

# SACH

South Asian Composite Heritage

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## Unity and Dignity - Shared Struggle of World's Worker

**SHARED** struggles are important legacies which are required to be remembered so that one can take insights from them while fighting against injustices at the contemporary juncture. Collective struggles are also an important part of our Composite Heritage as they ensured an equitable society for not only one specific section but for everyone. May Day, or International Worker's Day, which is celebrated as a mark of collective struggle acknowledges the victories of the working class and the labor movement. It is an acknowledgment of historic struggles and subsequent gains which shaped the idea of a worker as well as the workplace. Mass people's movements have played an integral role in molding societies so as to ensure basic human rights and create societies based on democratic principles.

A worker's movement can be understood as a movement to improve rights and conditions of working people. Most labor movements across the world sprung against deplorable working and living conditions of exploited workers. From communist movements to anti-imperialist political praxis, all worked in tandem with the needs of that of a worker. Karl Marx's conceptualization of a proletariat grounded itself firstly in understanding the exploitation of the working class. Ambedkar, who is primarily understood as an anti-caste thinker/activist and the maker of the Indian Constitution, ensured worker's rights such as limiting the working hours to 8 and giving maternity benefits.

However, while talking about the worker's movement, it is pertinent to talk about the ways in which workers occupy formal and informal sectors. The former, more often than not, can form unions which can in turn ensure their rights. The latter however continue to occupy precarious jobs which are often fragmented, which makes it difficult for them to form unions, marginalizing them further. This is the reason why unions and workers' collective have played an important role in mobilizing workers to first recognize their exploitation and secondly to assert their rights

South Asian countries have seen mass mobilizations to secure rights of the workers and dignified working conditions. In India the history of the labor movement can be traced back to pre-independent India. A labor agitation in 1875 in Bombay is considered as one of the first movements which led to the genesis of the larger movement. In Bangladesh the struggle led by Garment Workers is the movement that was organized along the lines of unions in industrialized world.

The current issue is an amalgamation of articles which catalogue various workers movements and struggles across South Asia. The effort is to underline the importance of engaging with them so as to forge solidarities across class, occupation etc. so as to take a step forward towards a democratic society.

# The Village Blacksmith

By **Henry Wadsworth Longfellow**

Under a spreading chestnut-tree  
    'The village smithy stands;  
The smith, a mighty man is he,  
    With large and sinewy hands,  
And the muscles of his brawny arms  
    Are strong as iron bands.

His hair is crisp, and black, and long;  
    His face is like the tan;  
His brow is wet with honest sweat,  
    He earns whate'er he can,  
And looks the whole world in the face,  
    For he owes not any man.

Week in, week out, from morn till night,  
    You can hear his bellows blow;  
You can hear him swing his heavy sledge,  
    With measured beat and slow,  
Like a sexton ringing the village bell,  
    When the evening sun is low.

And children coming home from school  
    Look in at the open door;  
They love to see the flaming forge,  
    And hear the bellows roar,  
And catch the burning sparks that fly  
    Like chaff from a threshing-floor.

He goes on Sunday to the church,  
    And sits among his boys;  
He hears the parson pray and preach,  
    He hears his daughter's voice  
Singing in the village choir,  
    And it makes his heart rejoice.

It sounds to him like her mother's voice  
    Singing in Paradise!  
He needs must think of her once more,  
    How in the grave she lies;  
And with his hard, rough hand he wipes  
    A tear out of his eyes.

Toiling,—rejoicing,—sorrowing,  
    Onward through life he goes;  
Each morning sees some task begin,  
    Each evening sees it close;  
Something attempted, something done,  
    Has earned a night's repose.

Thanks, thanks to thee, my worthy friend,  
    For the lesson thou hast taught!  
Thus at the flaming forge of life  
    Our fortunes must be wrought;  
Thus on its sounding anvil shaped  
    Each burning deed and thought.

*Courtesy : [poets.org/poem](https://poets.org/poem)*

# May Day Message: Farmers and Workers Must Stay United

By **INDERJIT SINGH**, INDIA

**IT** has become necessary that the working people, while fighting to protect their livelihood and trade union and democratic rights, should also seek to protect the values of fundamental rights, social justice and secularism as enshrined in the country's Constitution.

Celebrated every year on May 1, 'May Day' is a historic festival for working people worldwide. On this day, the working class takes pride in the success of their struggles and declares with renewed energy the resolve to be free from exploitation.

Two things are noteworthy this time.

Firstly, this May Day has come against the backdrop of the unmatched victory of the peasant movement, which was achieved due to the broad unity of the peasant organisations and the solidarity of the country's working class. Secondly, today's era is very challenging for the working class and the entire humanity.

On the 75th anniversary of independence, we must remember how the Modi government has been destroying the constitutional pillars of sovereignty, democracy, secularism, social justice and the federal system during the last eight years of



its rule. To save the country from these attacks, it has become most important that the people hold their unity and social fabric, which is under attack from corporate-communal collusion.

First of all, let us consider the importance of May Day. In America, May Day, dedicated to the Chicago Martyrs of 1886, is regarded as a unique international symbol of the struggle for equality, justice and self-respect, rising above religion, race, community, region, etc.

The Chicago movement is considered historical among the workers' struggles which emerged in the 19th century around the demand for eight-hour work. On May 1, 1886, labour discontent was registered in the form of a large gathering, and millions of workers in America went on strike. Witnesses write that the way the huge convoys of 20,000 demonstrators descended on the streets, the sight was seen for the first time. A labourer was martyred that day. There were also protests against his death on May 3, when police fired on the workers, and four workers were martyred.

