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# 'Docile Oriental Women' and Organised Labour: A Case Study of the Indian Garment Manufacturing Industry

DEEPITA CHAKRAVARTY

*This article attempts to understand women's labour market behaviour in the context of export-oriented garment manufacturing in India, particularly women's decision to work and their alleged aversion to unionism. Asian women's submissiveness in the labour market can hardly be the result of 'Oriental docility' in every case. We question this assumption by looking at a small sample of 25 women in garment manufacturing firms in Hyderabad, India, and seek other explanations for women's lack of interest in unions, and note the pressures that affect them.*

## Introduction

**Prisoners of patriarchy**, Asian women have always been conceived as docile. The notion during the long history of European construction of the 'Orient' (Said 1978) soon grew into a myth,

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Deepita Chakravarty is Assistant Professor, Economics Area, Indian Institute of Management, Kozhikode, IIMK Campus, Kunnamangalam PO, Calicut 673 571, Kerala. E-mail: [deepita@iimk.ac.in](mailto:deepita@iimk.ac.in).

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which, in the course of time, was perpetuated into a 'grand narrative'. The narrative, in Lyotard's (1989) sense, was conveniently pressed into service to control and arrest any deviation from the norm, that is, docility, by the guardians of society. Of course, in recent years considerable scholarship has been directed at questioning and deconstructing this 'grand narrative'. But, as myths die hard, the notion of docility still keeps appearing under various guises even today in many disciplines, including economics. For example, women's submissiveness and lack of militancy in labour markets in developing countries, especially in export-oriented manufacturing units, is often explained in terms of 'Oriental docility' (Standing 1989).

Export-oriented industrialisation emerged as a significant element in the industrialisation programmes of several Asian countries during the 1970s and the 1980s (Lee 1984). Certain gender-based patterns of labour use in export-oriented industries have been universally observed (UN 1995). Though India is relatively new to liberalised trade, secondary data show the significant presence of women in export activities.

The experiences of countries that have encouraged export-oriented industries indicate that the increasing cost competition in export markets leads entrepreneurs to search for newer sources of cheap labour. As a consequence of prolonged social and economic oppression in these countries, women are ready to work for very low wages and for longer hours under exceedingly inhospitable conditions. It is believed that their 'Oriental docility' does not let them join unions and agitate against the management (Barbezat 1993; Lim 1984; Standing 1989). Such reasoning has become well accepted even within developing countries. Moreover, the concept of docility in labour market behaviour has also roots in traditional economic theory where workers in general have been treated as passive agents of production:

Employees enter into the system in two sharply distinct roles. Initially they are owners of a factor of production (their own labour) which they sell for a definite price. Having done so, they become completely passive factors of production employed by the entrepreneur in such a way as to maximize his profits.

This way of viewing the employment contract and management of labour involves a very high order of abstraction. (Simon 1951: 293)

This idea of docile behaviour among workers is further strengthened by the construction of submissive Oriental women. By this logic, changes in market conditions and experiences have no role to play in shaping workers' behaviour in the medium or long term. Our inquiry starts right at this point, by questioning this assumption. We particularly address the issue of women's decision to work and their alleged aversion to trade union activities. We shall try to explore these issues with particular emphasis on the ethnographic dimension of this problem. Agarwal (1997) argues that women's awareness of their weaker fallback positions often constrains their ability to press openly for their own advantage within household decision-making processes. However, compliance need not imply collusion always. In fact, Agarwal (*ibid.*) cites various surreptitious ways in which women in the South Asian context seek to secure their own self-interest while apparently conforming to the cultural norms of self-subordination.

The aim of this study, and, hence, the methodology adopted, is to explore the meaning and motivations for particular courses of action rather than the production of statistically generalisable findings. The article is organised in the following manner. The next section deals with the background of the study. The section that follows presents four detailed profiles of women workers in different categories. This is followed by a discussion of the findings.

