 'women's question' in the West as well as in India. It puts several known political and intellectual histories in perspective, taking us back to a time before Marx in Europe where socialists jointly addressed the questions of patriarchal dominance and capitalist control, seeing them as essentially imbricated in each other. This history is outlined in detail in Barbara Taylor's book *Eve and the New Jerusalem*[1], but John's cogent overview allows us to see the connections of these early moments to Marx's theorizations and to later collective mobilizations of the twentieth century, for example, the

'Wages for Housework' movement, which took place in Italy and England in the 1970s. Led by women like Mariarosa Dalla Costa, Selma James and Silvia Federici (who later wrote the foundational *Caliban and the Witch*[2]), this movement brought women's unpaid work in the private sphere, as well as the question of social reproduction, to the centre of the debate on the capitalist-patriarchal exploitation of women. John goes on to discuss the works of Marxist-Feminist theorists like Heidi Hartmann, who argued that within patriarchy (which she saw as a set of social relations between men), capitalists and male workers collaborate implicitly and systemically to keep women in their place: discouraging them from entering the workforce, as well as discriminating against them when they did. Disagreeing with Nancy Fraser's rather shocking indictment of 'identity politics' as an enemy of socialist struggles, John highlights the importance of caste in understanding the stigmatization of women's public labour in India. She draws our attention to the deeply hidden domain of paid domestic work, which, despite being waged, is one of the most exploitative spheres of women's work in the subcontinent.

Samita Sen's essay argues that in India, the two major problems have been, first, the invisibility as well as problems of measurement of women's unpaid domestic work and second, the gendered nature of the labour market, as well as the specific material conditions of women's wage work. She reflects on the promise of autonomy offered by women's paid work as well as on how new thinking about affective labour and care work has managed to raise the question of gender sharply within the field of labour studies.

Rajni Palriwala's essay gives us a long and detailed overview of the ways in which the problem of care has been theorized and politically envisioned throughout the twentieth century. She outlines how feminist critiques of the welfare state were coopted by neoliberal policy discourses, to argue that the dismantling of the 'family wage' model would allow for greater autonomy and economic independence for women within the family. Palriwala leaves us with a conundrum (following JC Tronto): how can we envision an 'ethic of care' that does not romanticize oppressive familial practices of the past *and* demands value for care work without entering the profit-making logic of the neoliberal market? In her essay, Neetha N asserts the importance of disaggregating large-scale data on women's participation in economic activity to truly understand the implications of the broad general trends for distinct social groups, especially since gender is not the only category that shapes women's lives. While it has been generally observed that women's participation in the workforce is positively affected by the opening of the economy, looking at the data specific to marginalized social groups in India reveals realities that are missed in the macro analysis. She shows how, even though it was hoped in the early days of economic liberalization that the open market would increase opportunities for women marginalized by caste and religion in a way that state policy had failed to do (such as in the work of Gail Omvedt), current findings show that the market seems to 'operate within the existing and given structural inequalities of gender and caste/religion'.

The second part of the book titled 'Histories of the Present' includes two essays that place the historical lens on two very divergent work experiences of women. Meena Gopal in 'Cottage Industry to Homework: Tracing Women's Labour in Home-Based *Beedi* Production, c. 1930s-1960s' explores the contentious space occupied by women's household production in national development and the valence of terms like 'cottage industry' for the labourers working in them, especially when they happened to be women. 'Cottage' or 'village' industries included various

traditional industries, many of which operated on caste-based forms of production, where women's labour was often devalued or invisibilized. From the colonial period onwards, women and children remained classified as special labour. Gopal argues that it is the entrenched ideological perception of specific kinds of gendered labour as 'spare-time work'—subsidiary or mere extensions of domestic work—that solidified women's marginalization in traditional industries, as well as continued their lack of absorption and participation in the modern industrial sector. Gopal's essay analyses the National Planning Commission's reports in the 1930s, Gandhian influences on industry and labour, as well as the continuum of exploitation between unregulated factories and the home.

