

The Sweatshop Regime

This book explores the processes producing and reproducing the garment sweatshop in India. Drawing from Marxian and feminist insights, the book theorizes the sweatshop as a complex ‘regime’ of exploitation and oppression, jointly crafted by global, regional and local actors, and working across productive and reproductive realms. The analysis illustrates the links between the physical and social materiality of production, unveiling the distinct circuits of exploitation corresponding to different clothing items. As these circuits change across India, on the basis of regional patterns of product specialisation, so does the logic of the sweatshop, its composition, the social profile of the labouring poor engaged in garment work, and their working conditions. Through the eyes of sourcing actors, the whole country can be re-imagined as a giant department store, with different garment collections exhibited at different floors, and created through the sweat of different sets of labourers.

Highlighting the great social differentiation of the garment workforce in factories, workshops and homes scattered across the Indian Subcontinent, the narrative also unveils the multiple patterns of unfreedom this workforce is subject to. These exceed narrow definitions of unfreedom mainly based on forced labour, which are becoming dominant in the debate on global labour standards and ‘modern slavery’. By discussing interplays between productive and reproductive realms and processes of commodification and exploitation, on the contrary, the analysis highlights how social difference and unfreedom pre-exist the sweatshop and at the same time are also reproduced by it. It also highlights the role different actors – like global buyers, regional suppliers and retailers, and labour contractors – play in these processes. Indeed, the book depicts the sweatshop as a complex joint enterprise against the labouring poor, shaped and steered by multiple lords, and where production and circulation – of garments, processes and people – intertwine in manifold ways. It also shows how the labouring body is systematically and inexorably depleted and consumed by garment work, until it is finally ejected from the sweatshop. Finally, the book highlights how the study of India’s sweatshop regime informs contemporary debates on industrial modernity, comparative advantage and cheap labour, modern slavery, and ethical consumerism.

Alessandra Mezzadri teaches at the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London. Her research interests focus on globalisation and processes of labour informalisation; materialist approaches to global commodity chain analysis and global industrial systems, labour standards and CSR; gender and feminist theory; and the political economy of India. She has investigated in depth the Indian garment industry over a span of ten years, and illustrated the different ways in which distinct regional sweatshops are formed and reproduced across the subcontinent.

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The Sweatshop Regime

Labouring Bodies, Exploitation, and
Garments *Made in India*

Alessandra Mezzadri



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*To Bianca, who taught me about resistance.
And to Silvia, who taught me about resilience.
They are the roots of it all.*

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Despite its many labour regulations, India remains an extremely difficult arena for the upholding of workers’ rights. The current rise of the ‘Make in India’ agenda is unlikely to change this scenario, as it further reinforces the idea of ‘flexible’ (read cheap and informal) labour as being one of India’s key comparative advantages. In such hard climate, the work of many activists and labour NGO workers has been crucial, and is likely to remain so for many years to come. I engaged with many of them during the years, and learnt a lot from their political commitment and dedication. Special thanks to Pallavi Mansingh, Gopinath Parakuni, Ashim Roy, Aloysius, Rohini Hensman, Sujata Modi and Sanjay Kumar Singh. Thanks to the staff of SEWA Bareilly – Mary, Rochini, Sangeeta and Gulnaz – who greatly facilitated my work in Uttar Pradesh. Most of all, thanks to all respondents, in particular the many garment workers who dedicated precious time to answering my questions and who shared their stories with me, whilst endlessly toiling to cut, stitch, mend, embroider or pack stacks and stacks of clothes.

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List of Abbreviations

AEPC	: Apparel Export Promotion Council
BHG	: Bareilly Homeworkers Group
CEC	: Centre for Education and Communication
Cividep	: Civil Initiatives for Development and Peace India
CMAI	: Clothing Manufacturers Association of India
COTEX	: Consortium of Textile Exporters
CSR	: Corporate Social Responsibility
DCMSME	: Development Commissioner for Micro, Small, and Medium Enterprises
DISHA	: Driving Industry Towards Sustainable Human Capital
EOI	: Export-Oriented Patterns of Industrialization
ETI	: Ethical Trade Initiatives
GATT	: General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade
GATWU	: Garment and Textile Workers Union
GCC	: Global Commodity Chains
GGCC	: Global Garment Commodity Chain
GLU	: Global Labour Union
GPN	: Global Production Network
GVC	: Global Value Chain
HF	: Handwork Foundation
ILO	: International Labour Organisation
MFA	: Multi-Fibre Arrangement
NCEUS	: National Commission for Enterprises in the Unorganised Sector
NCR	: National Capital Region
NHG	: National Homeworkers Group
NTUI	: New Trade Union Initiatives
SAVE	: Social Awareness and Voluntary Education
SEWA	: Self-Employed Women Organisation
SIHMA	: South India Hosiery Association

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SMEs	: Small and Medium Enterprises
TEA	: Tiruppur Exporters Association
UNIDO	: United National Industrial Development Organisation
UP	: Uttar Pradesh
WTO	: World Trade Organization