## The Background

At the macro level there are indications of differences between the experiences of countries that began exporting earlier and India with regard to issues of women's employment (Goldar 2002; Jhabvala and Sinha 2002; Joekees 1995; UN 1995). However, we believe that the extreme macro nature of the information hides substantial sector-specific differences. Therefore, we decided to limit ourselves to the garment manufacturing industry of India. Since the early 1980s, garment manufacturing has played a very

significant role in Indian export activities. Changes in the macro-economic regime in the early 1990s gave a further boost to the process. Moreover, among all export-intensive sectors of India, garment manufacturing has been the most women-intensive from the beginning.

Our field of study was located in the city of Hyderabad in Andhra Pradesh (AP) and the surrounding areas, where a large number of manufacturing units have come up in recent years. More importantly, the government of AP established an Apparel Export Promotion Park in the year 1998–99 near Hyderabad (in Gundlapochampally, Rangareddy district). Some of the firms in this Park generally have high export shares in their net sales and are technologically quite sophisticated.

We decided to limit ourselves to the workers of the Export Promotion Park basically for the convenience of the field survey. There are altogether six firms in this Park. Table 1 provides some important information pertaining to these.

It can be clearly seen from Table 1 that the majority of the workers are women; most of them live in villages nearby. Given the fact that industrial development in AP is a comparatively recent phenomenon, most workers, irrespective of gender, are not much exposed to industrial work culture and, hence, to trade unionism. We tried to talk to at least one female worker of every category in all six firms. Generally, women workers are concentrated in the lower categories of work. There were altogether 25 women with whom we had long interviews. We also tried to talk to some male workers and the management in order to understand their views. The detailed profiles of four women of the 25 interviewees described in the next section should be treated as representative responses to the question of work and unionism in the garment manufacturing industry.

The firms in our sample, by definition, come under the registered factory sector of manufacturing. All of them are situated within the Apparel Export Promotion Council's Apparel Export Park, where standard labour laws are not applicable. Consequently, conventional trade union practices are generally absent in these firms. How do the workers look at this issue? In order to answer this question we divided our 25 respondents on the basis of their

**Table 1**  
**Basic Information about the Sample Firms**

<i>Firms</i>	<i>Year of inception</i>	<i>Number of workers</i>	<i>Percentage of women workers</i>	<i>Percentage of exports in total sales</i>	<i>Level of technological modernisation</i>	<i>Performance</i>
<b>Domestic market oriented firms</b>						
A	1999	900	80	40	Modernised	Profit making
B	1995	140	69	Nil	Modernised	Breaking even
C	2000	30	70	Nil	Non-modernised	Loss making
<b>Export market oriented firms</b>						
D	2000	75	70	100	Modernised	Profit making
E	1998	100	80	60	Modernised	Breaking even
F	1998	100	65	75	Modernised	Profit making

**Source:** Handloom and Textile Department of AP, India.

work history into three different groups: first, those who have not worked outside their household at all before in paid jobs; second, those who have worked before, but not in manufacturing activities; and last, a small number of women who have worked before in manufacturing activities, including garment making. Four workers were chosen for intensive interviews.

## Profiles of the Four Respondents

In this section we present detailed profiles of four women respondents that revolve around the questions of 'Why work?' and 'Why not trade unionism?'

### Radha

Radha (30 years old) belongs to the first group of women who have never worked before and came to the labour market as a result of a family calamity.

My father was an electrician. I had a more or less comfortable childhood as my father had a regular income and we did not have many dependents. We are three sisters and one brother. All of us were sent to school but only one sister could pass the Xth class exam. I studied up to the VIIIth standard. My mother had a sewing machine at home and stitched our clothes and sometimes for the neighbours to earn a little money.

After I left school I was at home looking after the household and taking care of my small brother when my mother was busy attending to other work. Gradually I began to learn how to sew. I found it quite interesting and picked up much of my mother's sewing work.

