

Inventory of Informal Worker Organizations: India¹

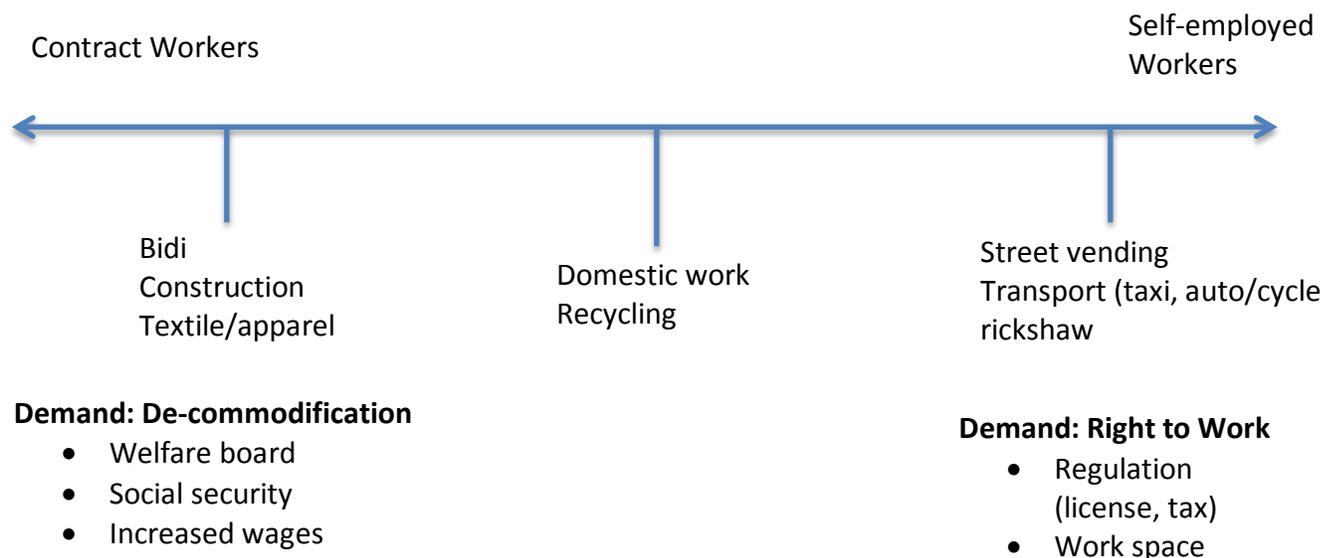
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This document summarizes our findings on informal workers' organizations in India. There is relatively little research that has been done on informal workers' organizations in India. My own work on organization efforts among Indian informal workers in construction, tobacco (or bidi), textiles, street vending, and waste picking suggests that the lack of research is *not* indicative of lack of activity. Informal workers in India *are* organizing, and more research on these movements is desperately needed. Given the lack of research currently available, the following review is based on: the few (often city-level) studies that do exist, organization and union websites, Indian government reports (available on the web), newspaper articles, and my own research since 2003.

Based on our preliminary survey of the existing literature, we suggest that informal workers' organizing strategies in India depend on where they sit on the spectrum of informal work--with contract work on one end and self-employed work on the other. Contract workers operate in a traditional wage-based, employer-employee relationship (albeit one that is not legally recognized or protected); self-employed workers are owners of a small business that employs 0-5 employees. Although both groups share several work characteristics (namely that they do not receive any legal protection or regulation and live in daily precarity), the structures of their work and their employment relationships differ in ways that are significant for organizing (see figure).

As ideal types, I suggest that contract workers, on one end of the spectrum of informal work, fight for measures that can de-commodify their labor (such as welfare boards, social security, and increased wages). At the other end of the spectrum, self-employed workers fight for measures that ensure their "right to work" without harassment from local authorities (such as increased regulation through licenses and taxes, and access to work space). Industries that fall in the middle of the spectrum appear to make both sets of demands. Across the spectrum, informal workers target the state, employers, and in some cases (especially among transport workers, such as taxi and rickshaw drivers) consumers. Perhaps most significant, all organized informal workers seem to share a struggle for "recognition" of themselves as workers and their work as legitimate.