The next day on May 4, the police planned a violent incident. A bomb was thrown toward the police in which a policeman was killed. On this pretext, seven prominent labour leaders were prosecuted and sentenced to death in 1887. Four labour leaders were hanged, one committed suicide in prison before hanging, and two were commuted to life imprisonment.

The forgery of the trial can be gauged from the fact that in 1893, Governor John Peter acquitted the convicts of life imprisonment, saying that there was not enough evidence in the whole trial and the proceedings of the trial were not just. Regrettably, those who were killed by hanging could not return, despite the just decision of the Governor.

It cannot be said by mere coincidence

that there is a striking similarity between this case and the case of Bhagat Singh and his associates. Keep in mind that Singh and Batukeshwar Dutt threw a bomb in Parliament in protest against the Public Safety Bill. The British government introduced the Public Safety Bill to curb labour rights. On September 28, 2017, the Lahore High Court, in an unprecedented decision, certainly set an example by declaring that the execution of Bhagat Singh and his associates was not justified.

After the execution of the prominent leaders, the labour movement also suffered a setback. With the rule of eight-hour work in many places, the workers started celebrating May 1 as Labour Day worldwide.

The first May Day was celebrated in Madras in 1923 with the initiative of K. Singaravelu Chettiar, the then well-known trade union leader and freedom fighter in India. It will be a complete century in the next year, i.e. 2023.

This long journey has created such an incredible history in which the working class and the natural curiosity of human liberation have made new paths. Many countries got freedom from imperialist slavery, apartheid, monarchy, and capitalism during this period.

The socialist system has proved its superiority in every respect during this period. Success has been achieved in eradicating poverty and illiteracy. During COVID-19, especially in health, the world saw the difference between capitalism and socialism.

The celebration of May Day has never been a ritual. In the current era of neo-liberalisation, its relevance has increased even more. Today, socio-economic inequalities have taken a frightening form.

According to an Oxfam India report, India's 10 wealthiest people hold 57% of the country's total wealth, while the bottom half of the population has only 13%. The profits

of corporate houses grew enormously even when lakhs of migrant families of the country were forced to eat stumbling blocks during the lockdowns.

Rising poverty, unemployment, hunger and backbreaking inflation have created a crisis of existence for the poor sections. Society has taken science and technology to such heights that development should have been used for betterment of the people. Still, capitalism used it for its profit and threw the people out of employment.

Women workers are first shown the way out while laying off. In the states of Haryana, Delhi, Gujarat, etc., women workers have successfully fought the government's oppression in the recent past. How ironic it is that this reserve force of unemployed is also proving to be a boon for the corporate.

For capitalism, maximum profit is paramount, above the public interest. On the contrary, if society is to be taken forward in overall development, then public interest has to be kept above profit. If this does not happen, then the current all-around crisis of the system is sure to deepen even more. There should be no doubt that it is this unemployment which capitalism has been using as a boon that also ensures its inherent crisis and, ultimately, its destruction.

The policies of the ruling classes of our country are entirely dedicated to the corporates. Just as three agricultural laws were imposed, four labour codes have also been introduced by repealing many labour laws. After their implementation, the owners of the companies will be free to fire the workers at their will. The demand for eight-hour work, which was accepted centuries ago, is also being denied, and permission is being given to work for 10 and 12 hours. This will turn the workers into bonded labour.

Everyone can see how the ruling class is trying to break the unity among peasants

and workers by making them fight each other to draw their attention away from the widespread resentment. It has become necessary that the working people, while fighting to protect their livelihood and trade union and democratic rights, should also seek to protect the values of fundamental rights, social justice and secularism as enshrined in the country's Constitution. In the guise of power, a polarisation game is being played by spreading communal hatred among them. They will be able to protect their livelihood only by maintaining mutual harmony. All these are victims of corporate robbing. Corporates are making super-profits by looting both the farmer and the consumer. The gap between raw and finished goods is widening, and it is sure to tighten the noose of debt on the farmers. The backbreaking inflation and falling wages are other vivid examples of this. The country's valuable assets are being handed over to domestic and foreign companies at a penny price.

Workers, farmers, farm labourers, workers, women, students, youth and other sections will have to move towards fighting for their livelihood and saving the country by creating a broad platform. In these platforms, the class unity of labourers and farmers will also have to be prioritised. The plans of America and other imperialist countries to tighten the grip of loot on the world will have to be defeated.

Today, with this message of unity and strength, we must pay our tributes to May Day and all the martyrs of the democratic movements.

Before his execution, August Spice, a May Day martyr, said, "The voice you are stifling to silence, the time will come, that silence will prove to be more powerful than our voice."

*Courtesy : newsclick.in*

# 8-Hour Work Days, and How We Got There

By SEEMA CHISHTI, INDIA

**THE** British brought in the system of indentured labour in 1819 via the Bengal Regulations VII, which rendered workmen liable to criminal penalties for breach of contract and desertion. This set of Acts continued till 1865, when special police were used to stop workers from leaving.

Over 150 years later, amid a pandemic and an economic crisis that has rendered several jobless, as state governments such as Gujarat, UP, Madhya Pradesh and others bring in 'labour reforms' that, in some cases, have suspended almost all existing labour laws, the historical background of some of these laws provide a useful context.

For instance, the 'eight-hour working day' — an idea that is often attributed to Robert Owen, a mill owner-cum-Fabian socialist in Lancashire, who is said to have come up with it in 1817 — is closely connected to ideas about labour rights in India. Though it may seem odd now, a good deal of pressure on the British government in India was at the urging of British cotton manufacturers, who did not want Indian textiles to have a lead over them with very long working days, often 16 hours long, with women and children also employed!