My father died quite suddenly three years after my marriage. By then I had two children and was busy taking care of my own family. My father had taken some loans at the time of my marriage and later to construct a new house. My brother was still too young to work and earn to feed the family. My mother was at a loss as she had never worked outside and used to think it a great disgrace for a woman of a respectable Brahmin family to take up paid work outside the home.

In the meantime those garment factories were coming up in the open fields of the neighbouring village of Gundlapochampally. People said these firms were in favour of employing women workers if they were available. Initially, the preference for women was viewed suspiciously by the villagers. However, in the context of utter distress they started sending their women to these factories for employment. The management preferred younger to the older ones. They had their own reasons but the villagers did not regard this kindly.

After much consideration my mother and some elders of our family decided that my mother would go out for work rather than my educated young sisters. One of them had already passed the Xth class exam and both of them were very much interested in garment work as many of their friends were already into it. My mother failed to get an entry even though she was an experienced tailor for she was above 40 and had no education at all. Finally, there was no option for my mother but to send my sisters to work in the garment factories.

As the management strongly preferred young women with a few years of schooling,<sup>1</sup> both my sisters got positions in different grades of tailoring after having three to four months of training. Incidentally, both my sisters got jobs in the largest firm A.

My husband (who was the only child of his mother) was doing very well and we had just finished repairing our old house when he fell seriously ill. At home, I had my mother-in-law and two small children. I spent everything I could for my husband's treatment. I mortgaged the house. Unfortunately, all my efforts to save his life failed and he died after six months. By then I had incurred a debt of one and a half lakhs of rupees [Rs. 150,000].

I was badly in need of some income. My mother-in-law was quite opposed to my working outside as our family had a respectable status in the village and women from such families usually did not go out for employment. But, as I did not have a father or an adult brother to fall back upon, I had no other option. My sisters insisted on my joining them at work. They said this was the best option available considering my qualifications. They explained to me the kind of work they did and insisted that it was much more respectable to work as a garment factory worker than as an ayah or a cook—the other two options open



to me. I convinced my mother-in-law that though relatives were opposed to the idea, none of them would support us in our time of need. I could easily get into the training programme at the Community Development Centre adjacent to the Park and subsequently join a garment factory as a 'machine operator', basically as a tailor.

I could not get a job at the same firm where my sisters were working. I joined a smaller one (firm C). I had a very tight work schedule. We did not have three shifts of work, but one could do piece-rate work after routine working hours. As I became a senior I started getting extra work. Extra work meant extra money. My mother-in-law took care of the household and my children while I went to work. At the time of interview, the management had quoted all the terms and conditions of work and the wage rate. We had one weekly holiday. Otherwise there was almost no leave with pay. The years in which the company did well we got a bonus. The majority of the workers were females. In fact, we had a lady boss at the cutting department [Thankamma of our sample]. Male workers were also hired in every category of work.

Several times my sisters warned me against our male colleagues. They said that the management in their firm was not at all happy with them as they tried to contact trade union leaders to unionise workers around a charter of demands. However, they were not successful, as the women did not cooperate under the threat of the possibility of losing their jobs altogether. You know, we cannot take this risk as it is the best work option we have. Men are generally more qualified and can easily move to any place. However, in our firm, when all the women workers together went to the management for an increment, the management agreed.

### **Vijaylakshmi**

Vijaylakshmi (19 years old), the second respondent from the first group, is unmarried and lives with her parents in a village adjacent to the Export Promotion Park.

My father sells milk. We are two sisters and two brothers. My parents made it a point to educate all four of us. I studied up to

the Xth standard. As I could not pass the Xth standard exam after two attempts, I lost interest in studies. My next door neighbour, a girl of my age, who had left school after the VIIth standard, was working in one of the units in the Park soon after it was established. We saw it from a distance with a mixed feeling of awe and a kind of uneasiness about a completely new thing coming up in those open fields.