¹ This is a *draft*. Please do not distribute without permission by the author. I thank Ryan Nielson for his excellent research assistance.

Figure 1: Continuum of Informal Workers' Movements

Organizations and Welfare Boards among Informal Workers

Indian informal workers are organizing through a range of organization types. Some are legally registered as NGOs (under the Societies and Trust Act), which enables them to attain foreign funding and the attention of supporters who may not want to openly support labor in India's current liberalization context. Others are legally registered as trade unions (under the Trade Union Act), which ensures a membership-based model, social movement ideology and (in some cases) support from established union federations. Informal workers' unions are more common than informal workers' NGOs. Most organizations organize by industry, because workers needs drastically differ by industry. However, there are a few large organizations that cut across industries to highlight the similarities of all informal workers and to gain greater leverage through a larger membership base. Although they are the exception, these large, multi-industry organizations are significant, because they have substantial influence at the national and transnational levels.

Perhaps the most innovative institution that has emerged in India for informal workers is The Welfare Board. Welfare Boards are tripartite institutions, where state governments, employers, and workers have representation and contribute funds. Employers' contributions come from a tax on production, while workers' contributions come from their membership dues. To become a member of a Welfare Board, workers must prove their informal work status; unions normally educate workers about welfare boards and provide confirmation for workers' informal status. To this extent, informal workers' unions are becoming recognized by the Indian government as an essential partner in grappling with the nation's swelling informal workforce. Some Welfare Boards have been launched at the national level, while others are launched at the state level, but in all cases it is the state government that is most responsible

for implementing the Welfare Board. Welfare Boards are currently trade-based. Perhaps the most famous are those for bidi (hand-rolled cigarette) manufacture and construction—both of which I have summarized below and extensively analyze elsewhere (see Agarwala 2013). Garment workers also have welfare boards; they appear to be relatively active in Gujarat, inactive in Maharashtra, and non-existent in Delhi (see below). Domestic workers have also launched welfare boards in some states, but further research is required to assess their effectiveness (see below). In return for workers' membership dues, Welfare Boards provide trade-specific benefits to informal workers. These include welfare benefits such as education scholarships for workers' children, health-care clinics, houses in women workers' names, expenses for weddings, funerals, and disability, and pensions. In some trades (such as garments), workers have also fought to receive work-related tool kits and equipment through the Welfare Boards. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, Welfare Boards help consolidate the identity of informal workers, provide a forum for informal workers' concerns, and issue a state-sanctioned worker identity card to informal workers, *even in the absence of employer recognition*.

Cross-industry Organizations of Informal Workers

Probably the most famous informal workers' organization in India is The Self-Employed Women's Association (SEWA), which has been registered as a trade union since 1972. In 2011, SEWA attained the status of a legally registered, national-level union federation, whose members are other Indian informal workers' organizations.² Because SEWA's membership is comprised entirely of informal women workers, its bargaining strategies are unique and differ from the vast majority of traditional Indian unions, who primarily target formal workers. Today, SEWA counts over one million members in over 100 industries in rural and urban areas (including garment workers, waste pickers, construction workers, salt workers, nursery workers, etc.).

SEWA has launched several extremely innovative strategies to meet the diverse and complicated needs of its members. Underlying all their efforts is recognition of informal workers' status as a permanent status. Like all unions, SEWA's main contribution is empowering and educating workers to fight for their rights to dignified work. Unlike other unions, SEWA does not fight to formalize informal workers. Rather, SEWA fights to improve work and livelihood conditions for workers within their informal labor status. To this end, they

² A union federation is a central organization that has unions as members. In SEWA's case, its largest union member is the original union in Gujarat. In addition to SEWA-Gujarat, there are 6 other (smaller) SEWA unions in India. LERN/MKS is also a union member of the SEWA federation. SEWA attained federation status to increase its presence and power in international and national level policy decisions. SEWA was the first (and to date, the only) non-traditional union federation to attain this status. To attain union federation status, SEWA faced much resistance from traditional union federations and ultimately had to engage in a major legal battle. As a result of SEWA's efforts, the majority of existing union federations altered the rules to qualify for federation status to be more stringent. Now, to qualify for legal registration in India, a union federation must have legally registered union affiliates across 8 states in India.

have fought directly with employers for improved wages and advocated for policy changes at the national level to provide informal workers with welfare benefits and social security. Perhaps SEWA's most interesting approach is its use of cooperatives. Cooperatives complement SEWA's union efforts against employers by giving informal workers an alternative source of income that draws from group-based support. Finally, SEWA also provides direct services to its members, including a bank with savings and loans products, health care services (that include midwives and other reproductive health care), and leadership and business development training.

