Redefining Exploitation: Self-Employed Workers’ Movements in India’s Garments and Trash Collection Industries

Rina Agarwala
Johns Hopkins University

Abstract

This article examines how self-employed workers are organizing in the garments and waste collection industries in India. Although the question of who is profiting from self-employed workers’ labor is complex, the cases outlined in this paper highlight telling instances of how some self-employed workers are organizing as workers. They are fighting labor exploitation by redefining the concept to include additional exploitation axes (from the state and middle class) and forms (including sexual). In doing so, they are redefining potential solutions, including identities and material benefits, to fit their unique needs. By expanding the category of “workers” beyond those defined by a narrow focus on a standard employer-employee relationship, these movements are also fighting exclusion from earlier labor protections by increasing the number of entitled beneficiaries. These struggles provide an important corrective to contemporary analyses of labor politics that focus too heavily on the precarious nature of employer-employee relationships and too little on broader definitions of work, exploitation, and protection. These broader definitions better represent the world’s mass of vulnerable workers and are being articulated from below.

Since the turn of the twentieth century, the world’s workers have struggled to institute a social contract to regulate working conditions, mitigate exploitation, and protect workers’ dignity. While the resulting social contracts varied across countries, they shared a commitment to formally recognizing labor, holding states responsible for enforcement, and ensuring that capital decommodifies productive and reproductive labor through minimum wages, job security, work contracts, health care, and old-age benefits. Despite these impressive strides, the vast majority of the world’s workers throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries have worked in continued precariousness without protection from the employer or the state.

Part of the reason for this stark omission is that labor appropriation, or the relationship of exploitation, was defined by a narrow conceptualization of a formal employer-employee relationship. To avoid labor regulations against exploitation, capital merely complicated, and thus hid, the employer-employee relationship in two ways. First, capital hired “contract” or “casual” workers, who are directly involved in capitalist production but are hired through subcontractors to avoid visibility, regulation, and protection. Contract workers’ principal employers can be small, unregulated enterprises or formally registered companies, such as...
Honda or Levi’s. Contract workers work in their homes, unregulated work sheds, or on the factory floor next to formal workers.

Second, capital relied on “self-employed” workers. Self-employed workers are owners of small, unregulated businesses that provide cheap inputs for capital production (such as auto parts, transport, or products manufactured on order) and goods and services to middle- and upper-class capital owners (such as cleaning, elderly care, gardening, and waste collection) as well as to low-wage workers (such as food, clothing, and haircuts). Many countries define “formal” employment by enterprise size, thereby excluding from labor protection self-employed workers (who by definition own small enterprises) and workers in small enterprises. In contexts where contract workers are protected under law, employers avoid regulation by claiming they “buy” their finished products from a self-employed worker, rather than a hired contract worker, though the product is ordered and designed by the employer. In these cases, self-employed workers resemble mislabeled contract workers. Self-employed workers work in their own homes, employers’ homes, or in public spaces, such as the street.

Together, these two groups of workers (contract and self-employed) are referred to as “informal” or “precarious” workers. Portes, Castells, and Benton famously defined informal workers as those workers engaged in producing and providing legal goods and services but who nevertheless operate outside labor, health, and financial regulation. Drawing on my findings of informal workers’ organizing efforts in India, I qualify this definition to specify that informal workers are those not regulated or protected under labor laws based on a standard employer-employee relationship.

By hiding the employer-employee relationship through contract labor and self-employment, capital has long avoided twentieth-century labor regulations for the majority of its workforce, thereby enabling it to continue exploiting a mass, cheap, and flexible labor force to subsidize the protected “formal” minority of workers. As a result, informal workers have constituted a structural contribution to contemporary capitalist accumulation, especially in the Global South. All the while, they have been excluded from twentieth-century social contracts designed to protect the proletariat.

Despite predictions of eventual decline, informal workers’ relative workforce has grown in recent decades, even in the Global North. More importantly, labor’s power to protect itself against appropriation has weakened. Under the ideological pressures of “neoliberalism” and “globalization,” states have deregulated markets and absolved capital of responsibility for labor’s welfare—yet often without assuming that responsibility themselves. States have overtly sanctioned unprotected informal or precarious work, despite its operations outside law.

But is labor’s crisis permanent? History has shown that such crises wax and wane. Karl Polanyi famously asserted that the pendulum of deregulation and decommodification swings back and forth as labor reasserts its rights against capital’s onslaught. Karl Marx astutely highlighted how capitalism’s contradictory social relations always yield working class struggles. So if we use history as
our guide, we should expect labor to reinvent itself and assert a new twenty-first-century social contract. How will labor organize in the twenty-first century? What will the new social contract look like?

In India, I have argued elsewhere that despite assertions that informal production structures prevent organization, informal workers are organizing to defend their humanity. Informal workers’ organizing efforts in India share several characteristics with those emerging in Mexico, South Korea, and the United States. A striking feature of informal workers’ recent movements is that they include diverse employment relationships—including contract workers and self-employed workers. In doing so, informal workers’ movements are broadening the terms of “exploitation” and thus undermining capital’s ability to avoid twentieth-century labor regulations through hidden employer-employee relationships. Questions remain, however, on how these movements’ goals and strategies vary across different employment relationships.

While in my book Informal Labor, Formal Politics I outlined how Indian contract workers are organizing, in this article, I examine how India’s self-employed workers are organizing as workers to fight labor exploitation. Contract workers, especially those operating in formally registered companies, are more easily acknowledged as members of the “proletariat.” After all, despite the chains of subcontractors designed to hide the employer-employee relationship, an employer is ultimately profiting from contract workers’ labor. Self-employment, however, lacks a clear employer-employee relationship, and the question of who is profiting (if anyone) from workers’ labor is complex. That Indian self-employed workers have chosen to organize alongside contract workers, therefore, is striking and hints toward a push from below to fight (1) labor exploitation by redefining “labor exploitation” in the twenty-first century, and (2) exclusion from twentieth-century labor protections by increasing the number of entitled beneficiaries relative to earlier formal workers’ movements.

Self-employed workers have long featured in development scholarship and policy and have recently been resurrected as a solution to underdevelopment. In the early 1970s, Keith Hart drew on Accra fieldwork to highlight how urban migrants who were not absorbed into formal employment generated alternative income sources through self-employment. Shortly thereafter, the International Labor Organization (ILO) incorporated urban self-employed workers into its poverty-alleviation programs. In the late 1980s, self-employed workers re-emerged in the development literature as a beacon of hope for modern, unfettered markets. Using data on Lima, Hernando De Soto famously argued that self-employment enables workers to avoid governments’ mercantilist regulations, which he depicted as rent-seeking mechanisms for Latin America bureaucracies and ruling classes. By the late 1990s, the World Bank had reversed its exclusive focus on formal workers and joined the ILO in promoting self-employment as a beneficial option for those squeezed out of formal labor markets.