I used to hear stories about the work at the garment factories from my friends working there. They showed me some dresses and cosmetics which they bought with their bonus money. They said that while there was absolutely no time to chat on the shop floor, they enjoyed talking to each other while going to and coming back from their workplace. Every day a group of girls from my locality would go to work together, calling out to each other, laughing and chatting like schoolgirls. They used to go to movies and sometimes go shopping on holidays. Some of them also started saving money for their dowries besides helping their families. True, elders in the village were not very happy with the ways of these girls. They could never think of women going to work, all dressed up around 'office time' along with men. When I wanted to work, my father asked me what would be the difference between a man and a woman then.

I was getting bored sitting at home. Finally, I managed to persuade my parents to let me take the tailoring classes organised by the Community Development Centre adjacent to the Park. Initially, my parents were completely against the idea of sending their grown-up daughter to work outside home. In fact, it is true that it is difficult to get a proper match for a working girl in our community. Moreover, factory work (specifically garment factories) is completely new in the area. The Park has a huge gate as you have seen. To enter the Park, you need to be checked out by the security guard. Each firm within the Park has its own security system and it is quite impossible for outsiders to see what is going on inside. My parents were also not comfortable with the idea of the management's preference for young women.

During this time a cousin of mine from Tiruppur came to visit us. She had worked in a garment factory for five years before

her marriage. She told my parents that it was perfectly safe for a young woman to work in a garment factory. She also told them how she helped her father to get her married by earning her own dowry. She reported that the management thought women workers were more efficient and disciplined than men, and that women do not waste time by engaging in 'unproductive unionism'.

Finally, my parents agreed to let me work in the Park. My friends informed me that there were some vacancies in firm A in the tailoring section. I was lucky enough to get a job in the largest firm as the pay was slightly better than in the others and had some fringe benefits as well. There were both female and male applicants with similar qualifications like mine. However, only five women got through. At the interview the management mentioned job responsibilities, and information regarding salary, leave and benefits. As this firm has three continuous shifts, there is no question of piece-rate work. So, I too became a 'machine operator', which I had wanted to be for such a long time.

You know, I am working for the first time in my life, so I had no idea about unionism in the factories. But I know it is something bad and one should not get involved in it. Moreover, our employer is quite nice and takes care of all our needs. So why do we need any union in our firm? Let me give you an example. The line supervisor of grade A tailoring was a man. He used to be quite unnecessarily rude to his women subordinates. A few times he did even try to sexually harass some of us beginners. We went together to the management and complained against him. The management took proper action and the man was thrown out of his job. Three months after I began working, our male colleagues asked us not to work the next day because there was a strike called by the union in order to improve our situation. However, we did not pay any attention because we felt it was great to have a job and that it was much worse without a job. Moreover, at the beginning itself I had been told very clearly by the management that I should not get involved in any kind of unionism and to pay attention only to my work.

## Nazma

Nazma, a 29-year-old Muslim woman, represents the second group.

I come from a very poor family. I am the eldest of four sisters. Our father was a mason working in construction sites in Hyderabad. As long as he was alive we used to go to school and our mother used to be at home. You know, in our culture women do not come out and work in the presence of other men. Unfortunately, my father died when I was only 10 years old. We did not have enough money to continue our education. Eventually, dropping out of school we started working as domestic servants alongside our mother.

As a maid I used to feel terribly unclean when I washed the clothes and utensils of other people. So, at 18 when I got a job in the brick factory, I did not hesitate to take it up; the work was harder but more remunerative. Here, I met Yunus and we got married. I have now two children. Meanwhile, the Apparel Export Park was built in Gundlapochampally almost next door to our house. Both my husband and I went there in search of jobs as the brick factory work became too strenuous. Fortunately, both of us got jobs—I as a helper and my husband in the pressing department of firm D.

As my husband now earns enough, he keeps asking me not to work. But if I don't work we will not be able to educate our children. I have convinced my husband that we need to educate our children. If I were educated I could have got a job in the tailoring section with better pay. I want my children to study as much as possible and live a better life than ours and for that I am ready to make every effort.