SEWA has also become famous for its leadership in three areas of transnational activities (see Agarwala 2012). First, it has initiated transnational advocacy networks for sub-groups of informal workers. HomeNet South Asia is a transnational network of home-based workers' organizations, UNIFEM, and academic researchers (from Harvard University and the Global Labour Institute in Geneva).³ It aims to increase home-based workers' visibility in the public sphere, security from protective laws, and economic rights. Using newsletters, an updated website, and regional workshops, the network maintains close communication across continents. Its main target for ensuring protective legislation for home-based workers throughout the world is the ILO. In 1996, the ILO passed Home Work Convention 177, which aimed to give home-based workers equal rights to formal workers. Since then, HomeNet has pressured national governments to ratify and implement the convention through local legislation. HomeNet also works to build local grassroots organizations. Recently, HomeNet organized a network for rural home-based artisans that links local embroiders to international designers and retailers.

SEWA is also an active member of StreetNet, a transnational network of street vendors. StreetNet formed in the late 1990s to increase the visibility of street vendors' contributions to urban economies, attain local licenses for street vendors, and incorporate street vendors' representation in urban development policies. Finally, SEWA helps lead WIEGO (Women in Informal Employment, Globalizing and Organizing). WIEGO is a transnational research policy network that was founded in 1998 by SEWA, Harvard University, and the ILO. WIEGO aims to increase information about the size, composition, and contribution of informal workers, facilitate policy dialogues, and strengthen member-based, grassroots organizations of informal workers. Recently WIEGO has increased attention and policy protections for waste collectors and domestic workers.

The second area of transnational activity in which SEWA has engaged is organizing informal workers in countries outside India. To date, SEWA has initiated efforts in Turkey, Nepal, Burma, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Bhutan, and most recently, Afghanistan. SEWA organizers from India travel to these countries and help local workers form new organizations by training them on organization structure and governance, teaching them to collect data on local informal work, and facilitating their linkages with government officials. In Afghanistan, SEWA set up a vocational training center in 2006 and trained 1,040 local women in informal trades including

³ UNIFEM is the United Nations Development Fund for Women. Currently, there is also a HomeNet Southeast Asia. The intention is to create regional networks across the world.

electricity, food processing, and sewing. Since then SEWA has helped these women organize into 22 women's groups and a federation, which was registered as Baagey Khazana Sabah Association in 2010 under Afghanistan's Ministry of Social Justice. These groups enable women to hold accounts in local banks. Recently, SEWA has begun training these Afghani groups in computers, accounting, finance, and English. Similar efforts have been made in Pakistan, Nepal, and Sri Lanka.

The final area in which SEWA engages in transnational efforts is within the international trade union movement. In 2006, SEWA became the first union of informal workers to become affiliated with the International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC). Since then SEWA has also received affiliation with trade based global federations, including The International Union of Food, Agricultural, Hotel, Restaurant, Catering, Tobacco and Allied Workers' Associations (IUF) and the International Textile, Garment and Leather Workers Federation (ITGLWF).

Lastly, it is worth noting the New Trade Union Initiative (NTUI), which is a trade union federation of unions in the informal sector. SEWA is also active in supporting NTUI. NTUI fights for social security, right to association, health and safety protections, and improved minimum wages for informal sector workers. NTUI is also unique compared to traditional union federations in India, because it is primarily comprised of unions that are not affiliated to political parties.

Domestic Work

Although the domestic workers' struggle is among the youngest informal workers' movements in India, it is rapidly growing and has already achieved some successes.

In India, domestic workers have become increasingly proletarianized as fewer workers live in the employer's home (as they did in the past, often for generations), and more workers live out. Some continue to work full-time for a single household, but most work in several homes on a part-time basis. These shifts have also moved domestic work in India from a largely male occupation to a female occupation. According to the Indian census, the percentage of female domestic workers increased from 37% in 1971 to 63% in 1991 (Ray and Qayum 2009). The majority of domestic workers in India serve as self-employed workers as they are directly employed by an employer in the household they work. Although most workers attain referrals through informal networks, some work through an agency that extracts referral fees from the domestic worker and from the employer.