Despite the attention given to self-employed workers in the development field, however, their politics and their relations with the state, capital, and the formal proletariat continue to be ignored. Oftentimes, self-employed workers
are assumed to represent a “latent surplus population” that has not yet been fully proletarianized. Scholars assume they cannot organize as a class, because they operate outside state regulation and are their own employers. Yet, studies have shown that self-employed workers preform a critical linking function between the formal and informal economies. Therefore, self-employed workers hold structural power vis-à-vis capital and states that support capital accumulation, and we should expect them to draw on this power to organize.

The data in this paper draw from thirty in-depth, semistructured interviews with leaders and members of seven self-employed workers’ organizations across two Indian industries: domestic garment manufacturing, which is home-based, and recycling/waste collection, which takes place in public streets. These are supplemented by interviews with Indian government officials and labor scholars and a literature review of Indian government documents and secondary sources. Informal labor is endemic in India, amounting to ninety-three percent of total workers and eighty-two percent of nonagricultural workers. Self-employed workers comprise forty-five percent of the nonagricultural labor force and fifty-four percent of that workforce’s informal portion. India’s home-based workforce is estimated at sixteen percent of all workers. India’s domestic garment manufacturing and waste collection industries are labor-intensive and employ a majority of low-paid self-employed workers. Workers in both industries represent vulnerable social groups. Garment and recycling enterprises employ a majority of women workers. In many regions, garments comprise primarily of Muslim workers (a religious minority), and waste collection comprises of Dalit workers (members of the lowest rung of India’s caste hierarchy). Despite these conditions, workers in these two industries have been organizing since the 1970s (garments) and 1990s (waste collection).

In the following sections, I argue that self-employed workers are redefining the concept of “exploitation” by expanding the category of “workers” to move past a narrow focus on a formal employer-employee relationship. By redefining the problem to include additional exploitation axes (such as state-worker and middleclass citizen-worker) and forms of exploitation (such as sexual), these workers are also redefining potential solutions and manipulating the terms of material benefits (such as welfare and wages) to fit the unique needs of self-employment. While most of these struggles are taking place among individual self-employed workers, some are forming bridges with subcontractors and self-employed buyers, further underlining the attempt to use the blurred employer-employee relationship to workers’ advantage. These struggles offer both continuities and alternatives to twentieth-century labor movements. As with traditional formal workers’ unions, self-employed workers’ unions empower and educate workers to fight for their right to dignified work. Unlike formal workers’ unions, however, they do not fight to formalize the employer-employee relationship. Rather, they fight to improve work and livelihood conditions for workers within their informal and precarious labor status. This strategy suggests important implications for the contours of an emerging twenty-first century contract.
Self-employed workers’ movements provide an important corrective to contemporary analyses of labor politics that focus too heavily on the precarious nature of employer-employee relationships and too little on broader definitions of work, exploitation, and protection. These broader definitions better represent the world’s mass of vulnerable workers, and they are being articulated from below. In the conclusion, I compare these findings on self-employed workers to my earlier findings on contract workers’ organizations in India’s tobacco and construction industries to offer a hypothesis on contemporary informal workers’ movements in India, which may nudge us closer toward a global understanding of workers’ struggles in the twenty-first century.

Evolving Structures of Production (1900–1980s)

The evolving structures of production in garment manufacturing and waste collection spurred self-employed workers to reinvent their organizing strategies. Like many industries in India and elsewhere, textiles/garments manufacturing and waste collection have long relied on an unrecognized and unorganized informal workforce. Unlike in many Indian industries, however, domestic garment manufacturing and waste collection do not illustrate a shift in production structure from colonialism to Fabian socialism/Keynesianism to neoliberalism, and thus a return to an earlier era of labor exploitation. Rather, they represent a new space of value addition that has arisen largely due to neoliberalism. Informal employment in these two industries did not grow as an avenue to directly undermine existing formal workers’. Rather, home-based self-employment in garments grew as a function of the demise of state-sponsored textile mills and the growth of a new, private sector: the ready-made garments industry. In waste collection, the movement to turn waste to energy has fuelled the growth of private waste collection companies, which are ironically threatening to displace self-employed workers. Not surprisingly, these differing trends in production structures under neoliberalism have shaped the contours of self-employed workers’ movements in ways that differ from earlier formal workers’ movements.

Textiles/Garments Manufacturing

India’s textile industry was essential to the colonial economy, and it remained an engine of industrialization after independence in 1947. Although the industry was touted as a symbol of India’s modernization, its growth always relied on subcontracting and home-based work. During the colonial era, Indian textile mills were labor-intensive and notorious for little capital investment. Production was export-oriented, intensely competitive and based on short-term demands. As a result, the industry relied on a large informal workforce that had little protection and regulation. In 1928, when the textile industry faced an economic crisis due to overproduction, Japanese competition, and limited investment from the colonial state, N. M. Joshi and R. K. Bakhle organized the communist-party-affiliated Girni Kamgar Union (Mumbai Textile Labor...
Union) to fight for increased wages and formal protections. Between 1929 and 1940, the union led eight general strikes and hundreds of smaller strikes. During the first half of the twentieth century, *Girni Kamgar*, alongside other large politically affiliated Indian unions, attained formal regulations and protections for India’s industrial workers under law.19

After independence, workers in Indian textile mills were entitled to formal protections. As well, they operated under a new economic model of import-substituting industrialization (ISI), an emphasis on self-sufficiency and industrial employment, and a state that owned essential industries and regulated all industries. Capital was thus protected from foreign competition and heavily subsidized by the state. Until 1982, state entities, such as the Industrial Finance Corporation of India (IFCI), Industrial Credit and Investment Corporation of India (ICICI), and the Industrial Development Bank of India (IDBI), gave fifty-six percent of their soft loans to textile mills.20

Nevertheless, urban textile mill production declined after independence, falling from seventy-nine percent of cloth in 1951 to forty-eight percent in 1987, and so too did formal labor’s victories. Some argue the state’s refusal to import capital undermined textile mill development.21 Capital constraints, combined with the increased costs from formal mill workers’ victories, spurred capital to replace mill production with power looms in small-sector establishments that operate in extralegal spaces and rely on unregulated, informal labor.22 For decades, power looms produced, dyed, finished, and printed cloth as subcontractors for mills; today they do so for the ready-made garment factories. Between 1956 and 1974, small-scale, unregulated power looms’ share (as a percentage of productive units) in Bombay increased from twenty-three percent to ninety percent.23

In the 1980s, India began liberalization efforts, delicensing and deregulating mills, enabling cloth exports, increasing credit to mill owners, and allowing mills to import technology and machinery under the 1985 National Policy on Textiles.24 Total employment in the textile sector expanded twenty-five percent during the 1980s. Most of this growth came from informal employment in the unregistered power loom sector; regulated, formal employment declined.25 The power loom sector’s sustained growth is often credited for undermining the historic 1982 Bombay textile workers strike, led by the *Girni Kamgar* Union. The strike involved 240,000 workers, lasted eighteen months, represents the largest and longest strike in Indian history, and ended with the closing of India’s largest textile mills.