Geeta Thatra's fascinating essay '*Mujra* and *Baithak* in Bombay: Courtesan's Affective and/or Sexual Labour' explores an entirely different world of gendered labour as she historically analyses the work of performers of Hindustani classical music in mid-twentieth century Bombay. Looking back at the scholarly work on the figure of the courtesan in nineteenth century colonial India, she notes how it has been defined by two major trajectories: firstly, the sanitization and subsequent disenfranchisement of women in the performing arts through the interventions of the colonial government as well as new notions of sexual morality, and secondly, the processes through which the Indian nationalist movement 'reformed' the classical dance/music forms in tandem with their project of nation-building. In geographically locating her essay in 'the Compound'—an area of Bombay where *tawaifs* and courtesans relocated after losing their patronage in the north of India—Thatra historically demonstrates, in terms of spatial practice and material histories, the contradictions of the Indian nationalist movement in their relation to the world of affective and sexual labour that the courtesan represented. The Compound and the Congress House seem to have peacefully coexisted, even while Gandhi and the mainstream nationalist movement were disallowing the presence of celebrated artistes/courtesans like Gauhar Jan in their public meetings. It is in the late 1990s, with unprecedented urban gentrification, that the attacks on the 'Compound' grew manifold and middle-class citizens' associations were desperate to sanitize the place of disreputable associations, observes the writer. Geeta Thatra's primary question remains: how to raise the question of labour within the realm of performance, in this specific case the *'mujra'*? This is a question that has been critically significant to Performance Studies in India of late, as Brahma Prakash's work[3], amongst others, will demonstrate.

The third part of the book, titled 'Beyond Invisibility: Labour from the Margins', discusses how the much-used trope of 'invisibility' is no longer sufficient to address the complex questions of women's labour in the present day. Saileshkumar Darokar's essay looks at the history and present conditions of the dehumanizing practice of manual scavenging still prevalent in India, where an overwhelming majority of manual scavengers are Dalit women of the various 'untouchable castes'. The essay highlights the fact that manual scavenging goes beyond the normative notions of labour and is not comparable to any other occupation, in that it is not simply exploitative but violently brutalizing, especially to women. Darokar concludes that tokenism and reformistic piecemeal attitudes cannot be solutions for this untenable situation. Following Ambedkar, Darokar suggests that only a radical overturning and dismantling of caste society can liberate manual scavengers from this dehumanizing and degrading occupation.

Next, Ranjana Padhi's brilliant essay paints a terrifying picture of the concerted and relentless assault of capital and state over the last thirty or more years on the communities that practice subsistence economy in the various regions of Orissa. Padhi highlights the ways in which feminist research in India over the last couple of decades has withdrawn from any serious or critical questioning of capitalism as a system that decimates women's livelihoods. The essay reminds us how women who sustain subsistence economies through their daily labour are at the forefront of struggles against the state's assaults on Adivasi land for bauxite mining and other international/national corporate interests.

J Devika's essay explores structural aspects other than class—namely, caste, gender and space—that intersect with each other in defining the lives of urban working-class women in Kerala. Devika uses Julia Kristeva's notion of 'the abject' to understand the specific social conditions of a slum in Trivandrum, analysing how Kulamnagar is an abjected space where the stigmatized poor form the 'constitutive outside' of the social order. She concludes the essay, based on detailed field work and oral interviews, by highlighting the need to factor in the intertwined structural nature of caste and gender stigmatization/discrimination in the envisioning of welfare schemes. Sunil Mohan and Rumi Harish's essay highlights that despite the law being in favour of equal wages for men and women, women's labour is often judged as less skilled and hence, deserving of lower wages. The authors analyse the complex circumstances of labour that define the lives of transgender people and those who identify themselves as hijras. The legal status and social legitimacy of sex work are still deeply suspect, while *basti* is seen either as begging or worse, as extortion. The participation of hijras and transgender people in mainstream occupations is acutely limited by the lack of social acceptance. Even within the NGO circuits, where transgender people might find some work, the understanding of sexual harassment and its definitions tend to be entirely defined within a heteronormative framework. The essay suggests that there is the need to rethink many of these policies and commonsense notions if we are to truly undertake the work of 'queering labour'.

Renu Addlakha's essay, 'Engendering the Disability-Work Interface' raises important questions about the absence of labour market integration of women with disabilities in India. She reminds us that the whole enterprise of industrial modernity is based on ableist notions of enterprise, independence and struggle, which has resulted in the widespread public perception of disabled people, especially women, as unemployable. About the gendering of disability in India, Addlakha marks that gender often intersects with caste and class as determinant factors. Disabled men are often assigned tasks traditionally marked as feminine, while disabled women continue to perform their domestic duties. A disabled woman is not simply seen as unproductive at work but is also perceived less of a homemaker and caregiver—and hence, less feminine. In the next essay, Bindhulakshmi Pattadath outlines the problems in statist narratives that paint the migrant female domestic worker—especially the unskilled and those below a certain age—as merely victims of trafficking, with no agency and forever vulnerable to exploitation (sexual or otherwise) by the brutal system of illicit migration. Madhumita Dutta's essay also draws our attention to the complicated motivations and trajectories that drive women to wage work in factories run by global corporations in Indian cities, especially within Special Economic Zones (SEZs). In their everyday lives as 'factory girls', while often resisting the debilitating and sometimes inhuman working conditions in myriad subversive ways, women

find ways to create solidarity and new forms of social relationships amongst themselves. At least, this was the case at the Nokia factory in Sriperumbudur, which was Dutta's primary site of research.