Our firm produces garments solely for markets abroad. There are three shifts in the factory. Women usually work in the morning and day shifts. Generally, the employer is considerate and pays attention to our demands. Once or twice we did go in for a strike, but the management immediately responded to most of our demands. There is no trade union in our firm. We organised strikes on our own, both men and women together. Workers

bargain for better wages, but so far there have been no strikes in any of the firms.

### **Thankamma**

Thankamma (55 years old) is a woman who has had the experience of working not only in manufacturing, but also in garment production before joining one of the firms in the Park. She is one of the few supervisors in the sample.

My father was a farmer in Pala near Kochi in Kerala, but the income from the land we owned was not sufficient to maintain the family. So he used to work as a daily labourer as well. We were two sisters and two brothers. All of us went to school. I studied up to the Xth standard, but could not pass the school-leaving exam. My mother was basically a housewife. However, sometimes she used to sell fish in the locality nearby to earn a little to buy soap, oil, etc. In our area, in those days, selling fish was an acceptable occupation for women of our class. Women also used to work in the fields alongside men.

After leaving school, I stayed at home looking after the household chores and occasionally worked in our own fields. At 19 I got married to a man who was a carpenter from a village nearby. My in-laws were economically better off than us. My father had to give a considerable amount of dowry (both in terms of money and gold) at my marriage for which he had to sell part of his land.

Initially, I was quite happy and never thought of working outside as there was absolutely no need. My husband had a regular income. However, things started going wrong as even after three years of marriage I did not have a child. My in-laws took it for granted that the fault lay with me and started talking of getting a new wife for my husband. Thus, five years passed. A friend of my husband was in Kuwait working as a carpenter. He managed a work permit for my husband and he left shortly after that. He never came back. When my in-laws understood that their son was not going to come back or not going to send money anymore, they virtually forced me to go back to my parents.

The situation at home had changed considerably by then. My father was no more. However, both my brothers were working. But I could see that it was necessary for me to start earning money immediately. A family we knew who lived in Chennai needed an *ayah* for their child. With them I left Kerala and the world of my own for my living when I was about 26. My employers used to live in the vicinity of an export-oriented garment factory named Tata Coromandel Company Limited. I watched young women going to work everyday and got acquainted with them. My contract with the family was coming to an end as the child had started going to school. I pursued the possibilities of employment in the garment factory which had a hostel for women workers within the factory premises. Without much effort I got a job in the lowest grade of tailoring.

I started performing well and moved up to the higher level quite soon. As I had no family, and nowhere to go at all in my free time, I started learning the job of a cutter. There was an elderly Muslim man who was the cutting manager. He knew about my background and took a keen interest in training me. Afterwards, with his recommendation, I got a promotion to the cutting department of the factory.

Life at the garment factory was otherwise okay. I lived in the hostel and whatever I earned was more or less sufficient for me. It was definitely a more respectable situation for me than staying back with my family and working either in the fields or as a housemaid. However, men inside the factory and in the locality used to look upon me as a woman who could be approached easily, deserted by her husband as she was and apparently having no male guardian.

The working hours at the factory were very stringent. There was hardly any time even to look at the woman working beside you. For different grades in the tailoring unit we had machines on a table and a stool to sit on. There was no backrest as the management felt that it would lead to laziness. Initially we did not have a toilet facility at the factory. This was extremely inconvenient. Women workers took up this issue with the existing union led by the Indian Trade Union Congress (INTUC). Unfortunately, this requirement of ours was a low priority in the

charter of demands presented by the union, and issues like wage increase and promotion received greater emphasis and diverted the attention of the management. Later, some of us, elderly women workers, took up the issue with the management. Yet it was only after prolonged agitation such as a 'go slow' action, and that too without the union's active backing, did the management grant us the facility.