In recent years, the textile and garment industry’s reliance on informal work has been amplified by a return to export-oriented production, thereby further undermining textile unions among formal workers. In 1991, India institutionalized its version of neoliberal reforms—furthering state deregulation of industry, increasing privatization, and opening its borders to global markets.26 By this time, textile mill production was low, and garment factories for ready-made clothes were emerging outside city centers. By 2001, garments contributed four percent of India’s GDP and twenty percent of its industrial output.
Employment in the garment industry remains largely informal. In 2001, garment manufacturers officially employed thirty-eight million people in India. However, this figure underestimates total employment (especially among women), since it omits informal work conducted in subcontractors’ workshops or at home, which some estimate to comprise 88.7 percent of garment workers.

As a result of these policies, Indian textile/garment labor now operates in two settings: factories that produce garments for export and homes where workers produce garments for domestic markets. This article focuses on the organizations emerging among the latter group, since those have been the most prevalent to date. Organization in the export garment sector is still in its infant stages.

Export factories represent a production structure shift often attributed to neoliberalism, where a majority of workers are informal. Interestingly, the unique institutional structure in which export garment factories operate has ensured that both formal and informal workers are denied their basic rights. Export factories operate in self-contained settings (such as industrial estates and townships, theme parks, new economic hubs, and special economic zones [SEZs]) designed to attract investors by offering advanced infrastructure, as well as exemptions on taxes and duties, license requirements, import/export restrictions, and foreign direct investment rules. Many began in the late 1980s with government land donations, and they have grown in number since the 2000s. While the factories are Indian-owned, they operate at the low end of a buyer-driven commodity chain, where production quantity, form, and quality are determined by foreign buyers (i.e., retailers).

Although all labor laws technically apply to these settings, enforcement is notoriously weak. SEZs have been given “public utility status,” which means strikes are limited and litigation is discouraged. In some SEZs, the labor minister does not have jurisdiction and all labor laws are enforced by the customs officer or the SEZ development commissioner. Rakesh Kumar, deputy development commissioner of NOIDA’s SEZ (NSEZ) stated:

We act as the Labor Commissioner for NSEZ, so all labor disputes come to us, and we serve as the mediator. It’s a single window method of dealing with everything at once. That is what makes the SEZ attractive [to investors]. Wednesday is my labor day, where I listen to all labor problems. They don’t get payment on time or they are fired without notice. I talk to management, and then they fix the problem. But sometimes leaders of small unions form, and they are immediately taken out of work. Although SEZ workers are legally entitled to their right to organize, Kumar was candid about SEZ workers’ inability to organize in practice. Kumar also acknowledged that SEZs subcontract work outside the factories, but only factory workers approach him with complaints—thereby reconfirming home-based contract workers’ invisibility and vulnerability.

The swelling informal workforce in Indian garments, who are not only scattered by work structure, but also by residence, has neutered most formal
workers’ politically affiliated textile unions. Mohammed Isha, president of the CITU-affiliated Readymade Garments Union in Delhi explained, “In 2011, the garments industry faced a major crisis, and the Delhi-companies closed. The companies split into smaller units and employed home-based workers and moved out of Delhi to places that have much lower minimum wages than us. To be honest, we are having trouble forming unions anymore.”

Rajender Dhar, Delhi’s additional labor commissioner reiterated, “Employment is down in Delhi, so strikes are also down.” In other words, workers’ bargaining power is viewed as arising from their legal right to strike (a right reserved only for formal workers), and capital flight is seen as negating workers’ power. Although these unions do not resist the export-orientation turn, they address exploitation through a traditional employer-employee relationship, holding employers responsible for workplace benefits, such as minimum wages, pensions, permanent contracts, and the eradication of subcontractors. They have had mixed success. These unions reported formal workers are routinely obstructed from organizing, and denied overtime pay, leave, appointment letters, minimum wages, timely payment, and pension and insurance contributions. The most common complaint is that employers terminate employment without warning or cause.

Very few textile/garments unions have tried to incorporate the massive informal work base, which includes contract workers who operate on the factory premises and in subcontractors’ workshops, as well as self-employed workers who work for piece-rates. AITUC, a union federation affiliated to the Communist Party of India (CPI), has tried to organize informal and formal workers in export garment factories, and a few independent unions have also emerged; but these efforts are fairly recent. Contract workers are said to be the most exploited workers in garments. They tend to be women; they tend to be first- and second-generation rural-to-urban migrants; the number of Dalits and minorities (such as Muslims or tribal members) among them is disproportionately higher than the national level; and most are semiliterate or illiterate. Delhi Additional Labour Commissioner Rajender Dhar explained:

95% of our complaints come from unskilled contract workers. The temporary nature of the export business means employers have to outsource work to contractors, and they lack supervision. Without prosecutions, employers will violate laws. This is the nasty side of humans. Enforcement is the mother of social entitlements.

Domestic Market

In addition to export-oriented garment factories, many contemporary Indian garment workers produce for the domestic market. These workers are entirely informal, predominantly female, and operate from their homes or unregistered worksheds. Some operate on a contract basis for unregistered, unregulated “micro-factories,” while most operate as self-employed workers on a piece-rate basis directly or indirectly for a wholesale or retail shop. These workers
represent a “new” group that emerged under neoliberalism. In the mid-1970s, women often worked as self-employed workers collecting cloth scraps from textile mills and making cheap dresses or quilts for sale in local markets. When the mills closed, however, the mill managers became the owners of local wholesale and retail ready-made garment shops. Although these shops hired women to produce ready-made garments in their homes, they labeled these workers as “self-employed.” Workers are given cut cloth by the shop owner, but they must buy/rent their own sewing machine and tools (including scissors and thread). The relationship between workers, subcontractors, and shop owners is complicated by the fact that they all reside in the same neighborhood, are often related, and are always part of the same community and kinship network. Because production is home-based, neighborhoods specialize in different types of clothing. Unlike the export garments industry, self-employed workers in domestic garments began launching alternative organizing models as early as the 1970s.