In recent years, several domestic workers' organizations have emerged throughout India. These include: Penn Thozhilalargal Sangam, Delhi Domestic Workers' Union, Desiya Garhika Thozhilali Prasthanam, Andhra Pradesh State Domestic Workers' Union, Karnataka Domestic Workers' Union, Akhila Karnataka Domestic Workers Trade Union, Karnataka Domestic Workers' Movement, Maharashtra Rajya Gharkamgar Kirti Samiti. These unions are fighting for legal recognition of the legitimacy of domestic work and the associated benefits of

social security, minimum wage, identity cards, holidays/holiday pay, and sexual harassment protections. Union members have advocated for policy changes at the state level, participated in several public marches, and even launched some strikes at the local level. In some states (Maharashtra and Tamil Nadu), domestic workers have won Welfare Boards. One interesting success in attaining recognition has been that domestic workers have managed to incorporate themselves into the new national health-care initiative, the *Rashtriya Swasthya Bima Yojana* (RSBY), by attaining health insurance for domestic workers from the Government of India. To qualify, domestic workers are required to get identification certificates from the employer, resident welfare associations, registered trade unions, or the police (Correspondent 2011). Further research is required to assess the effectiveness of the Welfare Boards and the insurance scheme to date.

At present, we did not find evidence of a national-level organization, although some are affiliated to the NTUI (the union federation for politically independent organizations of informal workers). As well, some are affiliated to the Asian Domestic Workers Network (ADWN), which struggles for the international solidarity of domestic workers across Asia. Although most domestic workers' organizations are independent, AITUC (a "traditional" union federation, affiliated to the Communist Party of India (CPI)) has recently had major successes in organizing 10,000 domestic workers in Mumbai. This effort requires further study.

Waste Pickers

In some regions (such as western India where we conducted our initial interviews), Indian waste pickers identify themselves as self-employed. However, in many cases, they are working as unprotected, unregulated, "disguised" contract workers for a private company. The table below, for example, illustrates the complex chain of contractors among waste-pickers in Delhi (Koberlein 2003):

Occupational Group	Estimated numbers of actors engaged
Waste pickers	90,000-100,000
Waste sorters	30,000-35,000
Auxilliary labourers	10,000-12,000
Itinerant waste buyers	15,000-20,000
Small scale dealers	8,000-10,000
Intermediate dealers	4,000-5,000
Wholesalers	800-1,000
Retailers	1,200-1,500
Agents	Not known
Recycling units	~ 100
Recycling factories	X
Total	159,100-183,600

In western India, the Kagad Kach Patra Kashtakari Panchayat (KKPKP) union (which began in 1993) has become the most successful waste pickers' organizations in the country. They employ three primary strategies. One of their first struggles was to secure identity cards from the municipal government, so they could avoid police harassment when collecting waste from public spaces. By the late 1990s, they were successful in attaining identity cards, and police harassment declined. Second, in 2008, KKPKP launched a new, affiliated collective, called SWACH, which attains waste collection contracts from housing complexes and businesses. This strategy enables SWACH members to regularize their work through contracts, increase their earnings through user-fees, and minimize competition by securing work outside public spaces. In cases where SWACH is unable to attain contracts, KKPKP continues to negotiate to incorporate their members into private companies or municipal governments. To date, KKPKP is the only organization in India that has integrated waste pickers into a regularized status with the local government, the Pune Municipal Corporation (PMC). These efforts to secure employment are similar to those made by street vendors in India. Finally, KKPKP's efforts focus on incorporating their members into existing government programs for low caste members. For example, KKPKP managed to integrate waste pickers into the Government of India's "Pre-Matriculation Unclean Occupations Scholarship," which provides school fee assistance to children from parents with "unclean" occupations. Because waste-picking tends to be an occupation that overlaps caste status, KKPKP's efforts straddle labor and identity politics. Today KKPKP has 8,000-10,000 members, while SWACH has 2,000; some leaders hold dual seats in both organizations. To attain government attention, KKPKP focuses on highlighting how much money local governments are saving due to waste-pickers and the environmental benefits of waste-pickers' work.