Also, there was strong opposition from the male workers when I was promoted to the cutting department which is usually dominated by men. As a result of the management's preference, the garment factories are generally women-dominated, mostly at the lower categories. Therefore, my entry into an essentially male domain was seen as an obvious intrusion, snatching away an opportunity from the 'really deserving'. Most pathetically, the garment workers' union leaders were all against my recruitment, although I was a union member. Fortunately, my women colleagues supported me and not all male colleagues were opposed either. The management, in turn, did not pay much attention to the union's demand.<sup>2</sup>

I worked in the Chennai factory for almost 20 years. A managerial staff member of Tata Corromandel was opening a factory in the Apparel Export Park near Hyderabad. A manager who knew me for several years asked me to join it as head of the cutting department. I moved to Hyderabad then.

### **Organised Labour and the Female Workforce in Garment Manufacturing**

The response to whether they were union members turned out to be significantly different for the three groups of women. The first group, that is, those who have not worked before, largely consisted of two categories of women: young girls between the ages of 18 and 22, and mature women aged 25 and above, who began working out of necessity. Vijaylakshmi and Radha represent this group. Irrespective of age, the women did not know much about what a union was and said that at their workplaces they had never heard of a union at all. While the second part of their answer is likely to be true, the first part is quite unbelievable. In fact, the core group

of workers who were helping us to identify the sample had told us that all the workers had some idea about trade unionism, but that the management does not like their workers getting involved in union practices and express this attitude in various unmistakable ways. Our intensive interviews corroborate this fact. There are, in fact, some instances of dismissal as a result of a worker's involvement with a union outside the Park. Since these women are newcomers to the labour market and highly nervous of losing their jobs, they were not ready to enter into any discussion on the subject.

The women in the second group, however, have worked earlier in paid jobs, for instance, Nazma. The women in this group prefer garment factory jobs to their earlier occupations for three reasons. First, wage rates in factory work are often higher than in agriculture or domestic services, the most common alternatives for working-class women. Second, the conditions of work in a garment manufacturing firm are far better than in other jobs. Finally, it is also socially more prestigious. Of course, these women are aware of trade unions. However, they are also aware of the fact that they get these jobs because the management believes that they are unlikely to join unions.

The women in the third group have already been somewhat exposed to industrial work culture and, consequently, have experience of traditional trade unionism. Almost all of them were union members in their earlier jobs. However, the response to the question: 'Have you benefited from your affiliation with the union?' was varied. While we have noted Thankamma's reactions to trade union practices in the last section, we now turn to a few other respondents here. Three women who were earlier working in a food-processing unit said it was because of unionism that there was a strike. The union leaders were so adamant that the management finally closed the unit and, as a result, these three women along with their colleagues lost their jobs.

One woman who was working as a helper in a TV manufacturing unit on a casual basis said that the workers there went on a strike mainly for higher wage rates for all categories of workers and regularisation of the temporarily employed. After 21 days of no work and consequently no pay, the workers agreed to settle



for a negotiation with the management. The outcome, however, was an increase only in the pay of a few skilled workers in the higher categories, who were also the unit-level leaders, but almost all casual workers including our informant were dismissed. This specific case reminds us of Williamson's (1985) assertion that skilled workers can win more since managements are interested in continuing the employment relationship with them. Unions do not oppose such partial victories as they are interested in their own existence. Union leaders do not have much to lose if unskilled or temporary workers are retrenched. TV manufacturing is mainly technical and women are found to be concentrated primarily in the lowest categories of work, often on a casual basis. Since women in AP (or in India as a whole) are far less likely, compared to men, to seek technical education, they tend to be concentrated in the lower categories of work. Naturally, women get affected disproportionately by negotiations between unions and the management. Interestingly, all the other respondents in this category did not say anything about the advantages or disadvantages of being associated with unions in their earlier workplaces.

The experiences of women who were earlier associated with trade unions seem to have been largely negative. In fact, the interests represented in negotiations between unions and the management around work conditions have been largely those of permanent male workers. In this context, Thankamma's experience portrayed in the last section is worth noting.

From our long discussions with the workers we noticed that one of the main reasons for the management preferring women is the lower probability of their being involved in trade union practices, on account of their 'docile characteristics'. It is a long-standing fact that women workers in the Third World are often stigmatised as 'cheap labour', willing to work in horrible conditions, and that they will not stand up for their rights, the syndrome originating from their 'Oriental submissiveness'. It is claimed that because of prolonged oppression, Third World women do not even aspire to higher wages (Standing 1989).