Recycling/Waste Collection

Like domestic garment production, recycling and waste collection represents a new area of value creation in modern capitalist economies, and its growth can be attributed to the forces of liberalization and privatization. For decades wastepickers (also known as scavengers, recyclers, and waste collectors) have operated in the Global South as splintered, self-employed workers who subsisted by collecting waste from streets and public dumps and reselling it to buyers, who earned marginally higher incomes but also operated as precarious self-employed workers. The majority of wastepickers and buyers comprised recent rural migrants and slum dwellers. With modernization efforts in the postindependence era came a belief that trash collection should be municipal corporations’ responsibility. In many Indian cities, corporations established trash collection schemes and hired formal municipal employees, while continuing to rely on unrecognized and unpaid self-employed workers who operated on the margins. In some cities, municipal corporations also hired informal contract workers for trash collection. These shifts restricted access to waste. Self-employed waste collectors, therefore, began operating in stealth—collecting waste in landfills, industrial areas, and even municipal garbage containers and thus increasing their exposure to police harassment.

While some politically affiliated unions organized formal, municipal waste collectors in the early twentieth century, these efforts were small and localized. Moreover, as in manufacturing, these efforts omitted informal workers; self-employed waste collectors and buyers remained invisible, unrecognized, and unorganized.

With the rise in privatization during the 1980s and the push for converting waste to energy in the 2000s, recycling and waste collection became a lucrative area of profit generation. As a result, self-employed waste collectors found themselves being displaced as municipal corporations contracted waste
collection to private companies; the number of self-employed waste buyers and scrap dealers also increased. In this process, waste became private property, further denying self-employed waste collectors their means of livelihood and production. As a result, self-employed waste collectors and buyers were not only invisible, they were becoming increasingly unemployed. In this context, waste collectors launched a fascinating set of alternative movements beginning in the 1990s.

**Discursive Benefits: Redefining “The Worker”**

Despite the differences in these industries’ histories and production structures, a striking consistency appears in their movements today—that is, the primary effort to attain recognition as workers, even within a self-employment status. Interestingly, self-employed workers’ politics of recognition echoes that of contract workers. As illustrated above, for decades both sectors’ formal labor movements excluded self-employed workers. Because they lacked a direct employer who was profiting off their labor value, self-employed workers were not recognized as “workers” by formal workers, the state, employers, or even themselves. Although some have argued that invisibility affords power (such as avoiding taxes), I argue here that the costs are greater. Specifically, the lack of formal recognition undermines self-employed workers’ dignity and robs them of a platform on which to demand rights to legal protection.

To organize self-employed workers, therefore, unions in garments and waste collection spoke about the primary importance of redefining their members as “workers” without altering their employment status. In doing so, they aim to shift self-employed workers from being viewed as economic outcasts or “surplus populations” to integrated, visible members of the economy—subject to exploitation and thus entitled to protection. This strategy’s most important implication, I argue, is the redefinition of exploitation to include a broader set of relations than simply the employer-employee relationship. Highlighting additional axes of exploitation (such as state-worker and citizen-worker) enables informal workers’ organizations to fight for worker protection within informal employment relationships. In both industries, these efforts have been operationalized through struggles to attain state-sanctioned worker identity cards, even absent employer recognition. Union members in both industries now hold state-sanctioned worker identity cards, which bear several implications.

First, state-sanctioned, informal worker identity cards give self-employed workers empowerment and dignity, especially against police harassment. In doing so, the cards highlight an additional relationship of labor exploitation beyond the employer-employee relationship—that is, the state-worker relationship. Self-employed workers who operate in public spaces are especially vulnerable to police demands for bribes. Wastepickers, for example, complained that police officers would accuse them of stealing waste and recyclables. Whenever robberies occurred in the neighborhood, wastepickers were the first accused
and questioned. Workers said police officers regularly beat, interrogated, and threatened them with arrest. To retain their livelihoods, wastepickers paid bribes out of already low earnings. These bribes constitute a form of labor exploitation, where individual police officers directly profit from informal workers’ labor value.

In addition to protecting informal workers from labor exploitation by the state, identity cards protect women workers against sexual exploitation by the state. Many interviewees complained of sexual harassment from police officers and noted they use identity cards to inform police that there is “an employer” behind them and an organization backing them. Individual identity cards are irrationally used to connect atomized informal workers to an empowered, collective force against local state officials. Among wastepickers, this strategy has been so effective that union leaders reported a near absence of reports of police harassment among members. Organizing around police harassment also served as a powerful mobilization tool. In 1993, an innovative union of wastepickers, called Kagad Kach Patra Kashtakari Panchayat (KKPKP), was launched in the Indian city of Pune. As KKPKP General Secretary Lakshmi Naryan explained, “A typical organizing lesson we learned [was] ... you just need one cop to brutalize one wastepicker for a hundred to stand by her ... So we started organizing around issues we felt the wastepickers were completely capable of articulating for themselves ... so we focused much more on harassment from police.”

Second, the struggle for identity cards has explicitly folded self-employed workers into the “proletariat” by exposing the indirect, often invisible, profits that the state and middle class citizens make off self-employed workers’ labor value. Although self-employed workers are highlighting different axes of exploitation than formal workers, they are drawing on similar sources of structural power.

In the case of wastepickers, citizens and municipalities have long benefitted from self-employed trash collectors’ services without directly paying for these services or employing these workers. To expose these relations and attain recognition for this invisible work, KKPKP registered as a membership-based union where members pay an annual fee. The union’s first organizing initiative was to attain identity cards from the municipality. As Manisha Desai, the outreach manager for SWaCH, the wastepickers’ cooperative affiliated to KKPKP, noted, “KKPKP was formed with the objective of organizing wastepickers around issues of identity ... Identity involved recognizing wastepickers in the work that they do. So the first struggle was to get identity cards endorsed by the municipality.” KKPKP General Secretary Lakshmi Narayan stated,

The decision to register as a trade union was done specifically to legitimize waste picking as work in both the eyes of the wastepickers and everyone else. Before the union, this was not seen as work. So again, the trade union was a very conscious decision ... to establish this as an occupation, it’s a profession, and needs various things that one would argue occupations need.
Today KKPKP has more than 9000 members. Eighty percent of the members are of the lowest caste, and seventy percent are women.