But the first version of the Factories Act came in only after the Crown took charge, in 1881. Subsequent improvements were found necessary as the first one satisfied no one, neither workers nor owners.

But it was the 20th Century that ushered in big strikes, actions and an awareness of work, rights and remunerations.

Bal Gangadhar Tilak's arrest and sedition trial in 1908 sparked a series of events in then Bombay, starting with a number of Greaves, Cotton & Co mill workers putting down their tools and walking out on July 13, despite a lot of tough measures by the British government. This was not to stop and by July 23, lakhs of workers joined in.

Mahatma Gandhi's movement with indigo farmers in Champaran and the role it played in the freedom struggle is known. But equally significant was the Ahmedabad mill workers' strike to which he rushed immediately after securing a win in Champaran with the Champaran Agrarian Bill in 1918.

Fasts followed and despite a strong under-current within the Congress, which frowned upon workers' actions and was largely pro-industrialist, the working-class movement was only to intensify with the impetus that the Russian Revolution gave after 1917.

So strong was the connection between securing workers' rights and calls for freedom that labour analysts say of that time that the trade union movement coincided with the building up of tempo for freedom and Independence of India.

So much so that interlinked events



during 1917 to 1947 make it very hard to distinguish between “a purely economic struggle and a purely political struggle”.

Says trade unionist J S Majumdar, editor of the monthly *The Working Class*, “The International Labour Organisation (ILO) was established in 1919 and just a year later, India got its first central trade union with Lala Lajpat Rai at its head. Hundreds of trade unions, several unregistered, followed suit. After the first attempt by the British to control Unions through the Trade Union Act in 1926, they introduced the Trade Disputes Act in 1928 to control strikes. Bhagat Singh and his associates in 1928 threw a bomb in the Central Legislative Assembly protesting this and gave the call for ‘Inquilab Zindabad’. So the trade union and the national liberation movement were joined at the hip.”

The rights of workers to eight-hour days, guarantee of minimum wages and the right to organise were derived from a trinity of laws — the Industrial Disputes Act, the Minimum Wages Act, and the Factories Act — that came into force even before the Constitution was formalised. These laws went on to inform the Constitution and breathe life into the Directive Principles too, which mentions the promise of a decent living wage through a minimum wage.

The idea that labour had rights, and that too mediated through trade unions, had their heyday before opening up and ‘informalisation’ of the Indian economy in 1991.

S A Dange, B T Ranadive, Datta Samant, P Ramamurthy, Dattopant Thengadi came from different political stables but owed their heft to their influence among workers.

The intermeshing of politics and labour activities was clearly visible when Indira Gandhi was halted in her tracks by the All India Railwaymen Federation not letting trains run on time, eventually leading to the Emergency that led to her downfall.

The 1990s and the New Economic Policy brought a new wave of ideas into dominance and ‘contract labour’ greatly diminished the power of organised trade unions.

Says Amit Basole of the Centre for Sustainable Employment at Azim Premji University in Bengaluru, “A lot of laws had remained on paper and were beginning to be seen as arbitrary. The laws were not wrong, but there was some degree of harassment and small businesses did feel stifled, and this started poisoning ideas about labour laws themselves.”

The 21st century and the emergence of the gig economy, with inequality and asymmetry in the power equation coming to the fore again after the 2008 recession, have again steered the conversation to the precariousness of working lives.

The drive by certain states to take a “law holiday” for three years has met with some pushback.

Says Chinmay Tumbe, migration scholar at IIM Ahmedabad, “The debate on minimum wage laws across the world is on the level of the minimum wages, not their existence. Unfortunate that in India, some states are attempting to woo investment by scrapping this law in its entirety.”

Delhi-based labour economist Prof Praveen Jha says, “Now even the most elementary provisions for labour are proposed to be suspended for about three years, all in the name of attracting investments, boosting growth etc, even though there is powerful evidence and strong theoretical arguments that such assumptions are fallacious.”

Says Majumdar, “The challenge for trade unions is big and it is two-fold for informal workers and the migrants — those in and out of work, and those in and out of towns. Theirs is a shifting world. We need to be there, both at the village-level, at home and at work, and in the cities, too.”

*Courtesy : indianexpress.com*

# For May Day, a Call to Defeat Gender, Class and Caste Divisions Among Workers of Southasia

## A BRIEF REVIEW

By RAVNEET, INDIA

**FOR** labour rights to be respected, the spirit of democracy needs to shine across this region. Workers fighting this war will find their strength in unity.

Southasia Peace Action Network, or SAPAN, organized an online meeting remembering the Rana Plaza garment factory collapse in Dhaka. It was also

Kamla Bhasin's birthday, a leading feminist in the region, who was remembered posthumously for her contribution to the women's movement as well as worker's rights. It was attended by senior and student activists from the region who have been a part of struggles to forge solidarities across the region. It becomes all the more





important since the Covid-19 had a dreadful effect on the workers putting them in precarious condition.

It was discussed how a threat to democracy puts labor rights at risk as is evident from violence against religious minorities across the region. The marginalized have to face the brunt of any jingoistic politics which was underlined by homes and shops, primarily in Muslim neighborhoods, being bulldozed in India. The assault against religious minorities is well documented.

Raza Rumi, editor of *Naya Daur*, asserted that violence can be mitigated by forging regional solidarities. He underlined three main points of agreement which were as followed- a) solidarity between southasian workers given the commonality of their issues, b) a visa-free regime in the area, c) more research and sharing of experiences across regions. They further underscored how caste, gender, class etc. restrict access to dignified work. Neo-liberal policies along with conventional prejudices undermine a steady progress of the marginalized.