In other regions of India, organizations have not been as successful at attaining collective contracts. For example, the Stree Mukti Sanghathana (SMS) in Mumbai has advocated to eliminate waste picking as an occupation and tried to turn their members into collectors with contracts (similar to the KKPKP model), but they have not achieved the scale of KKPKP. Instead, they have been more successful at offering services, such as counseling and the creation of self-help groups that attain loans for women.

The Alliance of Indian Wastepickers serves as a national-level network of 35 local organizations across India. The Alliance fights to connect waste pickers with government waste collection systems, recognition and "legitimization" by the state, the registration of workers for state welfare benefits, and the registration of industry through licenses. Like Domestic Workers, some waste pickers (in the state of Karnataka) have had some success in attaining official recognition of waste pickers as a vulnerable "class" or "occupation" by attaining state-sanctioned identity cards that give them access to health benefits (Reporter. 2012).

Although waste-pickers in India have attained some success at being recognized as an occupation, traditional, politically affiliated unions continue to ignore them for the most part. Therefore, most waste-pickers' organizations in India are independent.

Street Vending

Indian street vendors have begun organizing in recent years, and they have attained some visibility as a legitimate occupation with legitimate needs. They are also unique in their efforts to fight for a national-level policy. To date, however, they have not had much success on their main demands.

Most Indian street vendors are self-employed, and they tend to be male (although there are more female vendors than is commonly understood). Unlike waste pickers, Indian street vendors represent a range of different castes. Based on a study of 300 street vendors in each of three cities, Sharit Bhowmik shows that few street vendors come from the lowest castes, and they have moderate levels of education (Bhowmik *Hawkers and the Urban Informal Sector*). Indian street vendors are either “mobile”, where vendors use carts and sell goods while moving, or “stationary”, where vendors sell their goods on the side of the road or sidewalk. Some stationary vendors also sleep in the area that they vend from, and in most cases, mobile vendors rent their carts. In both cases, street vendors rely on the use of public space, and are most vulnerable to harassment and rent-seeking behavior (in the form of bribes and arbitrary fees) by local enforcement officials. Some argue that up to 20% of their earnings are lost in this way (Bhowmik 2005). According to a survey in Mumbai by Sharit Bhowmik, 58 out of 60 interviewed street vendors entered the occupation after the vendor or spouse lost a job in the formal economy in textiles or other factories (Bhowmik). Similarly, 50% of street vendors in Kolkata and 30% of street vendors in Ahmedabad turned to street vending after losing a job in the formal sector (Bhowmik 2005).

Like domestic workers and waste pickers, street vendors have been focused on attaining recognition for their work and protecting their right to work by regulating the industry and diminishing police harassment. Unlike domestic workers and waste pickers, however, street vendors have tried to organize at the national level by advocating for national-level policy changes. The National Association of Street Vendors of India (NASVI) is the leader in this effort. NASVI (which was spearheaded by SEWA and others) is headquartered in Delhi and is a federation of unions and NGOs across India. NASVI also includes several unregistered organizations; ironically, these are especially prevalent in West Bengal, which was ruled by the Communist Party of India-Marxist for over 2 decades. NASVI strives to create “inclusive” cities, and legitimize street vendors as a critical component of cities. NASVI targets the government with demonstrations.

NASVI’s main goal is to get the Government of India to pass a national law to regulate street vending (the law was introduced in Parliament in 2009 and was set to be discussed in Parliament before the end of 2013). The proposed policy aims to create 3 street vending zones in municipalities (no vending, restricted vending, and restriction-free vending). Under the national policy, municipalities would create a town vending committee (TVC), which would manage the registration and licensing of vendors and serve as a regulatory board for vending in the city. TVCs would be representative and comprise of local government officials, street vending organizations, resident welfare organizations, and other civil society/NGO groups.

TVCs would also be responsible for ensuring that vending zones were equipped with public toilets, waste disposal, electricity, drinking water, storage facilities for goods (including cold storage for food), child-care facilities, and parking areas. Lastly, the policy aims to establish a procedure for photo census, the issuing of licenses/identity cards, and the registration of street vendors. Such regulated zones are expected to reduce congestion in public spaces, while still enabling vendors to service the needs of the city and secure their right to a livelihood.