As Maitreyi Shankar, KKPKP Union Treasurer explained, a key strategy that KKPKP used to convince the municipal government to officially recognize wastepickers as workers was to expose how much money self-employed wastepickers save the governments:

Identity cards … came as a demand from the workers. It was pretty pointless to have a union identity card … It didn’t carry any value to any government official. We said that wastepickers are reducing the burden of solid waste management, and therefore they need to have a card that is endorsed by the municipal corporation. The municipal corporation said, ‘great give them cards, we have no problem with it.’ But that showed that they weren’t really owning the whole process or not really recognizing wastepickers in any way. So it [the victory] was actually in ’95 when identity cards started being signed by the municipal corporation.46

In other words, self-employed wastepickers viewed a state signature on their worker identity cards as formal state recognition of their work. With the state signature, and thus state recognition, the organization could then fight for a framework of workers’ rights.

KKPKP has also launched innovative programs to educate citizen populations about self-employed trash collectors. As Aparna Susarla, the data manager and director of the Green Schools Programme in SWaCH, said:

In our education system, where I studied environmental science, I was never taught there are wastepickers, that there is a livelihood associated with waste. I always knew waste management in terms of composting, landfills, incineration … in our Green Schools Programme … a wastepicker will come to the school, talk about waste management in the city … this bridges that gap between students and waste-pickers to bring in the dignity of labor. Still you see wastepicking as a demeaning job and you don’t want to respect it. It should be the other way around. People clean what you’ve made dirty, so you should respect them more.47

As Aparna illustrates, self-employed workers’ struggle to be identified as a “worker,” despite the absence of an employer, is a struggle for recognition and dignity from the beneficiaries of their labor (i.e., the state and citizens).

Similarly, in the case of garments, the Indian state has indirectly profited from garment workers’ production without acknowledging the role they play. The garment industry is often viewed as constituting a small share of total exports (less than ten percent). Less acknowledged, however, is the fact that garments constitute thirty percent of export earnings, indicating the high-value-added component of the industry.48

Unlike unions organizing export garment workers, unions organizing self-employed garment workers producing for the domestic market have fought to transcend this invisibility through identity cards. In 2009, the Self-Employed
Women’s Association (SEWA), one of India’s largest and oldest unions for informal workers, attained identity cards from the state government for all home-based garment sewers and headloaders (who transport garments from homes to wholesalers and retailers either on their heads or pulling handcarts). SEWA was registered as a trade union in 1972 and attained the status of a union federation in 2011. Today SEWA counts more than one million members in more than 100 trades; home-based garment workers make up four percent of SEWA members, thirteen percent of urban members, and twenty-three percent of home-based workers. In my interviews, women garment workers appeared most excited about the card, and (as with wastepickers) the perceived victory was achieving state recognition of workers’ worth through an identity card with an official state signature. “The government now knows we are workers! This was a great learning for the Labor Department,” said member Zetunben.

Mahila Kamgar Sangatan, or Women Workers Union (MKS), is another garment worker union that has fought to attain worker identity cards in India. But as Indira, a senior MKS analyst, notes, “First we have to convince women that they are workers.” In addition to convincing the state and citizens, a major part of the struggle for identity cards involves convincing informal workers of their own identity and worth. As Laxmi, an MKS organizer, explained:

Getting women to simply join the union was our first problem. We are workers! But we had to have multiple meetings to convince women that we deserve something … Even after the work we did we were told we are just servants and women. But we should get as much respect as them [formal workers].

MKS was registered as a state-level trade union in the state of Maharashtra in 2009, and its sister organization, The Labor Education and Research Network (LERN), was registered as an NGO in 1998 to examine informal worker concerns. Currently, MKS has 6,000 members in five regions of Maharashtra and a few paid staff. Its members are restricted to women informal workers. Sixty percent of the members are Muslim or from “backward castes.” Many are migrants from the south Indian city of Chennai. All members live and work in the slums; half own their own homes, and the other half rent homes.

Third, in addition to expanding workers’ exploitation relationship to include the state (especially police) and citizens, and expanding the proletariat to include the self-employed, identity cards help fold informal workers into existing state programs designed for underprivileged citizens. In other words, worker identity cards underline informal workers’ citizenship rights. Wastepickers, for example, have fought to be included as an occupational category in the Indira Gandhi National Old Age Pension Scheme, designed for “older women below the poverty line,” a health insurance scheme for “families below the poverty line,” private schools that reserve twenty-five percent of their seats for children of “low caste-members,” scholarship schemes for children of parents from “unclean occupations,” and party promises to extend generic...
drugs to “the poor.” Many of these programs require documentation (such as proof of residence or an electric bill) that wastepickers lack. The unions, therefore, lobby directly with local representatives to have the worker identity card suffice as documentation of citizenship. They send mass postcard mailings to government officials, hold mass public rallies, and march. Similarly, garment workers have used the identity card to help them attain other identity cards, such as the voter identification card and the ration card for the public food distribution system, all of which also require proof of residence. These efforts echo those of Indian tobacco and construction workers, who have used the identity card to demand water in their slums and seats for their children in local schools. Across Indian industries, identity cards not only give informal workers a state-sanctioned certification that they are indeed workers, the cards help informal workers “enter the system” so they can make further demands on the state as worthy citizens.

A common critique of informal workers’ approach is that by highlighting relations of exploitation between workers, the state, and middle-class citizens and by folding workers’ demands into citizenship demands, they are still absolving employers of responsibility toward labor’s welfare. This critique is valid. However, it is also important to note that earlier efforts to hold employers accountable, while noble, excluded the vast majority of the world’s workers. Moreover, in the case of self-employed workers who are their own employers, holding employers accountable is not a meaningful option. Informal workers’ discursive efforts, therefore, must be understood as an effort to increase the number of entitled beneficiaries relative to earlier formal workers’ movements.

**Material Benefits: Welfare Boards, Wages, Cooperatives, and Services**

In addition to building a new worker identity by redefining the terms of exploitation, self-employed workers have struggled to attain material benefits that fit the needs of their employment status. Self-employed workers’ movements have met their members’ needs by launching innovative strategies to attain welfare from the state, wages from buyers (who they redefine as “employers”), livelihood security from self-owned cooperatives, and services from their unions. Although their efforts have been broadly consistent with those of contract workers, they have enacted several unique approaches to accommodate their different work structures.