Lucky Akter, an activist from Dhaka, deliberated on the interconnectedness of issues resonate across regions. For example, the slogan, 'Save the farmers, save Bangladesh', can find reverberation in India as well.

What surfaced overtly during discussions was the importance of strength of workers as united. The farmers protest in India forced the government to roll back the farm laws which were deemed as anti-farmers/people. The economic crisis in Sri Lanka brought out the workers to mark historic protests.

Haris Gazdar, a sociologist from

Karachi, shared observations from research he did with Nitya Rao. The study observed that women comprise over half of the agricultural workers across the region. However, the government, society fail to recognize them as same. He further mentioned that the poorest workers are occupied in agricultural activities and women are paid the worst. He mentioned that we can gain a lot by learning from one another. The study generated enough momentum for the issue to be taken up seriously in Pakistan, which led to a legislation called the Sindh Women Agriculture Workers Act 2019.

In Pakistan, Sindh and Baluchistan provinces have passed legislations about the rights of home-based workers, added Khawar Rani Mumtaz, a women's rights activist. Other southasian governments can implement similar legal frameworks to secure worker's rights.

Bezwada Wilson, co-founder and national convenor of *Safai Karmachari Andolan*, underlined the casteist mindsets of people towards manual scavengers. He asserted that roads are being built, highways, skyscrapers but sanitation system doesn't seem to be modernized. He added that thousands of workers have died in manholes and septic tanks and how there is an urgent need to mechanize the work.

Sultan Uddin Ahmmed summed up the discussion saying that all of these issues are interconnected. He asserted that we cannot afford to work in isolation and how there is a need for an alliance of trade unions with workers associations and research associations and consortia.

LINK — <https://thewire.in/labour/labour-may-day-southasia-workers-unity>

# Observing May Day in Post-Pandemic Times

By SHIHAB SARKAR, INDIA

**LIKE** many global celebrations, the May Day jubilations in the last two years (2020-2022) remained suspended due to the Covid-19 pandemic. At the height of the pandemic's ferocity, repeated lockdowns and movement restrictions had made the lives of the general people with fixed income veritably miserable. Spanning from the affluent European countries to the US and onward to Australia, the world had to put up with the pandemic impacts. Yet these nations were compelled to introduce

emergency social welfare schemes, provide the unemployed with monetary incentives and take up programmes to save people from becoming homeless. In the developing and poorer countries the pandemic-time sufferings stemmed from a lack of sources of income. Apart from the governments' inability to keep people fed while confined to home for shutdowns, there were other shortcomings. Due to their being poor and not properly literate, these people couldn't manage online access to jobs. The people,



especially the underprivileged without income, veritably hit the rock-bottom in socio-economic contexts. The physical labourers comprised a large segment of these people. They lived in the cities in particular.

Being a nation aimed at full LDC graduation, Bangladesh had, woefully, emerged as one of the countries badly affected by the corona pandemic. Of the total population, it had found itself burdened with a large number of jobless people, many going half-fed. On the first May Day in the countries after becoming apparently fully-free of the 2-year pandemic, a vital question arises. How much they could come to the help of the working class. Have these people felt being left in the lurch due to the near-closure of their factories or other income generating sectors? With Bangladesh projected as having reached a no- Covid 19-fatality stage now, pandemic watchers might feel eager to take an in-depth look at the country's novel corona situation. Media reports have it that newer variants of the pandemic are poised to make assaults on the vulnerable cities and countries. One of them is Shanghai in China. The two newly new mutants belong to the Omicron mother virus.

The labour welfare measures and helping the workers tide over their difficulties are the two most critical imperatives for Bangladesh. As a member of International Labour Organisation (ILO), the country has to abide by the labour safety rules involving those covering industrial labour and those related to child toiling. When it comes to the spirit born in Chicago's Hay Market's blood-stained outburst in early May in 1886, and the official declaration of May Day celebration in Paris on May 1 in 1890, it was the workers' interest which attracted the focus

of the world. It was no small achievement. That of all industrial cities, it was Paris, the birthplace of the French Revolution in 1789, which had been chosen as the venue of announcing the annual 'Workers Day of International Unity and Solidarity' on every May 1 speaks volumes of the workers' future unity and camaraderie. When it comes to the quintessential message of the May Day, it turns out to be keeping aloft the global labour interests again and again.

The 2-year hiatus prompted by Covid-19 should also be kept in perspective. That how much successfully, or otherwise, a developing status-aspirant country like Bangladesh could attend to the needs of its labour force cannot be skirted as a fast-assertive nation. The country should have few reasons to feel worried. Thanks to the Covid-19 pandemic's global nature, few countries can manage to escape scrutiny.

On the eve of the coming May Day, the salient features set to be under review include workers' safety in the new normal world, as well as a fulfilling life in the post-pandemic times. Taking cue from the history of the modern labour movements, labour rights activists can safely be unanimous on one point: In the one and thirty-two years, the spirit of the labour forces to remain united against all machinations hatched by the industry owners reigned supreme over all social imperatives. Society, its community-based norms and economic preferences keep changing. In accordance with the inevitable dictate of science, mechanisation and online platforms entered the scene as remedies to cumbersome and heavy workloads. This is what happened with the introduction of steamships and aeroplanes replacing the traditional modes of transport. It was implied that the physical workers would show their hostility

towards the technical revolution sweeping the world. This malaise has already begun creeping into the vast industrial belts across the world.