Taxi and Rickshaw Drivers

Taxi and Rickshaw drivers in India are organizing and (based on newspaper reports) are actively waging strikes. However, further research is needed to better understand their work structures, movement strategies, and movement effectiveness.

In Mumbai, taxi workers are well-known for being organized into strong unions comprised of male migrants from neighboring states. But further study is needed to better understand the structure of taxi work across Indian studies and the forms of organization among taxi workers.

Currently, the rickshaw industry is completely unregulated, so drivers are subject to substantial fraud and exploitation by agents and middlemen. Autorickshaw drivers, for example, are said to be controlled by agents who provide drivers with loans and licenses; some agents are registered, while others are not. According to Mohan and Roy's (2003) study 274 autorickshaw drivers in Delhi, 65% owned their own vehicles, 24% got a license from legal or semi-legal sources, and the remainder obtained loans and licenses from an "agent". Official channels for licenses are long and mired with bureaucratic red tape, so a lucrative market for private "agents" has emerged. Private agents charge drivers for their services, collect interest on their loans, and sometimes issue illegal licenses, but they deliver vehicles immediately.

Cycle rickshaw drivers are even more vulnerable. A much larger percentage of cycle rickshaw drivers rely on "*thekedars*," who not only own the vehicles and rent them to rural-urban migrants but also house migrant drivers and provide them with high interest loans. Based on a study of 1,452 cycle rickshaws in Delhi, only 132 were owners, while 1,320 were pullers; more than 90% operated rickshaws owned by others (Kurosaki 2012). Each *thekedar* owned on average 56 rickshaws, two-thirds of which were rented out daily at fixed rental fees averaging Rs. 34 per day. Over half of the *thekedars* in the study arranged accommodations for rickshaw pullers, and 66% provided loans to rickshaw pullers. Although *thekedars* are rural migrants themselves, they usually remain in the city permanently while maintaining close connections with villages through remittances. In the Delhi study, 75% were found to maintain their home village as their permanent address. According to the Delhi study, before becoming *thekedars*, 37% engaged in rickshaw repair work and 8% were pullers themselves. Although this indicates some social mobility in the sector, it is also important to note that the majority of *thekedars* came from privileged demographic groups: 67% were Hindu, nearly 60% were middle and upper caste members (17% are lowest caste, and 24% are members of the protected caste

called “other backward castes”). Nearly 90% of *thekedars* in the study had primary or higher education, and 34% had secondary or higher education.

A number of organizations exist to organize rickshaw drivers in India. Some are politically independent, while others are affiliated to major traditional union federations. The existing unions include: the Andhra Pradesh Auto Rickshaw Drivers and Workers Federation (affiliated with Indian National Congress (INC) Party); Vijayadurga Auto Drivers' Welfare Association (constituent of above organization); and the All Bengal Rickshaw Union. Currently, the primary demands appear to be designed to create a better business environment, rather than improved working conditions. These demands include increased government regulation, limited licensing to reduce competition, control of gas prices, and increased fares. Since rickshaw licenses are provided by municipal governments, most protests are local. Unlike with street vendors, there does not appear to be any efforts to create a national-level policy.

Textile/Apparel

Informally employed garment workers in India can be divided among those who produce garment for export versus those who produce garments for the domestic market. Among those producing for the export market, informal workers can be hired as contract workers (who usually work on the factory premises, but are nonetheless vulnerable and unregulated, because they operate through chains of sub-contractors) or piece-rate workers (who usually work at home, operate as self-employed workers, work seasonally, and are viewed as more educated and higher paid). Informal workers who produce for the domestic market also include contract and piece-rate workers; but all are home-based and most are women.

Based on initial fieldwork, I find that there are *three* distinct forms of unions organizing textile workers' in India. These organizations differ in terms of their target membership and their primary organizing strategy. All three union types are legally registered under Indian law. The relationship between these three types of unions is often tense.

