

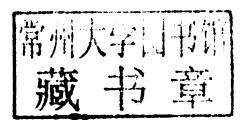
Informal Labor, Formal Politics, and Dignified Discontent in India

Rina Agarwala

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RINA AGARWALA

Johns Hopkins University





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Informal Labor, Formal Politics, and Dignified Discontent in India

Since the 1980s, the world's governments have decreased state welfare and increased the number of unprotected "informal" or "precarious" workers. As a result, more and more workers do not receive secure wages or benefits from either employers or the state. What are these workers doing to improve their livelihoods? Informal Labor, Formal Politics, and Dignified Discontent in India offers a fresh and provocative look into the alternative social movements informal workers in India are launching. It also offers a unique analysis of the conditions under which these movements succeed or fail. Drawing from 300 interviews with informal workers, government officials, and union leaders, Rina Agarwala argues that Indian informal workers are using their power as voters to demand welfare benefits (such as education, housing, and healthcare) from the state, rather than demanding traditional work benefits (such as minimum wages and job security) from employers. In addition, they are organizing at the neighborhood level, rather than on the shop floor, and appealing to "citizenship," rather than labor rights. Agarwala concludes that movements are most successful when operating under parties that compete for mass votes and support economic liberalization (even populist parties) and are least successful when operating under non-competitive electoral contexts (even those tied to communist parties).

Rina Agarwala is an assistant professor of sociology at Johns Hopkins University. She holds a BA in economics and government from Cornell University, an MPP in political and economic development from the Harvard Kennedy School of Government, and a PhD in sociology from Princeton University. Agarwala is the co-editor of Whatever Happened to Class? Reflections from South Asia (2008). She has published articles on informal work and gender in International Labor Journal, Political Science, Research in the Sociology of Work, Theory and Society, Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science, Critical Asian Studies, Social Forces, and Indian Journal of Labour Economics. She has worked on international development and gender issues at the United Nations Development Program in China, the Self-Employed Women's Association in India, and Women's World Banking in New York.

"The global rise of neoliberalism, and its increasing strength, means that whether in India or the United States, labor must develop new strategies and forms and organize new constituencies or be increasingly marginalized. As Agarwala brilliantly shows, neoliberalism weakens traditional union forms, increases the importance of informal labor, and – most importantly – creates possibilities for informal workers to act through new organizational forms that pressure the state."

- Dan Clawson, University of Massachusetts, Amherst

"This is a powerful and measured analysis of how India's informal working class makes effective citizenship claims to the state. Dispelling the myth of an inevitable decline of the labor movement in an age of alleged neo-liberalization, this fascinating India story offers an indispensable beacon of hope for working people worldwide."

- Ching Kwan Lee, University of California, Los Angeles

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Continued after the Index

For Carsten

Acknowledgments

Nearly twenty years ago, I arrived on the front door of a women's organization in India, eager to begin my internship and oblivious to the journey I was about to begin. As I entered the office, a tall woman from Kutch stared at me with a perplexed expression. "Have you come for the march for rag pickers?" she asked. In response to my blank stare, she squatted next to me to explain the march and other activities of the trade union for informal women workers that I had unknowingly come to work for. The lesson continued for the next year and a half, where the members and staff of the Self-Employed Women's Association (SEWA) patiently introduced me to the informal workers I had seen but never noticed, challenged me to think beyond the development models I had so diligently learned, and inspired me to realize the voices that women workers were asserting every day. I thank SEWA, and especially Elaben, Reemaben, and Ushaben, for changing my worldview forever.

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Abbreviations

ADMK All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam AITUC All-India Trade Union Congress (CPI-affiliated)

BJP Bharatiya Janata Party

CII Confederation of Indian Industry

CITU Congress of Indian Trade Unions (CPM-affiliated)

CPI Communist Party of India

CPI(ML) Communist Party of India (Marxist-Leninist)

CPM Communist Party of India (Marxist)

CSW College of Social Work
DK Dravidar Kazhagam

DMK Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam

GDP gross domestic product GOI Government of India

ICLS International Conference of Labor Statisticians

ILO International Labour Organisation

ILP Independent Labor Party

INC Indian National Congress Party

INTUC Indian National Trade Union Congress (Congress-affiliated)

KMC Kolkata Municipal Corporation

LPF Labour Progressive Federation (DMK-affiliated)
MLA Member of Legislative Assembly (state government)

MP Member of Parliament (national government)

NCP National Congress Party

NMPS Nirman Mazdoor Panchayat Sangam

NSS National Sample Survey on Employment and

Unemployment

xix

xx Abbreviations

NSSO National Sample Survey Organisation

OBC Other Backward Caste
PWP Peasants Workers Party
RPI Republican Party of India
SDP state domestic product

SEWA Self-Employed Women's Association

TMC All India Trinamool Congress

TMKTPS Tamil Maanila Kattida Thozilalar Panchayat Sangham

UF United Front

WBIDC West Bengal Industrial Development Corporation

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Introduction

Informal Labor and Formal Politics

"Listen sister, we are just poor folks who work to put bread in our stomachs. We can't do anything else. If we ask for more, we lose our jobs. If we lose our jobs, we will die," explained Basama, an unskilled construction worker in Mumbai, India. Basama's statement reflects a sentiment of vulnerability often heard among poor, informal workers in India. Informal workers produce legal goods and services but engage in operations that are not legally registered. Therefore, unlike formal workers, informal workers are not officially recognized by their employers, and they are not regulated or protected by fiscal, health, and labor laws.² Although some work at home or in unregistered subcontractors' workshops, others operate openly on the employers' site or in a public space (such as the street). As a result of receiving decreased protection, informal workers usually work in harsh conditions, with low levels of technology and capital, and no labor rights.

In most developing countries, informal labor – labor that is not formally protected – represents the majority of the labor force. In India, informal workers comprise 93 percent of the labor force or 82 percent

Interview, August 21, 2003.

² In recent years, these workers have been variously called "informal," "precarious," "casual," "nonstandard," "Post-Fordist," and "flexible." I use the term "informal" throughout the book. This definition of informal workers was first offered by Portes et al. (1989). It has been accepted in much of the literature on informal work; see Cross (1998), De Soto (1989), and Portes (1994). To operationalize this definition, I use the worker-based definition of informal work that was endorsed by the 17th International Conference of Labor Statisticians (ICLS) in 2003 and used by the National Sample Survey of Employment and Unemployment (NSS) in India in 1999–2000.