**Welfare Boards**

Like contract workers, self-employed workers in India are petitioning the state for welfare benefits to defray their social reproduction costs through support for health, education, housing and other family-related expenses. Unlike contract workers, however, self-employed workers are also demanding state welfare to defray direct production costs through provision of equipment. These efforts have had varying success. Nevertheless, they are striking. Even in the wake of state attempts to legitimate capital’s waning responsibility toward labor,
informal workers seek to pull the state into defending their livelihoods and managing nitty-gritty aspects of their private, daily lives.

Perhaps the most innovative institution that informal workers have launched in India to ensure their welfare is the welfare board. Welfare boards are designed to be tripartite institutions, implemented by the state or central government, where state governments, employers, and workers have representation and contribute funds. Employers’ contributions should come from a tax on production, while workers’ contributions come from board membership dues. To become a welfare board member, workers must prove their informal work status; unions normally educate workers about welfare boards and provide confirmation of workers’ informal status. Perhaps the most famous and longest running at the national level are those for bidi (hand-rolled cigarette) manufacture and construction. In recent years, a plethora of new boards have also begun to emerge in some states. Some are trade-based and include self-employed workers, such as garment workers and domestic workers. Others are general, aiming to provide welfare for all informal workers, under the 2008 Social Security Act for Unorganized Workers. These newer boards are even more problematic than the earlier boards in that some are no longer tri-partite, and many lack a defined funding source. Nevertheless, informal workers’ organizations, across sectors remain committed to demanding and implementing welfare boards to help consolidate informal workers’ identity, provide a forum for their concerns, and provide an institutional mechanism for the delivery of worker identity cards and benefits.

As with contract workers in tobacco manufacturing and construction, self-employed workers’ welfare boards aim to decommodify social reproduction costs by providing health-care clinics located in workers’ slums, scholarships for workers’ children, houses in women workers’ names, and grants for family weddings and funerals. In addition, however, self-employed workers’ welfare boards provide workers with equipment. In the state of Gujarat, SEWA has fought for welfare boards for self-employed, home-based garment sewers and headloaders. Garment sewers’ welfare boards offer a sewing box with scissors, a table, and other tools; Rs. 1200 for medical needs; and skills training. Although wastepickers have not yet attained a welfare board, KKPKP wastepickers have forced the municipal corporation to provide them with carts and bins to transport waste, as well as masks, gloves, slippers, and coats to legitimize their profession and protect them against hazards.

I have found that getting these welfare boards enacted and implemented constitutes a central focus among informal workers’ movements today. Interestingly, SEWA-affiliated garment workers claimed that after years of organizing, they had managed to attain proper payment of their wages from shopkeepers. “The shop-owners give us our money, and we can increase our wages more by coming together to increase our work. But we need pensions, health insurance, education scholarship, government identity cards,” said Karunisa, a home-based garment worker and long-time SEWA member. Headloaders’ main complaint is lack of access to private space (because they work in the public space of the
street). Their demands included a place to eat during work hours and a place to go to the bathroom. Their demands also include a home for the workers and their families, because many do not own a home. \(^5^8\) SEWA leaders reiterated this point. Ela Bhatt, founder of SEWA, said, “Minimum wages and these things are out. We need pensions and social security.” \(^5^9\) “Our members are receiving their wages due to our efforts. Wages are not our main problem. Our problems are different. Our members don’t have full-year employment, and we need to improve their skills,” explained Manali Shah, head of the SEWA union. \(^6^0\)

As with garment workers, wastepicker organizers noted that their primary struggle today is to attain welfare boards. \(^6^1\) After years of struggle, KKPKP wastepickers feel they have succeeded in securing a worker identity for their members and curbing police harassment. Now, however, securing their livelihood has become a primary concern. Wastepickers are increasingly denied access to waste dumps, as private companies have emerged to attain municipal waste collection contracts. Furthermore, because waste collection is subject to different city-level systems, welfare boards are viewed as the only national-level way to regulate the sector.

Despite organizations’ focus on attaining welfare boards, they are also keenly aware of their limits. At the most basic level, welfare boards are subject to all the standard limitations of government-implemented programs, including inefficiencies, corruption, and rent seeking (by state and union officials and workers). At the more structural level, welfare boards have been criticized for subsidizing capital and sanctioning severe labor exploitation with symbolic handouts. Elsewhere, I have offered a theoretical framework to explain the political-economic conditions under which contract workers’ welfare boards succeed and fail. My finding that they tend to succeed under neoliberal-populism indicates that welfare boards are at once exciting and frightening. \(^6^2\)

Given the limits of welfare boards, it is crucial to view them as an innovative part of a larger strategy for informal workers’ rights, rather than as an isolated end goal. While a deep analysis on the impact of self-employed workers’ welfare boards on material benefits is beyond the scope of this article, let me underscore here that (1) informal workers’ unions in India are fighting hard for them, and they thus deserve our attention, and (2) their impact on mobilization has been surprisingly high. Organizations expressed their focus on attaining welfare boards as a successful way to attract and mobilize the vulnerable informal workforce. As Ajit Abhyankar, president of CITU, the communist party-affiliated union federation in Pune, explained:

> This is the employment of last resort … any other job is better … So what happens is if you don’t work for this salary they will get a replacement, and then there will be in-fights [between workers]. So we decided not to give more importance to that, unless there is a serious kind of harassment from the employer. We intervene only in harassment issues, rather than in payment issues … Instead of getting in direct confrontation, let’s show that we are organizing them. That had an effect. But we concentrated more on welfare schemes and making of a law. \(^6^3\)
As Shah, head of the SEWA union, eloquently put it,

Our approach is a campaign approach. Every 3 years we decide the most important issue. We decide on a long-term campaign and a short-term one. The Welfare Board was part of our short-term campaign. Welfare Boards give members *something*, and that gives them strength to fight for more. Our motto is: Take something and fight! Take something and fight! Take something and fight!

**Wages**

In addition to fighting for welfare, self-employed workers’ organizations are launching innovative struggles to secure wages for their members. To this end, self-employed workers have redefined traditional wage negotiations along several lines.

First, they have redefined their “buyers” as “employers” and thus “fees” as “wages,” thereby exposing the hidden relationship of exploitation. In addition to directly fighting municipal corporations and private companies that hire wastepickers as contract workers, wastepicker organizations negotiate wages with consumer households. Although consumer households claim to “buy” the service of door-to-door trash collection for a “user fee,” wastepickers consistently refer to the exchange as “wages.” Wastepickers have also demanded that NGOs who have hired wastepickers to clean public toilets as a public service pay wastepickers fair and timely wages for their work, rather than categorizing them as “volunteers.” In addition to homeowners’ user fees (and, in some cases, NGO fee-for-service or wages from municipal and private subcontractors), wastepickers rely on earning money by selling waste to scrap dealers and buyers. To date, however, they have not tried to regulate the price of waste sales. This might partly be explained by the fact that waste buyers belong to the same kinship networks and unions as wastepickers, thereby complicating the negotiations, whereas citizen households, NGO leaders, and municipal officials reside in distinct social spaces from wastepickers.

