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).

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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
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