The pandemic times have already demonstrated the redundancy of prerequisites like permanent work-places, working hours, leaves etc. Countries both developed and developing have started adapting to this style of work-from-home. It keeps gaining speed with the detection of newer Covid-19 viruses.

A vital section of the May Day charter of demands was a hazard-free work atmosphere. The labourers wanted the working time to be at eight hours. The work time had been almost infinite and without noticeable respite all along. All this workplace reality is poised to undergo a radical change. Given the wide scope for working at will, either at a stretch or with breaks, working from home online favours the young mothers. Apart from performing domestic work, the young mothers doing office from home can take care of their small children or breastfeed their babies. This makes jobs attractive. In both rich and Third World countries, privately run workplaces allowed their male executives to do office online during the pandemic. Many offices have retained the system as it saves electricity and charges spent on many utility services. There are also grim prospects, though, when it comes to factory jobs. In resorting to digitisation, many massive factories might turn to the practice of declaring workers redundant. This will draw the ire of the labour rights activists. To them retrenching workers, no matter with whatever large volume of compensation packages, certainly goes against the May Day message.

A similar adversity was seen during the post-Industrial Revolution stage in the 18th-19th centuries. The industrial belts may have to brace for another chaotic

times after the introduction of computerised devices. The affluent countries can cope with the adverse situation. They have the money and means to pick the interested manual workers to provide them with on-the-job online training. This replacement is, however, feared to remain elusive to industries in the poorer countries. Given this reality, a cloud of *deja vu* appears to have started looming over the online-based yet traditional industries like the one seen during the Europe's industrial transition, i.e. Industrial Revolution. To their relief, the labour force in the poorer countries like Bangladesh has still enough time to prepare themselves before their factories fully switch over to industrial digitisation.

Coming to doing online office at home might become a dominant feature in the near future. Ironically, few places could be more convenient as a workplace than a fully equipped office. The musings about attending office-cum-home point to favourable times awaiting the white-collar employees. The blue-collar workers might find themselves in the limbo in the first phase of the online switch-over. However, under the pressure of time or that of the workplace managements, blue-collar workers turning to online modes of work may not seem that absurd in the coming days. Theoretically speaking, vis-à-vis the workers' strength derived from the May Day resolve, worldwide regional wars, creation of new trade blocs for national interest, climate change impacts have all started redefining the roles for the workers in the 'new normal' world. The workers' dominance in both ex-socialist and present left-leaning countries as well as the unflinchingly avowed market economies keeps diminishing. Against this backdrop, the proponents of a completely new worker-friendly world sans bellicosity may not prove fully wrong.

*Courtesy : thefinancialexpress.com.bd*



# Ambedkar's Legacy Lives on in Anti-Caste Peasants' Movements

By PRABODHAN POL, INDIA

*April 14 is Dr B.R. Ambedkar's Birth Anniversary.*



**HISTORICALLY** speaking, Ambedkar's contribution is often associated with the inception of organised Dalit politics in India.

Scholarly writings on Ambedkar have largely directed attention on his association with the caste question and radical politics of social justice that he propounded. His contribution to the drafting of the Indian constitution has already been widely recognised and celebrated.

But very few scholars and historians have underlined his contribution as a mass

mobiliser and a leader of a prominent peasant movement. His involvement with the anti-*Khoti* movement in the Konkan region was beyond tokenism. The organisations (such as Bahishkrit Hitkarni Sabha and Konkan Praant Shetkari Sangh) led by him instrumentally shaped the peasant movement in the Konkan region in the decade of the 1930s.

As a consequence, he was able to build a formidable organisation of peasants in the Konkan that not only mobilised farmers across various caste groups on a



larger plane, but also tried to emphasise that long-lasting peasants' solidarity in India can only be achieved if and when social questions are taken up seriously. The movement initiated by him lost its influence in the 1940s due to the changed political circumstances. Simultaneously, with the abolition of the Khoti land tenure system in 1950, the orientation of regional politics also changed profoundly.

The anti-Khoti movement led by Ambedkar produced many towering political figures who subsequently shaped the politics of Maharashtra in the 1940s and 1950s.

Ambedkar's intervention in the 1930s is instructive for quite a few reasons. First, his resolve to align the rural Dalit agricultural labourers with peasants reflects his pragmatism in establishing a united front of oppressed communities against the larger repressive feudal (and colonial) power structures.

Secondly, his involvement underscored the point that peasants' solidarity cannot sustain itself without addressing the caste divisions in society. The agitations in the Konkan not only played a role in strengthening peasants' voices in the anti-caste movement, but also became a sort of a laboratory for Ambedkar to fuse Dalit-peasant (*Shudra*) unity.

The attempt to invoke a discourse premised on equality and unity was itself a radical move to align anti-caste discourse with class politics.

Thirdly, peasant politics shaped by the dominant landed castes in the post-colonial era had failed to address the question of caste inequalities within the rural fabric that resultantly led to perpetuation of caste hegemony, violence and atrocities against Dalits. The rhetoric of 'peasant unity' has therefore failed despite some noticeable exceptions to

attract substantial support of Dalits during peasant mobilisations throughout the post-Independence period.

## AMBEDKAR AND PEASANT POLITICS IN THE 1930S

Ambedkar's involvement with the peasant movement became prominent with the establishment of the Konkan Praant Shetkari Sangh in 1931. The organisation was originally established by Anant Chitre, a caste-Hindu follower of Ambedkar. Within a few months of its establishment, the Shetkari Sangh became a significant mass based peasants' organisation in the Konkan region. In the first ever pamphlet published by the Shetkari Sangh, which subsequently appeared in Ambedkar's newspaper, *Janata*, the goals of the organisation were clearly articulated.