Let us look at this issue closely from the facts collected about our women respondents. As we have already mentioned, there is no concept of traditional trade unionism in the firms of our sample.

It seems, in the largest firm of our sample, INTUC tried to unionise workers but failed mainly because, first, there was strong management opposition that might lead to dismissal; and second, there was a perceptible reluctance on the part of the female workers who constituted 70 per cent of the workforce to unionise. These factors secured women's aversion to participation in union activities, but whether this is necessarily because of their docility needs to be probed further.

In the context of lack of unionism, it would appear that it is the management that sets the wage rates and other work conditions, and that the workers accept them. However, in reality, when we asked the women workers about how wage settlements were arrived at, we got a uniform answer. In all the firms, irrespective of market orientation and technological status, initially the wage rate was set by the management on the basis of the qualifications and previous work experiences of workers in garment factories. Some stray instances of individual bargaining were, however, possible. In the next year, in almost all the cases, there was evidence of group bargaining for wage settlements and, in the case of successful units, settlement of bonus as well. Workers claimed that while in highly export-oriented units the gains were substantial, in the domestic market-oriented firms it was often marginal. In none of these cases did wage bargaining have anything to do with traditional trade unions. Interestingly, workers of different firms do not collude with one another; workers in individual firms decide on common matters of interest among themselves. When we asked the male workers of the sample firms about the possibility of forming unions to put forward their demands, in every case, they pointed out that the women workers (who formed the majority) were not ready to go that far.

From the detailed discussions we had with the women workers we could figure out two important reasons for their apparent union-averse behaviour. A strike could be extremely costly for women workers, who were the main breadwinners, as it would necessarily mean loss of pay. Moreover, those who were aware about unionism and strikes knew that there was a possibility that the factory might close as a consequence. An immediate question crops up at this stage: Why do male workers not behave in the same

way? This is because it is more difficult for a woman to find a new job elsewhere, especially because of her inability to go too far away from her residence to work. In addition to that, women workers are generally less endowed in terms of education and information.

As we have already noted, most of our respondents had very little exposure to factory work culture. They have to achieve first a belief in the right to work. The consciousness about rights at work in general will evolve gradually with experience in paid factory work. Incidentally, Krishnaraj (1987) observes that women workers do support and achieve successful strikes in the large garment manufacturing units in Mumbai, causing production to come to a total halt. Women in our survey have asserted that access to factory employment has provided them with something positive in their lives. In the context of a labour-surplus economy, where women have less opportunities anyway, they are not ready to be separated from their new opportunities even if working conditions and wage rates are not acceptable. This has to be understood in a context where women do not have a very clear idea of what they would gain by participation in trade union activities.

The second reason, however, is more of a surmise. Aversion to labour solidarity and militancy may be a kind of strategy for these women. Kabeer (2001) maintains that women are far more likely to give their support to the incremental accretion of rights at work in preference to the kind of confrontational tactics that had led to male workers in the industry being replaced by women. A similar explanation has been given by Agarwal (1997) in a different context. Therefore, it may be concluded that women's reluctance to unionise does not necessarily emanate from their 'characteristic docility'. The idea of 'oppressed Oriental women' who have forgotten to stand up for their own rights comes from the assumption that workers in general and women workers in particular are passive agents of production, who become faceless homogeneous entities in the labour market.