The first are the traditional unions that are affiliated to political parties. These unions primarily organize formal workers, although some have recently begun to organize informal workers. Membership is limited to workers operating in export-oriented factories. AITUC is among the few traditional unions that has attempted to organize informal contract workers operating in the factory premises of SEZs. Their primary demand is to formalize informal workers. Instead of using strikes, AITUC uses existing conciliation channels. To recruit members and discuss grievances, they meet workers at the factory gates during tea and lunch breaks. They never hold meetings during the workday inside the factory premises, and they never meet or recruit workers in their neighborhoods. Then they write a letter of demand to the employer. If the employer does not agree to negotiate, they may hold a demonstration at the gate. They then turn to the state and write a complaint to the relevant government office (such as the Labor Commissioner, Labor Inspector etc.), who in turn will begin the dispute resolution process, which may eventually end up in the labor court or even the high court. This

process takes *years*. In addition to mobilizing workers to fight for legal labor protections, these unions also engage in political mobilizations, such as the struggle for a common minimum wage for workers across Indian states and industries

The second type of union organizing informal garment/textile workers are independent unions, such as the Garment and Allied Workers' Union (GAWU) in Delhi, Garment and Textile Workers' Union (GATU) in Bangalore, and Munnade in Bangalore. Like traditional unions, these unions organize workers in export-oriented factories, but they more explicitly organize formal *and* informal workers. GAWU emerged in 2007, and today its membership is 4,176 (60% of members are permanent and 40% are informal contract workers). These unions target the more marginal population of workers that many critics argue are often left out of traditional, politically-affiliated unions (i.e. women, tribals, Dalits, migrants). As a result, they employ a more innovative and broader bargaining strategy, akin to "social movement unionism". For example, they attempt to assist workers in improving their livelihoods not just at the workplace, but also in their civic and home lives. To do so, they organize at the factory gates *and* at workers' homes. They also make traditional demands, such as increased wages; freedom of association; child care facilities; and protection against 'wage theft'; forced overtime; and sexual harassment. Finally, to collect information on the problems being faced, GAWU partners with the think-tank, Society for Labor and Development, to gather data using the government program, Right to Information (RTI).

In addition to their civic and factory-level efforts, these unions engage in political mobilizations designed to alter public policy. One important current campaign is the Asia Floor Wage campaign (led by Annanya Bhattacharjee), which seeks to win a continent-wide minimum wage of US\$475/month (in Purchasing Power Parity terms) for garment workers. Bhattacharjee (2009, p.14) stated that as of 2009, the Asia Floor Wage Alliance included over 70 organizations in 17 countries in Asia, Europe, and North America—including trade unions and "labor and human rights organizations, development NGOs, women's rights organizations, and academics." Finally, unlike traditional unions, these unions also use brand pressure to campaign for buyers to bear some responsibility for the payment of minimum wages.

The third type of union organizing Indian garment workers are independent unions that exclusively target informal workers. All their members operate outside factory premises (in sub-contractors' workshops or homes), and they tend to produce textiles for the domestic market. These unions include SEWA and LERN/MKS. Unlike others, these unions do *not fight to formalize informal workers; they fight to improve work and livelihood conditions for workers within their informal labor status*. Rather than fighting for traditional minimum wages based on time of work (i.e. wage/month), they fight for minimum wages on a piece-rate basis (i.e. wage/shirt made). In this struggle, SEWA organizes women workers who sew garments, as well as women workers who transport garments from shop to shop (on their heads or pulling handcarts). At present, SEWA and LERN work with employers to negotiate a minimum wage on piece-rate basis, and they are simultaneously fighting for a policy-level minimum wage that can be more universal (across more employers and covering more products). Second, these unions are fighting for welfare benefits (such as pensions, health insurance, education scholarships,

and government identity cards), as well as improvements in work conditions (such as private space to eat or use the bathroom for headloaders). To this end, SEWA has fought for and attained Welfare Boards for home-based garment sewers and self-employed headloaders. Because work environments differ between these trades, so too do the Welfare Board benefits. The headloaders welfare board provides medical and education materials. The garment sewers welfare board offers a sewing box with scissors, a table, and other tools; Rs. 1200 for medical needs; and skills training. In 2009, all self-employed workers were given identity cards from the Welfare Boards. LERN has also attained identity cards for its 6000 members. These unions also employ cooperatives and provide training.