They were mainly centred on seeking legislations to eradicate oppressive Khoti system, to reduce the burden of the land revenue, and to reduce the unnecessary interferences by the rural moneylenders. Most importantly, the pamphlet also observed that the peasant solidarity could only be realised by identifying its strengths and weaknesses. It argued that the strength of the peasant movement across different castes can be derived by identifying common structures of oppression. On the other hand, the pamphlet further argued that the biggest weakness of the peasant movement was caste that discouraged the larger unity of the oppressed.

Against this backdrop, the Shetkari Sangh made conscious attempts to consistently invoke the caste question in its organisational activism in the 1930s.

On the other hand, the activities of the Shetkari Sangh grew exponentially after its establishment in 1931. The increasing mass support was a causing anxiety to the feudal landlords and the colonial

government. On the pretext of spreading 'extremist ideas', the Shetkari Sangh was banned by the colonial government for two years from 1932 to 1934. This testifies the significance of the political stance taken by Ambedkar and his organisation.

Despite prohibitions and restrictions in the early 1930s, the Shetkari Sangh, was successful in keeping its following among the peasants intact throughout the decade. In this period of crisis, Ambedkar not only provided the leadership to the organisation but also defended the peasants in the court. Thus, his role in developing the peasant resistance defy the conventional historical narrative about Ambedkar's politics.

Interestingly, his involvement with peasants' politics did not restrict him from taking a critical position against Hinduism.

It was in 1935 at Yeola, that he had famously declared that he would quit Hinduism. Ambedkar founded the Independent Labour Party (ILP) in 1936. Although, the simmering caste antagonism between Dalits and non-Dalits remained a matter of concern for ILP, it was convinced that it was fighting an important battle for a greater cause.

The party programme envisaged by the ILP significantly argued for the abolition of *Khoti* land tenure system, state ownership of industries, free and compulsory education, and minimum wages for industrial workers. In the provincial elections of 1937, the ILP was able to win 15 seats from the Bombay Presidency. The Konkani region was one with the highest representatives of the ILP with six seats, including that of Ambedkar who won a seat from Bombay city.

The peculiar feudal structure of Konkani society and its association with

Bombay city, as a reservoir for urban labour, played a very important role in the rise of ILP and anti-caste peasant radicalism. Konkani signified the success of party's wide penetration amongst the peasant population. Cross-caste solidarity was achieved through common agitations. Consequently, Ambedkar rose to become an undisputed leader of the Konkani based peasant movement.

In 1937, Ambedkar was able to table a Bill that proposed the complete abolition of the *Khoti* land tenure system. It was consequently supported by a mass procession of Konkani peasants which was held in Bombay in January 1938. The procession, organised by the ILP was attended by more than 20,000.

This was another testimony of the support Ambedkar received from Konkani peasants. With the disbanding of ILP in 1942, Ambedkar's influence among the peasants of Konkani gradually waned. However, the decade of the 1930s has provided an interesting template for a broader agenda based anti-caste politics.

Ambedkarite peasant radicalism of the 1930s provided multiple avenues for Dalits to forge wide-ranging alliances with non-Dalit masses. Throughout his political life, Ambedkar attempted to devise strategies to do just this. Although the ILP was a short-lived political experiment, confined mainly to the 1930s, the ramifications of the caste-class intersection had greatly shaped Dalit politics in the later decades. In the 1970s, the Dalit Panthers, an organisation founded in the 1970s in Maharashtra, drew its inspiration by invoking Ambedkar's engagement with the workers and peasants' politics of the 1930s.

*Courtesy : thewire.in*

# Battered by The Pandemic, Sri Lanka's Female Garment Workers are Reeling From The Economic Crisis

By **PIYUMI FONSEKA**, Thomson Reuters Foundation

**THE** pandemic was hard enough. Now, Sri Lanka faces an economic crisis of its own making that is taking a heavy toll on low-paid female garment workers sewing clothes for wealthier women in the West.

"I have never seen anything like this in my 20-year career," said one factory owner, who employs 20 women to make vests and slips, some of whom have been on his payroll for over a decade.

Now Anthony – not his real name – says he is leaving the rag trade, hit by rolling power cuts, soaring costs for raw materials, shrinking orders and a labour shortfall: a fistful of problems for an island that depends on exports for income.

"The game is over," said Anthony, whose small textile operation in Moronthuduwa lies close to Sri Lanka's main city of Colombo. "I am compelled to close my factory." And with it, 20 local women will be compelled to find new jobs or else 20 families will be short of cash.

"I can only imagine the desperation their families will feel," Anthony said. "But, is it my fault? This is the state of affairs across the country."

Shutdowns, shortages, pay problems and looming strikes are playing out across the island, with the female backbone of the garment industry paying the highest price. Many rural, low-paid women have already lost their jobs or say they have taken on loans or extra shifts to make ends meet each month – all for the cost of a Victoria's Secret negligee.

"One luxury brand garment piece stitched in our factory is worth our monthly salary," said 22-year-old Charika Fernando. "When they earn millions of dollars off of our many hours of arduous work, we are paid little."

Victoria's Secret did not immediately reply to a request for comment about pay and conditions among workers at its suppliers in Sri Lanka. Garment making is Sri Lanka's second top foreign exchange earner, with about 300 factories making clothes for dozens of well-known global brands.

The industry contributes 6% to the country's overall gross domestic product, providing direct employment to 3,50,000 people and to another 7,00,000 indirectly.

