

Mallika Shakya, *Death of an Industry: The Cultural Politics of Garment Manufacturing During the Maoist Revolution in Nepal*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018. ISBN: 9781107191266 (cloth); ISBN: 9781108123310 (ebook)

Alessandra Mezzadri, *The Sweatshop Regime: Labouring Bodies, Exploitation, and Garments “Made in India”*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016. ISBN: 9781107116962 (cloth); ISBN: 9781316337912 (ebook)

South Asian Apparels: Stories of Boom and Bust

How do two neighbouring South Asian countries have seemingly contrasting experiences with the apparel sector? One, Nepal, has seen its garment industry annihilated; while in the other, India, it is seamlessly expanding. On the face of it, the two countries seem to have contrasting experiences, yet is this the case when one considers the labour politics within the industry in them?

The insightful books by Mallika Shakya and Alessandra Mezzadri trace for us the varied trajectories of the apparel sector in these neighbouring countries. Yet at the same time, both books underline the limits to and failures of neoliberalism, especially when viewed from the perspective of labourers. The authors provide us with rich analyses of how the garment industry actually touches down and how the promises of capitalist industrialization via the apparel sector actually play out at multiple scales. Using empirical data covering more than a decade, they weave together the rich tapestries of Nepal and India, offering a glimpse into the multi-layered development and labour politics of the global garment industry.

The industry is promoted as the archetypal route to industrialization for countries in the global South. The experiences of some newly industrialized countries, such as Singapore, Malaysia and Thailand, for instance, is used as prima facie evidence of the potential that the industry brings to countries adopting and investing in the manufacturing of ready-made garments for export. Economic geographers and sociologists have traced the upgrading potential of labour-intensive industries, such as apparels, using framings of global value chains (GVCs) or global production networks (GPNs). Yet many of these contributions

restrict their analysis to production processes, organizational structures, technological transformations, or governance analysis. The GVC and GPN literature has rightly highlighted how global garments are a source of surplus accumulation and yet how subcontracting – an indelible feature of the value chain – fragments the process. While studies on South Asian apparels have broadly taken off from these contributions and have incorporated labour voices, a comprehensive examination of the composite components of the industry has been missing. This is where Shakya's and Mezzadri's research steps in, though each draws on distinct theoretical and conceptual trajectories to analyse their research findings.

In both countries, like elsewhere in the global South, the Multi-Fibre Agreement (MFA) provides the backdrop for chronicling the boom and bust stories of the apparel sector. To help developed countries adjust to imports from the developing countries, the MFA was introduced in 1974 as it became evident that these countries may have a comparative advantage and so quotas were introduced, especially in the US. The MFA quota system continued until 1995, and despite being a protectionist measure, it was not necessarily always harmful as quota-hopping became a reality. Hence, the MFA was seen as a boon to the global South and its generous quotas to Nepal and India, amongst other countries, offered the chance for employment creation against a backdrop of structural adjustment programmes (SAPs). The implementation of SAPs, advocated by the International Monetary Fund and World Bank, proposed foreign direct investment to introduce export-oriented industries through which employment creation was to take place. The jobs founded through these industries were to absorb any loss of employment associated with a reduction in the public sector. Shakya and Mezzadri show that the distinct terrains of these policy proposals meant a mismatch of job type and potential employees was not the only limitation. As the decades wore on, it transpired that the types of jobs – low paid and often exploitative, created mainly through the global garment industry, which was a linchpin for export-oriented investment strategies promoted by the World Bank and IMF in the global South – hampered economic and social development. Indeed, in the case of Nepal, Shakya's work defies the industrial upgrading mantra alone. In other words, the expiry of the MFA determined the fortunes and failures of the industry and with it those involved in the industry, from capital to management to labour.

Shakya, through seven chapters, takes the reader on an absorbing ethnographic journey that locates how being enraptured by market-oriented logic and not appreciating the garment ecosystem in Nepal may provide the relevant explanation for the failures and eventual demise of the industry. She argues that the garment industry in Nepal is best understood along the vectors of ethnicity, class and competitiveness mutating to bring together its composite parts. Loyalty, friendship and trust, which are interlaced with class and ethnic affinities, are foundational to the doing of garment business in Nepal. These social registers, as Shakya neatly traces for us, shape both the mass-produced end of the garment industry as well as artisanal and niche production. To illustrate, a mass-producing garment firm producing a label appealing to environmentally-conscious consumers was able to convince its London-based buyer to approve sourcing the relevant fabrics from China because of affective ties cultivated between the supplier and buyer (p.46). Similarly, the density of social connections between weavers and fabric merchants resulted in everyday cross-border relations between Nepalese and Indians that meant tracing different parts of India onto the Nepalese garment industry, which – if a firm was to be competitive and cost-effective – had to be done through getting to know a community of weavers (p.47-48).

The ethnographic connections and dense webs outlined in the books suggest that outsiders may perceive these clusters to be chaotic because of the multiple business options operationalized within just the weaving community, for instance. Yet it is the cultural patronage and contours that makes it feasible for A&E, an artisanal producer, to flourish when the firm was enjoying the boom times. The fact that these social connections are fundamental to the garment industry at both ends of the production spectrum, mass and niche production, suggests that the industry's successes and failures cannot be understood from the viewpoint of market forces alone. However, the preoccupation of policymakers to provide only market-oriented solutions to address the abolishing of the MFA, according to Shakya, explains the death of the industry.