The contribution exploring Svati Shah's recent work, *Street Corner Secrets*—a book on sex workers in Mumbai—takes the form of an interview between the author and the editors of this book. Shah's work signposts several radical ideas: for example, the continuum between 'sex work' and 'sex for work' amongst female migrant workers in the *nakas* of Mumbai, where demanding sex for paid work is a common practice for male agents. At all these sites, Dalit and tribal women define themselves primarily as migrant labourers, rather than as sex-workers per se. Shah points out that there is an urgent need to reframe the question of sex work based on *what is said by the sex-workers themselves*, much of which the anti-trafficking discourse fails to consider.

Nandini Manjrekar's essay on women teachers in India and the historical discourses that shape their lives, examines teaching as a form of gendered labour, especially in view of the extensive feminization of the profession in recent years. Manjrekar explores the effects of market-oriented reforms on the personal and professional identities of female teachers, as well as the growing contractualization and stratification that have begun to mark their careers.

Sandali Thakur's essay looks at how 'domestic art' by women in Mithila has been historically embedded in the social relations and labour practices of the region shaped overwhelmingly by the feudal-Brahminical power hierarchies, prompting upper caste women, excluded from *shashtric* and textual knowledge, to find their own pictographic knowledge system through the intricate symbolic structures of their ritual paintings, without which many important Maithili lifecycle rituals would remain incomplete. Dalit and lower caste women have, on the other hand, found their own idioms to depict their life-worlds and especially their labour practices, as well as mythical heroes and deities.

The last section of the book, focusing on women's labour mobilizations in India in recent years, looks at the various ways in which women have organized themselves as workers' collectives against the combined forces of the state, neoliberal capital and communitarian control, as well caste hierarchies and oppression. Sreerekha Sathi's essay looks at the valiant collective mobilizations of *anganwadi* workers to be recognized as workers instead of volunteers. Sujatha Gothoskar's essay examines women's historically fraught relationship with trade unions in India, which have remained largely male dominated, along with a brief overview of some recent and successful attempts at collectivizing by women in the tea gardens and pharmaceutical industries of India. K Kalpana's essay examines women's self-help groups, looking at how the state's investment in these modes of micro-credit for women means very little given the widespread devaluation of women's labour in the job market. While the informal economy is all important in the Indian context and self-employment is the primary mode of survival for many poor families, the provision of micro credit to women without understanding how this alters their social and familial relationships, often even adding to the burdens on their health and well-being in gendered ways, ultimately defeats the purpose. The essay also asks why the state actively encourages certain forms of collectivization amongst women workers (SHGs), while discouraging or even brutally suppressing others, i.e., trade unions that question or resist state policies.

Women in the Worlds of Labour covers an astonishing amount of ground, not only in terms of the range of experiences and life-worlds it brings together for its readers, but also because of the staggeringly wide variety of methodological and interdisciplinary approaches it is able to bring into conversation with each other. A few threads run as themes throughout: 1) it is impossible to look at gender in its relation to labour in isolation, whatever the context. Especially in a country like India, gender was always complicated by the overarching problem of caste which just as significantly shapes the worlds of labour; 2) coercion and consent can often not be mapped in a clear binary in the world of women's work; 3) complexities of agency and oppression can only be unravelled by asking structural questions as well as looking closely at the everyday life-worlds of women and non-men engaged in marginalized labour practices that often escape the macro-view; 4) there is an urgent need to break down traditional frameworks of thought, as well as generate new conversations between different conceptual approaches, to reframe issues based on (as Svati Shah insightfully suggests) what women themselves are saying about their lives**;** 5) an overarching take-away seems to be that except for a few sectors which remain the stronghold of the upper castes and classes, whatever the experience or context of labour, neoliberal polices and resultant transformations in society have worsened things for women across the board, driving their lives into further precarity, violence and impoverishment.

Women in the Worlds of Labour does the much-needed work of bringing together a host of critical voices on women's work in India.

[1] . Barbara Taylor, *Eve and the New Jerusalem: Socialism and Feminism in the Nineteenth Century* (London: Virago, 1983).
[2] . Silvia Federici, *Caliban and the Witch: Women, the Body and Primitive Accumulation* (New York: Autonomedia, 2004).
[3] . Brahma Prakash, *Cultural Labour: Conceptualizing 'Folk Performance' in India* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2019).

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