Hard-hit like so many other industries in the pandemic, the garment sector seemed to be on its way back earlier this year as demand picked up post-lockdown and coronavirus infections waned. Numbers show a post-pandemic recovery was well underway, with export earnings for garment makers up 22% to \$514 million this January, compared with January 2021.

That was then.

Now, a domestic economic crisis fuelled by a foreign currency shortage is squeezing the island just as it seeks to slough off the deadliest epidemic in decades, a crisis that had already wiped out years of growing prosperity.

## DOLLAR SHORTAGE

Sri Lanka is facing its worst financial crisis since independence in 1948, with foreign exchange reserves shrinking 70% to \$2.36 billion in January.

The dollar shortage has left the island struggling to pay for imports including food, medicine and fuel.

Unprecedented blackouts – power often dies for hours at a time – have shuttered the most energy-intensive industries, textiles among them and disrupted shipments to the West.

The government says help is on its way but shops cannot wait and some big brands have already turned to alternative markets, such as Bangladesh and India, to fill the gap.

Trade unions blame underlying problems that had lain hidden for years and have now surfaced, highlighting the stark power imbalance between Western brands and their Asian workers.

“We have to spend more than half of our wages on transportation to and from the workplace ... leaving almost nothing to support our family or maintain a roof over our heads,” said Jasintha Nilmini, who works at an underwear factory. “The situation has only become worse.”

## WOMEN WORST HIT

Women make up about eight in every 10 workers in the sector and most come from rural areas in search of jobs – women like Fernando’s mother Rani, who moved 120 km from her village to make clothes in the commercial capital’s Katunayake Free Trade Zone.

“My mother worked as a trimmer and ironer,” Fernando said. “From my mother’s experience, I understood how demanding this task was for her body.”

Nevertheless, she took the same path, choosing garment work as her best way out of poverty.

“In March I earned 40,000 Sri Lankan rupees but everything has become more expensive,” said Fernando, a machine operator who makes clothes for big labels including Victoria’s Secret.

“The prices of vegetables, meat and fish

have all gone up. In February, following trade unions’ demands, we received a salary increase of 2,500 Sri Lankan rupees. And just before the salary increase, my landlord raised the rent of my room to 15,000 Sri Lankan rupees per month.”

Plus her workload has ballooned, she said, which often means 12-hour days, six days a week.

“The targets have gone up,” she said. “If we do not reach the target, we will have four hours of overtime. Our factory set a historic record for the highest monthly targets in March. Factory owners must have reaped the harvest.”

“There were moments when I would burst into tears with despair,” she said. “We are not compensated for our sick days. We do not get vacations.”

## GLOBAL PROBLEM

From Central America to South Asia, the low pay, long hours and risky conditions endured by many workers has blighted the glitzy image of the fashion industry.

The pandemic exacerbated their plight.

Thousands of garment workers faced reprisals and worked in tough conditions as Covid-19 protocols were violated and outbreaks swept through factories, said a report by a global labour rights group this month.

And globally, a series of high-profile disasters at textile factories, reports of abuse in company supply chains and heightened ecological awareness has pushed some buyers to shun cheap, throwaway fashion and its high hidden costs. “If you care about women’s rights, you should worry about how the fashion business runs,” said Padmini Weerasooriya, who defends garment workers in Sri Lanka and said it was more difficult to unionise women.

“They are repressed not just at home, but also at work, school, and in their families,” said Weerasooriya, a trade unionist for more than 20 years. “We want everyone who works in the garment industry to be paid a fair wage.”

*Courtesy : scroll.in*

# The Organisation of The Arts

By CHRISTOPHER CAUDWELL

*...Continued from previous issue*



IN addition to the sound-symbolical arts, there are the visual or plastic arts – painting, sculpture and architecture. It is easier to see how these fit into our analysis. The visual sense – in all animals, eked out by tactile corrections – has been that sense used most consistently to explore external reality, while the hearing sense has been used to explore that particular part of external reality which consists of other genotypes. Sound mediates between genotype and genotype – the animal hears the enemy or the mate. Light mediates also between genotype and non-genotypical portions of external reality.

As a result, when we make a visual symbol of external reality, such as a diagram or a drawing, it is naturally made projective of external reality and not merely symbolic. Except in onomatopoeia, words individually are not mechanically projective of things like a photograph, but are only symbolic and therefore “conventional.” A drawing, however, is directly projective of reality without necessarily the mediation of pseudo-grammatical rules or conventions. This is shown by the resemblance between a drawing and a photograph.

In drawing and sculpture bits of external reality are projected into a mock world, as in a drawing of a flower or a sculpture of a horse. This picture must have in common with the external reality from which it is drawn something not describable

in terms of itself – the real or logical manifold or, more simply, the “likeness.”

But line and colour also have affective associations in their own right. These must be organised in an attitude towards the mock world, the “thing” projected. This must be an affective attitude, which is what the painting or sculpture has in common with the genotype, or affective manifold, and cannot be itself symbolised by a drawing, since it is inherent in the drawing. To the naive observer this appears as a distortion in the drawing as a non-likeness to external reality. But of course it is really a likeness, a likeness to the affective world of the genotype.

For the purpose of this brief survey, the only distinction that need be made between painting and sculpture is that one is three-dimensional and the other two-dimensional. Thus painting selects two out of the three dimensions of external reality – or rather to be accurate, it selects two out of the four dimensions, for unlike music, poetry and the story, the plastic arts lack the fourth dimension, time. Pictures do not begin at one moment in time and end at another. They are static; they do not change. All arts must select from external reality in some way, otherwise they would not have any looseness at the joints to give play for ego-organisation. They must have one degree of freedom.