Similarly, garment workers and headloaders target shop owners, who claim to “buy” the finished garment pieces or the transport service, when negotiating for what shop owners claim are “fees” and workers reclaim as “wages.” Like wastepickers, garment workers do not target subcontractors, recruiters, or middlemen due to their shared kinship networks. In 2011, SEWA’s headloaders had a major strike in one of the largest cloth markets in Ahmedabad to demand shop owners pay a revised “wage” for their transport services because the transported product had changed from loose cloth to (heavier) packed ready-made garments. Shop owners called SEWA to stop the strike and agreed to renegotiate wages. In response, SEWA held a meeting in the courtyard of the market to publicly recognize shop owners as an “employers’ association.” In a symbolic gesture, SEWA presented each shop owner with a shawl as a sign of their respect. Shah explained, “Industry workers need to work together. Currently,
different areas have different wages, depending on the relationship we create with the employers.”65 SEWA is currently mapping all the cloth shops in Ahmedabad so they can work with more shop owners and extend the same wage to other areas. SEWA also pressures shop owners to pay the same wage to all workers in a given area; for headloaders, SEWA has fought to ensure that women and men headloaders receive the same wage.

Second, self-employed workers have redefined the unit of wage negotiations. For example, SEWA does not fight for traditional minimum wages based on work time (i.e., rupees/month). Rather, they fight for minimums on a piece-rate basis (i.e., rupees/shirt made). As Shah explained, “This is how women are paid on the home basis, so this is how we should determine the minimum wage.”66 At present, SEWA works with employers/shop owners to negotiate a piece-rate minimum wage every two years. Once an agreement is reached, they report it to the state labor commissioner. While this is indeed a major improvement, SEWA is simultaneously fighting for a policy-level minimum wage that can be more universal. SEWA is not yet part of the minimum wage advisory committee at the state level, but they are at the national level.

Cooperatives and Companies

In addition to exposing the employer-employee relationship and reforming the unit of payment, self-employed workers in India have pursued a supplementary strategy to ensure their incomes: building cooperatives and private companies. Cooperatives and companies represent an important pathway through which self-employed workers secure their own livelihood while retaining self-employed status.

SEWA represents one of the earliest and most innovative attempts to combine the use of unions and cooperatives for self-employed workers. Cooperatives complement SEWA’s union efforts against employers by giving informal workers an alternative income source drawing from group-based support. Shah provided a garment-worker illustration:

For the last three years, we were not able to increase our wages. Employers couldn’t or wouldn’t do it. So we did it in another way. During the festival season, there is more work and more designs and workers get more wages. But they have to buy their own raw materials. Therefore we said they should buy the raw materials in bulk. So we registered a cooperative, a Thread Facilitation Center, where SEWA buys raw materials in bulk and sells them back to our members. We used to have two shops, but now we only have one, because our shops put pressure on the other shops to decrease their prices! So eventually we just closed ours down. Therefore, wages couldn’t increase but we did this to help our members increase their real incomes.

SEWA has created similar cooperatives in various trades, including nurseries and waste collection. “When women used to collect textile scraps from the
mills and sell them to shop-keepers [who would hire women to turn scraps into quilts and dresses], we created a *chindi* (scraps) cooperative that gave women higher rates for their scraps,” explained Shah. “Other shopkeepers were furious, and this made some women nervous. But one of our scrap-pickers, Karimaben, started the cooperative, and her brother was a shop-owner. This gave others confidence to fight. Organizing is hard, but people get confidence by seeing each other.”

In addition to its cooperative, in 2003, SEWA launched the Trade Facilitation Center (TFC), which is registered as a nonprofit company with worker shareholders. The TFC serves as a mediator between garment workers and buyers. Buyers place orders through TFC. TFC then trains workers in design and sewing; they currently employ forty stitchers who assemble the cloth in the TFC, and 100 paid staff. Many sewers are daughters of SEWA garment worker members. Additionally, TFC sends the cloth and a toolbox to rural members to complete the embroidery (a local skill-based craft). “I was working with rural women members in agriculture and animal husbandry, and their main complaint was the lack of water. This was a problem for drinking, but also for income generation. So we tried to generate income from their embroidery,” explained Savita Patel, CEO of TFC. The rural embroiderers are organized into 225 groups, totaling fifteen thousand embroiders. Today, TFC owns two retail shops in India and sells most of their products through the retail shops and during exhibitions. They also complete some orders for domestic and foreign retail brands.

Similarly, in 2008, the Pune wastepickers’ union, KKPKP, launched an innovative cooperative called SWaCH, through which they negotiated a municipal contract. In return for the designation of SWaCH as the city’s official household trash collector, SWaCH offered the municipality their services free of cost and agreed to charge the fee to users (households), thus “hiding” the employer-employee relationship. Under the Waste Management Policy of 2000, household waste not only had to be collected door-to-door, but also segregated (into wet and dry waste). By offering to do these tasks for the municipality, SWaCH secured its members’ access to waste at the point of generation.

Although the TFC and SWaCH models have been successful to date, they have been limited in reliability and scale. For example, the shift toward transforming waste to energy has made waste collection more lucrative. Therefore, private sector companies are now entering the field. Unlike SWaCH, the private companies are contracting formally with municipalities and charging the municipality directly. In return, municipal corporations are able to boast a more “modern” image, and citizens receive free trash collection services (although they are still charged in indirect ways). The private sector approach is therefore displacing self-employed wastepickers. To counter this market shift, SWaCH has launched several additional services. In addition to waste, SWaCH members collect used household goods, electronics, and clothes. As well, SWaCH has launched a new branch, SWaCH Plus, through which SWaCH members provide composting services in sixty-five housing complexes, sell compost, and provide sanitary napkin disposable bags.
In addition to scale, cooperatives and companies have presented another challenge to self-employed workers—the loss of flexibility. Although through SWaCH and TLC, workers retain their self-employed status, they are subject to strict collection/production schedules and working hours. This shift in work culture has been hard for many workers.