Since the garment industry in Nepal and internationally is “neither purely economic nor purely cultural but rather an amalgamation of these and more” (p.126), Shakya contends that politics and identity shaped the start, the middle and the end of the industry. While the

demise of garments also had consequences for those labouring in the industry, class solidarity in the form of unions too was eclipsed by social vectors of class, caste and ethnicity. Since Shakya's ethnographic research spans a two-year time-line, 2002-2004, she relies on secondary sources to outline how employer-worker relations changed in the late 1980s-early 1990s period on the shop floor. With the end of caste-dominance during these years, workers were not only disembedded from their social and political spheres but also had to work on piece-rate. With an increasingly alienated labour force working for the larger employers in the 1990s, unionization in the garment sector was slow to ensue – yet it gathered pace with the end of the MFA and return of war by the Maoists. The interregnum was shaped by an anarchic situation with workers ill-prepared to understand the scale of the collapse. A migratory exodus (and finding other jobs scarce) was more likely than reaching out to unions or the state. Using Amita Baviskar and Nandini Sundar's (2008) work, Shakya argues that the state exhibited its paradoxical character with regards to democracy and neoliberalism – “withdrawal from concerns of social justice, on the one hand, and policies for protection of corporate interests, on the other” (p.121). Thus, the voices and struggles of workers were never formally acknowledged by development policy advocates or the state, as the expiry of the MFA decimated the industry and the jobs that came with it – or, the entire industrial ecosystem.

If Shakya's intellectual inspiration comes more from Polanyi for a conceptual apparatus, Marxist-feminism provides the intellectual tools for Mezzadri's analysis of the Indian garment sector. In this neighbouring country, the sweatshop regime is deployed to understand how the labouring poor encounter and make a living within the garment sector. The global production system is understood to be a joint enterprise of multiple actors and clusters that criss-cross scale and India's vast geographical space to connect global retailers, domestic producers, factories, merchants and manufacturers, subcontractors, and family workshops. Mapping the intricate nature of the global garment sector from regional lords to brokers to labouring bodies is indicative of how each of these segments is involved in producing and reproducing sweatshop conditions. The upshot of these social dynamics is that inequalities are legitimized and working poverty institutionalized.

The empirical backbone for Mezzadri's book comes from multiple rounds of fieldwork that go back to 2004. She uses a combination of open-ended interviews, various reports, and revisits that follow the value chain within India, and carries out multi-sited investigations to draw upon her complex data set. By treating the garment chain as a multi-sited terrain worthy of close investigation, Mezzadri's aim is to reconstruct "the nature of capital-labour relations" and "their implications for labour and labouring" (p.10). It is a combination of these ethnographic methods that permits her to delve into the nuances of labour exploitation, oppression, unfreedom and the depletion of garment sector workers. The scale analysis provided by the book is also able to shift our gaze from production to the labour process, nationally, regionally, and locally – and it is this multi-scalar analysis that gives a sense of the sheer enormity and complexity involved in one country's apparel sector alone.

Taking readers through production circuits and hubs, this book is both thorough and at times leads to dizziness. It surely reveals that the audit trails that corporate retailers in the West stand by for effective global governance are unlikely to offer credibility. When the production regime varies across multiple clusters, scales, and geographical spaces as it does in India – from the North and East to the South – the complexity is unlikely to make neoliberal global governance effective. In India, persistent relative inequality and social distinctions, which production and product differentiation draws upon, compounds these challenges. Or, put differently, labouring poor both circulate within these clusters and are reproduced within labour regimes that are shaped by sweatshop conditions; and the absence of a living wage in the global garment industry means the reproduction of sweatshop regimes is inscribed into global garments.

Both books are grounded and take readers on an empirically rich journey. Shakya is at her best when she deftly takes us through the development terrain and the information she gathered as a development practitioner herself and her presence with management and capital at various clusters of the garment industry. Her insights are many, which she cleverly teases out of her rich ethnographic data; and she constantly brings our attention to the social vectors that have significance in capital-management-labour relations in Nepal. The account of the shop floor and the fate of labourers and unions makes some broad sweeps for the period prior

to the fieldwork phase, and may have benefited from more tentativeness. In contrast, Mezzadri's composition of the sweatshop regime reveals how class, caste and gender remain central to the differentiation of the labouring poor, and capital's ability to extract surplus using these markers strategically, not just accentuating existing differentiations but also further fragmenting populations. The institutionalized sweatshop regime that makes the boom in the Indian apparel sector possible relies on a pervasive inequality marking the garment industry, whether in factories, workshops or home production.

The boom and bust in the garment industries of India and Nepal, respectively, underscore how global capitalism's promises and market-oriented policies draw upon social differentiation, which extends beyond class. State and capital continuously collude with each other based upon these differentiations, and yet are silent in acknowledging how these distinctions matter in the world of policy making. The failure of labour and union movements to call out how caste, ethnicity, gender, class, religion and identity intermingle to shape capital-labour terrain may be the Achilles heel that unsettles its potential strength and thwarts the possibility of producing a politics that has a transformative agenda of redistribution. The global garment industry otherwise remains a mode of surplus extraction, as it did historically, until collective labour struggles can more effectively shape and transform capitalism. And the on-going effects of and contestations around Covid-19 may be the space to advocate those voices much more.

Reference

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