We have mentioned that while workers bargain for wages and other conditions of work in almost all the firms, their achievements are substantial only in the case of export market-oriented firms. From our extensive interviews with both the workers and the management, we came to know that the workers had even threatened

to strike in one highly export-oriented firm. Does labour militancy occur when human asset specificity emerges as a result of higher technological improvement in export-oriented firms? Perhaps not, for two reasons. First, by nature, garment manufacturing is not a technology-intensive process, although some technological improvement in designing and other aspects has taken place. But our interviews with management as well as with workers did not give us any strong indication of asset-specific skill formation in the technologically advanced units. Second, the domestic market-oriented firms are equally technologically advanced units in this Park. The only difference lies in the nature of markets catered to by these two groups of firms. High export orientation of the units leads to a highly time-bound production process. The date of shipment of the products depends on factors not under the control of the management. It is very costly for a firm to fail to ship products in time. At the same time, these firms are quite small ones and do not have proper arrangements to keep inventories. As a result, a single day's strike before shipment can be highly expensive for the export-oriented units compared to domestic market-oriented firms. Table 2 reveals the picture of inventory–sales ratio for the firms in our sample. The low ratio in export-oriented firms compared to domestic market-oriented firms confirms the fact that these firms do not keep sufficient stocks after shipment.

It is important to note here that the size of firm B in the domestic market (in terms of employment) is comparable with that of the

**Table 2**  
**The Ratio between Inventories to Final Sales**

<i>Name of the firm</i>	<i>Inventory–sales ratio</i>
Domestic market	
A	0.25
B	0.10
Export-market	
D	0.03
E	0.03
F	0.02

**Source:** Collected from the sample firms.

firms in the export market, such as E or F. Moreover, firm B too does not have proper arrangements for large inventories. However, the inventory–sales ratio for firm B is much larger compared to export-oriented firms. Firm B is basically a domestic market-oriented unit and hopes to sell its products throughout the year. Even though it does not have proper storage facilities, it can take the risk of keeping inventories and selling in the home market within two to three months. But for export-oriented firms the gaps between two shipments are often quite long and, as a consequence, the products run the risk of becoming damaged. Workers in these firms are aware of this particular fact. Though the majority of these workers are women, they do not hesitate to take full advantage of market conditions and collectively bargain much more fiercely compared to their counterparts in the domestic market-oriented firms in order to ensure higher wage gains. If women workers are indeed a passive factor of production, how is it that they can behave in this way?

### Concluding Remarks

The findings of this study are, thus, not in conformity with the idea of ‘docile Oriental women’ constructed to explain the submissive behaviour of women workers in export-oriented manufacturing in the developing world. The negative attitudes of the women workers towards trade unionism originate from the fact that the trade unions usually prioritise the interests of permanent male workers in their negotiations with the management. It is also possible to look at women’s apparent aversion towards traditional trade unionism as just a strategy in order to secure jobs in an otherwise man’s world. This argument particularly gains strength when we consider the fact that in the South Asian context the right to join the traditionally male domain of paid work still has to be fought for by a woman at various levels and in several ways. Her struggle starts at home and continues at the level of the community. She has to negotiate with the family and the village patriarchs in order to go out for work. The struggle often continues at the workplace where her male colleagues regard her as a trespasser. Therefore, when a woman worker gets a job her immediate interest is in

how to retain it. The issue of rights at work is a later priority. It is not hard to find instances of women workers fighting also for their rights at work. However, they fight for their priorities only when they consider the time to be appropriate. They time and choose their battles.

A major shortcoming of this study is its small sample size. However, we have emphasised at the very beginning that we are not attempting any sort of generalisation. Nonetheless, even a small study can be successful in raising important larger questions that need to be probed further.

## Notes

1. In several interviews with the management it came out that the years of schooling attained by a worker play a very important role in learning ability. Therefore, even if the machineries are not very complicated and jobs not quite difficult, a strong sense of coordination and alertness are essential for getting trained quickly, especially when one has been totally unexposed. Theoretically this particular issue of education's overall role in increasing productivity has been substantially dealt with in the literature of industrial organisation.
2. Kabeer (2001) argues that gender-specific constraints and responsibilities hinder women workers' behaviour. Consequently, these constraints often do not let women act in a manner usually typical of a traditional full-time industrial worker in the context of trade union struggles. Kabeer further emphasises that as women's priority for flexibility is generally greater than men's, they conform to a different set of imperatives.

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