Line and colour, symbolising real objects, are organised by the ego-reality projected. The result is a new emotional attitude to a piece of reality. After viewing a Rembrandt or a Cézanne we see the



exterior world differently. We still see the same external reality, but it is drenched with new affective tones and shines with a bright emotional colouring. It is a more “appetising” world, for it is the appetitive instincts which furnish the aesthetic affects.

Plainly the same criteria we have already established for language hold good here. A Michael Angelo painting or a Dutch portrait contains more of external reality than a Picasso, just as a story contains more than a poem. But what is the scope and degree of the emotional reorganisation in the visual that it effects? It is chiefly on this that the varying estimates of greatness in painting are based. Just as in music or poetry, so in painting, easy solutions or shallow grasps of reality are poor art.

Painting resembles poetry in this much, that the affects do not inhere in the associations of the things, but in the lines and forms and colours that compose them. Certain scenes – for a funeral, – have affective associations in themselves. But the affective associations used by painting do not pertain to the funeral as an event but to a brownish rectangle in a large transparent box with circles at the end drawn by greyish ere horeshapes. The affective associations adhering to ideas of bereavement could quite properly be used in a story, and the novelist could legitimately bring in a funeral in order to utilise its affective associations in his pattern. Again the *mere* word “funeral” as a word has of course inherent affective associations which can be used in poetry – the “funeral of my hopes” – only if it is thoroughly understood that whole group of such linguistic associations will be brought into the poem, and must either be utilised or inhibited, e.g. suggestions of *darkness*, of *purple*, of *stuffy respectability*, of a *procession*, or *pomp* and *ceremony*, of *deep wells* (sound association with *funnel* plus *grave*). The affective associations used by painting have

only those of colour, line and combinations of colour and line, but they are used to organise the meaning – the *real* object represented.

Hence the static plastic arts which are representational are akin to poetry and mathematics – to the classificatory sciences and the universal arts. Just as we slip at once into the “I” of the poem, so we slip at once into the viewpoint of the painter. We see the world both from where the poet and where the painter stands.

We have already explained why this approach leads to a “tribal” primitive attitude to living, why it tends to lead to the realisation of a static universal human essence opposed to a static nature, and is therefore the best medium for voicing universal cries of passion or insight. By a paradox which is not really a paradox, but is given in the nature of individuation, poetry and painting are also the best mediums for expressing individuality – the individuality however only of the poet. Painting, poetry and melody all have this in common – this timeless universal quality of the human genus rather than the interesting sub-complications of a group of human individuals. Hence too we find painting developed at an early stage in the history of civilisation – as early as Palaeolithic man.

In its first appearance painting is man’s consciousness of affective quality in Nature, hence the “life-like” character of early Palaeolithic Art, when it deals with natural subjects. But with the development of man from a group of hunters and food-gatherers to a crop-raising and cattle-rearing tribe, man passes from a co-operating observation of Nature, seeking his own desires in it, to a co-operative power over Nature, by drawing it into the tribe and domesticating it. Hence he is now interested in the power of social forms over reality, which becomes “convention” in perceptual rendering. Therefore naturalistic Palaeolithic

Art becomes in Neolithic days conventional, arbitrary and symbolic – *decorative*. Not only does this prepare the way for *writing*, but it also expresses a psychic change in culture similar to the passage from rhythm to poetry and to melody.

The passage from the gens or tribe to class society is marked by a further differentiation in pictorial art which takes the form of a return of “naturalism,” but man now seeks in Nature, not the affective qualities of the solid tribe, but the heightened and specialised qualities of the ruling class. These are elaborated by the division of labour and the greater technical power and penetration of Nature this makes possible. This naturalism is always ready to fall back into “conventionality” when a class ceases to be vitally in touch with active reality and its former discoveries ossify into dry shells. Naturalism becomes academicism. The most naturalistic pictorial art is bourgeois art, corresponding to its greater productivity and differentiation and more marked division of labour. Hence the rise of naturalism in bourgeois art, and its revolutionary self-movement, is connected with the rise of harmony in music and of the evolutionary sciences generally during the same period. Naturalism must not be confused with realism – for example the realism of bourgeois Flemish painting. This realism too may be conventional. Since painting is like poetry, and not the novel, the vital ego-

organisation which is the basis of naturalism does not take place in the real world depicted, but flows from the complex of memory-images and affective reverberations awakened by the line or colour, and is organised by the “meaning,” by the projective characteristics of the painting.

In later bourgeois culture economic differentiation becomes crippling and coercive instead of being the road to individuation of freedom. There is a reaction against content, which, as long as it remains within the bourgeois categories, appears as “commodity-fetishism.” The social forms which make the content marketable and give it an exchange value are elevated as ends in themselves. Hence, cubism, futurism, and various forms of so-called “abstract” art.

Finding himself ultimately enslaved by the social form and therefore still “bound to the market,” the bourgeois rebel attempts to shake himself free even from the social ego and so to escape into the world of dream where both ego and external world are personal and unconscious. This is *surréalisme*, with the apparent return of a realism which is however fictitious, because it is not the real, i.e. social external world which returns, but the unconscious personal world. We have already explained why *surréalisme* represents the final bourgeois position.

*to be continued...*

*Courtesy : Illusion and Reality*

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INSTITUTE *for* SOCIAL DEMOCRACY, New Delhi, India

E-MAIL : [notowar.isd@gmail.com](mailto:notowar.isd@gmail.com) / WEBSITE : [www.isd.net.in](http://www.isd.net.in)