

TITLE: “*They Bowed Down, Because We Work For Justice!*”: Everyday Struggles and Victories of Domestic Workers Women Union in Kanpur

Kanpur, previously the hub of textile mills and labour union activities, saw its textile workers rendered jobless due to the closure of the mills operated by the National Textile Corporation Limited in the early 2000s. While the workers and their unions responded with a protracted struggle reaching up to the top echelons of power, including Atal Vihari Bajpayee, the then Prime Minister, the struggle led to recognition, and/but empty promises. Not only were the structures of employment impacted by coercive policies, such as the enforced Modified Voluntary Retirement Scheme, but the employable demography in marginalised pockets of Kanpur was also redefined. The turbulence had a serious, debilitating effect on the well-being of the workers, their families, and their routines. The ‘men’ who lost their jobs had to stay at home while their wives started working, and ‘stepped out’, to earn a livelihood and find means of surviving in a city that was previously known, amongst unionists, as the ‘Russia of India’.

While the official and policy-based histories of the city and the mills (Mahaprashasta¹, 2016) discuss the rise and decline of the industry. This paper, based on ethnographic fieldwork in Kanpur with the workers and leaders of Gharelu Kamgar Mahila Union (GKMU), is constructed from the voices and oral histories of the very people that those policies affected. Instead of the traditional approach of recording reactions of the immediate aggrieved in the face of arbitrary and oppressive policies/actions of the state, this paper shifts the gaze towards ‘*the vicarious aggrieved*’, here, the women of the households, who face the magnified impact of the arbitrariness and oppression, albeit indirectly.

¹ Mahaprashasta, A. A. (2016, April 15). How the Once Flourishing Kanpur Textile Mills Decayed - The Wire. *The Wire*.

<https://thewire.in/labour/faulty-govt-policies-corruption-and-exploitation-of-labour-how-the-once-flourishing-kanpur-textile-mills-decayed>

By looking at this period of turbulence the attempt is to theorise the transition (from employment of male head of the family in textile mills to females being employed domestic workers, from formal to informal structure of employment, from organised to unorganised sector) by concentrating on the new 'everyday' of these women who had to 'step out' and work to provide for their families while facing gender oppression, simultaneously. The added layer of routine labour exploitation in their work, due to harsher-than-usual working conditions and the absence of socio-legal protection, transformed the 'ordinary everyday' of these women into sites of political and legal assertion, coalescing into a domestic workers women union (Gharelu Kamgar Mahila Union).

These women, through their union, not only attempted to achieve recognition and benefits from the state as workers, but also resisted gender oppression through public hearings, women's courts (Mahila Adalat), protests, demonstrations and collaboration with other activists in the region. The union also currently serves as a site of parental collaboration, ensuring that their children avail the benefits of the statutory right to education.

The paper documents the impact of turbulence, both material and moral, on the families of workers employed in textile mills and later as domestic workers, while examining the response of women to their new ordinary - in the form of unionising and asserting rights as workers, parents, and equal citizens of the polity.

The empirical insights offered by the paper are doubly relevant for theoretical development. One, the paper forwards, *tal-mel* (synchronicity), as a new theory of political mobilisation, consolidation and connection which, according to the union leader, differentiates its functioning from male-constituted/run unions. For the members, GKMU blurs the difference between political and personal expression which, as they believe, concretises their politico-personal bonds. Two, the paper on the meta-theoretical level highlights how crisis, resistance and solidarities intertwine to push the aggrieved, both

immediate and vicarious, into various forms of political associations which then become platforms for creative enunciation and strategising. GKMU, with its Mahila Adalat, running for the past 20 years, then shows not only possible recourses to the hegemonic criminal justice system but also how people, in the face of crisis and totalising oppression, find creative avenues of bypassing these totalising phenomena.