As with the welfare approach, the turn to cooperatives and companies by self-employed workers’ organizations has drawn sharp criticism from the traditional left, who accuse the organizations of privatizing the occupation. While organizations are aware of this risk, they challenge the critiques. Laxmi Narayan, general secretary of KKPKP, retorts by addressing self-employed workers’ structural location in the modern economy:

So why don’t you come up with a blueprint for wastepickers? Our point is that wastepickers are part of the private sector. So if you say you oppose privatization and you oppose the state having a formal relationship with wastepickers, this is fine. But are you okay with the state having an informal relationship with them, which is so much more exploitative that they have nothing to stand for? So if that’s your position, then we don’t see eye to eye.69

Service Provision

Finally, self-employed workers’ unions offer direct services to their members. First and foremost, interviewees spoke of the confidence they have received by being a member of a larger group. In addition, both SEWA and KKPKP provide loans for their members, life insurance schemes, and, in some cases, education support for members’ children.

Conclusions

In this paper, I have outlined the contours of self-employed workers’ organizing strategies across two Indian industries (domestic garments manufacturing and wastepicking) since the 1970s. Like contract workers, self-employed workers are fighting to protect themselves within their informal work status, despite their unconventional employer-employee relationships. In the process, they are redefining the concept of “labor exploitation” to accommodate additional forms of worker exploitation and employer-employee relations. By struggling to attain a state-sanctioned worker identity card, self-employed workers highlight hidden channels of labor and sexual exploitation between the state and workers, and citizens and workers. As well, they are exposing the hidden exploitation channels through which the state and citizens profit off their labor, despite the term “self-employed.” Finally, they are demanding that the state mitigate these channels of exploitation by folding their occupational categories into existing government schemes designed for “vulnerable” populations, thereby ensuring their basic citizenship rights.

In addition to engaging in a politics of recognition, self-employed workers also fight for material benefits. Like contract workers, they have demanded
welfare boards to support their social reproduction costs through health and education benefits. Unlike contract workers, self-employed workers have also fought to secure their livelihoods. To this end, they have petitioned welfare boards to cover their direct production costs by providing them with equipment. As well, they have launched self-owned cooperatives and companies to secure a semiformalized income stream. To boost their incomes, they have redefined their “buyers” as “employers” and redefined their “fees” as “wages,” which they have negotiated for directly with their “employers.” Finally, self-employed garment workers have fought to redefine the unit of wage negotiations to accommodate the system in which self-employed workers operate, fighting for a piece-rate rather than a time-based minimum wage rate.

These innovative strategies reveal an important attempt by self-employed workers to organize as a class, despite their nebulous employment relationship. Not surprisingly, these attempts are imperfect. Nevertheless they deserve our critical attention. That self-employed workers’ strategies share remarkable continuities with contract workers force us to reconsider traditional conceptualizations of workers defined by a narrow relationship of exploitation between a formally recognized employer and employee. The vast majority of the world’s workers operate outside such relations. Yet they are workers whose labor value is exploited, and they deserve and demand protection. They are not simply (or only) a surplus population, but rather the modern proletariat. Informal workers’ movements are forcing us to reconceptualize the problem of labor exploitation, and they are shedding light on potential solutions that may redefine workers’ power and social contracts in the twenty-first century.

NOTES

1. I am grateful to Ryan Nielsen for his excellent research assistance.

10. Agarwala, *Informal Labor, Formal Politics, and Dignified Discontent in India*.


19. These laws include the 1947 Industrial Disputes Act (requires large, formal, industrial establishments to obtain government permission for layoffs and closures and protects workers’ right to form associations and unions); the 1948 Factories Act (regulates factory working conditions regarding sanitation, health, and safety); the 1948 Minimum Wages Act (protects workers’ wages); the 1965 Bonus Act (guarantees bonuses to those working more than 30 days); and the 1948 Employees’ State Insurance Act, the 1956 Employees Provident Fund and Miscellaneous Provisions Act (provides workers with old-age pension and insurance in sickness, injury, maternity leave, and death).


22. Small, unregulated powerloom establishments are defined as those with less than four powerlooms, employing less than twenty workers.


25. An additional constraint on mill production at this time was the 1974 Multi-Fibre Arrangement (MFA), an international quota regime that restricted developing countries from exporting textiles, yarn, and apparel to protect developed countries’ textile industries. The MFA ended in 2005.

26. Liberalization policies affecting Indian textile/garments included the 1998 Open General License List liberalizing the import of textiles; the National 2000 Textile Policy to develop textile exports by fostering competitiveness, foreign direct investment, R&D on technological innovations, and sustaining traditional craftspeople; and the 1995 phase-out of the MFA.


30. NOIDA stands for New Okhla Industrial Development Authority, a planned city in the northern state of Uttar Pradesh and part of the National Capital Region of India.
32. Interview, January 2, 2013.
33. According to my interviews, self-employed workers in the export garment sector tend to be skilled, better compensated, and mostly men. They work seasonally, relying also on agricultural income. They are not yet organized in the unions interviewed, and government labor officers reported they do not interact with them. Due to time and resource constraints, I was unable to get further details on these workers.
34. AITUC stands for the All-India Trade Union Congress.
38. Agarwala, Informal Labor, Formal Politics, and Dignified Discontent in India.
39. The card does not qualify workers for protection under the labor laws described above.
41. Interview, August 12, 2013.
43. SWaCH stands for Solid Waste Collection and Handling. The cooperative’s official name is the SWaCH Seva Sahakari Sanstha Maryadit.
44. Interview, Manisha Desai, SWaCH outreach manager, July 29, 2013.
47. Interview, August 3, 2013.
49. A union federation is a central organization that has unions as members. SEWA is to date the only nontraditional union federation to attain this status.
51. Interview, January 19, 2013.
52. MKS stands for Mahila Kamgar Sangatatam, or Women Workers Organization.
53. Interview, January 17, 2013.
54. Interview in MKS offices, January 17, 2013.
55. Agarwala, Informal Labor, Formal Politics, and Dignified Discontent in India.
56. Ibid.
57. Interview, January 19, 2013.
58. Interview with headloader members, January 19, 2013.
60. Interview, January 20, 2013.
62. Agarwala, Informal Labor, Formal Politics, and Dignified Discontent in India.
63. Interview, Ajit Abhyankar, CITU president, Pune, August 9, 2013. CITU stands for the Centre of Indian Trade Unions and is affiliated to the Communist Party of India-Marxist (CPI-M).

64. Interview, January 20, 2013.

65. Ibid.

66. Ibid.

67. Ibid.

68. Interview, January 18, 2013.

69. Interview, August 12, 2013.