

Nirmala Banerjee (ed.), *Indian Women in a Changing Industrial Scenario*, Indo-Dutch Studies on Development Alternatives—5, Sage Publications Pvt. Ltd., New Delhi, 1991, pp. 319, Rs. 250.

The Indo-Dutch Programme on Alternatives in Development (IDAP) was launched jointly by the Indian Council of Social Science Research, New Delhi and the Institute of Social Science Research in Developing Countries, The Hague, in 1980, for the furtherance of development research. A component of the programme, comprising four research projects relating to women's issues in development, forms the basis of this book, together with the editor's Introduction and Conclusion which present the theoretical frame and a discussion of the findings of the separate studies. Its title indicates the editor's primary concern, namely, the experience of Indian women workers in the new and expanding industries of the 80s; or to phrase it academically, the relationship between gender and socio-economic as, also, technological change.

Past research has already confirmed that India too discloses certain features of women industrial workers found in most industrially developed and industrialising societies: that they work for lower wages; that female hired labour is much less frequently found as regular workers than male hired labour, i.e., they are more often transient or casual or part-time or piece-rated workers; and that the prevailing patterns of gender-typing of tasks and work severely curtail industrial

opportunities for women. Much of this research has been cast in the "more"/"less" designs meant to compare the phenomenon of women's experience in industry with that of men. Valuable as these pioneering studies have been in locating the precise indices of gender inequality in industrial work, they have left unanswered several questions bearing on the trends of change, *if any*, which rest on industrial modernisation, diversification and growth, and on the nature of the social forces which sustain male power over women, despite the increasing vulnerability of both in the industrial labour markets of present-day economies.

In this context, the collection edited by Nirmala Banerjee is very welcome as it raises these ordinarily unasked questions, and takes the reader along in the search for some answers. Its importance lies less in the individual cases dealt with, although these in themselves are interesting, i.e., the new *growth* industries—textiles, electronics, garments, frozen prawns, silk yarn, leather garments and accessories, electric fans—than in the book's movement towards a *perspective* in which to place the insights of the many studies now available on women, work and industry. Such a data-based perspective is not simply useful, it is essential for the appraisal of the gains (or otherwise) of women workers in the evolving Indian industrial and social structure, and for an examination of the gender dimension of the dynamic of technology in industries intended for bigger domestic and export markets. Instead of being limited to mechanistic

comparisons of the costs and rewards of recent Indian development to male and female hired labour, and using static categories of industrial and patriarchal hierarchies with which to explain them, the research methodology of these IDAP studies takes in a wider range of societal and global phenomena : the nature of the economic, political and social calculations (of the mainly male policy-makers, entrepreneurs, supervisors and trade union leaders), which rarely redistribute resource and power to serve the interests of women ; regional variations ; the (re)constitution of the gender division of labour in the newly growing industrial activities ; the implications of the recent restructuring of the so-called international division of labour : the operation of prior social programming, experience and perceptions in the elimination of discrimination ; and the place of social autonomy in the formation of *women* as social entities.

The four papers provide numerous specific insights on the woman's world of work in certain "women-prone" industries, to which the development perspective sought for by the book, lends coherence. Take recruitment. The growth of garment exports in a scenario of the general insecurity of markets for the Delhi garment industry, which is being helped by subsidies, splitting of production units, etc., saw the entrepreneurs' preferences in female labour recruitment shifting, in the face of fluctuating world market demands, to the younger, more docile, unmarried women with little education (Vijay Rukmini Rao and Sabha Hussain). In Maharashtra's highly industrialised Thane and Pune areas, however, where the more advanced, established production sectors of the garments and electronic industries also show a noticeable concentration of women workers, the demand for

female labour was found to be linked to a conjunction of three main sociological factors : the high skill levels of the women, their acceptance of lower wages due to family considerations, and their weak involvement in trade union activity (Kumud Pore). The third study (Isha Baud), situated in Tamil Nadu and concerned with decision-making structures, indicates that there is no linear relationship between the social influence of women industrial workers and the technical levels prevailing in the textile industry. In the family/household type of production organisation in the handloom sector, it is the family strategies of control over the family's income which tend to keep women as *unpaid family workers*. Equally, in the large scale mills, where production follows technical change, the increasing segregation of women in mainly one function (reeling and winding), and the decreasing percentage of women to all workers in the mills, have a negative effect, due, also, to trade union mobilisation being geared, as earlier, to male workers. It is only in the expanding small scale powerloom sector, where the division of labour is fairly equal between men and women, and women serve as both wage and family workers, that the margin of autonomous decision-making is increasing for certain categories among them : typically, married women, working as wage labour, with access to more than one job function. Nor do the five women-prone, increasingly "outward oriented" industries of West Bengal, engaged in the officially termed "non-traditional export items" (frozen prawns, garments, silk yarn, leather products, electric fans), show evidence of technological upgradation, organisational expansion and managerial improvements, which might potentially act for greater societal equity for women (Nirmala Banerjee).

Taken together, these findings suggest the conclusion that as far as women's gains from industrial development is concerned (as to recruitment, job security, remuneration, skill enhancement, union protection), it is the *kind* of development which matters, the degree of economic uncertainty with which it is fraught, its modalities, and the social, attitudinal and ideological bases on which it rests. The competition faced by the exporting units appears, in fact, to have prompted the entrepreneurs to keep down the levels of fixed investment in the producing units, and the wage rates low. Overall, these studies point to the necessity of understanding the *current* business conditions for the reproduction (or displacement) of gender-based discrimination in industrial work, and not the tradition of the gender division of labour or its differential

supply alone. They are essential reading, therefore, for the researcher, policymaker and activist on women's issues,

While the implication of the gender-structured pathways of Indian development and world economic trends have yet to be examined through more research and tested on the ground, and the explanations of the development process remain tentative and in need of theoretical elaboration, the book shows considerable work-in-progress in the attainment of a fresh feminist perspective on the course of Indian industrialisation.

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