A note on the carpet industry

The carpet industry in India is classified within textiles. Organization efforts in the carpet industry, however, differ from those in other garments and textiles. Efforts in the carpet industry have focused on issues of child labor and have been dominated by NGOs, international human rights groups, and churches, rather than unions or labor NGOs. In addition, a key bargaining strategy in carpets has been to pressure consumers using a rhetoric of human rights, rather than empowering workers and pressuring states and employers (Brooks 2005; Brooks 2007; Rodrigues 2004).

The carpet industry has traditionally been based on sub-contracting/putting out from home-based work (Seidman 2007). In the 1980s, the carpet industry became more export oriented and began to grow. To facilitate this growth, the government of India created training centers. Although the centers were limited to workers over age 12, many younger children were trained. In 1981, the government had 600 centers producing 30,000 weavers under age 15 per year. At the time, the Indian government actively encouraged child labor to meet the growing export demands.

In the 1990s, however, child labor in Indian rug-making came under scrutiny with the growth of human rights discourses, consumer outcry, and new government initiatives in the US and elsewhere. As part of this trend, Rugmark emerged as the first organization started in India by Indians to introduce socially labeled goods. These movements targeted consumers to improve working conditions. Rugmark's impact on child labor is debatable (Chowdhry and Beeman 2001; Seidman 2009).

Tobacco Manufacturing (*bidi*) & Construction

These are the two industries whose informal workers' organizations I detail in my book, *Informal Labor, Formal Politics, and Dignified Discontent in India* (2013). I would argue that workers in these two industries have launched the most successful industry-wide, alternative social movements for informal workers in India.

Bidi is a local Indian cigarette made of a rolled leaf and roasted tobacco. Bidi workers comprise ninety-eight percent of workers in the Indian tobacco industry (NSSO 2001). The bidi and construction industries operate through private employers and long chains of informal subcontractors, and both are exploitative. The table below illustrates the salient characteristics of both industries' workers. Although workers in both industries operate outside any employer protection or regulation, laws in several states protect the mass informal workforce in these two industries due to informal workers' movements. According to official figures, nearly 3 percent of the 15 million workers informally employed in construction are unionized; in tobacco, nearly 7 percent of the 4 million informal workers are unionized (NSSO 2001).

The construction industry is among the fastest growing industries in India. In 2000, it employed more than 11 percent of India's nonagricultural labor force (NSSO 2001). During the last forty-five years, construction has accounted for 40 percent of India's development investment (NICMAR 1998). The bidi industry, in contrast, is known in India as a "sunset" or a declining industry, especially in urban India. Since India agreed to sign the Framework Convention on Tobacco Control, launched by the World Health Organization (WHO) in 2003, much of India's bidi production has shifted to rural areas to reduce costs by avoiding municipal taxes and high fees.

Construction and Tobacco Industries in India

	Construction	Manufacturing	Tobacco/Bidi ^(a)
Total workforce	15,662,264	39,075,839	3,742,979
Employment ^(b) (% of non-agricultural workforce)	11	28	3
Informal workers ^(c) (% of industry workers)	98	88.5	93
GDP ^(d) (% of total GDP, 2003-04)	5.2	17	-
Female ^(e) (% of industry workers)	12	29	81
Illiteracy ^(f) (% of industry workers)	42	31	57
<u>Union density among informal workers^(g)</u>	<u>2.7</u>		<u>6.6</u>

(a) Tobacco is a sub-sector of manufacturing.

(b), (c), (e), (f), (g) Calculated by author using NSS 1999-2000

(d) (GOI 2004)

In addition to differences in growth structures, these industries differ in terms of type of work. Some construction workers have fixed homes in the city and wait at a local street corner for contractors to pick them up to do short-term jobs (lasting from a few hours to a few weeks). Others migrate to the city with a contractor to live on the construction site in temporary shacks constructed from materials that the builder provides (remaining on a site from a few months to several years). Bidi workers have fixed homes; those in urban areas congregate in particular slums. Because of the lack of mechanization involved in bidi-making, workers cut and roll bidis in their homes and take the finished product to a local contractor to get paid on a piece-rate

basis. Contractors pass the finished products through subcontractors to a registered, retail manufacturing company. Only then do bidis get labeled, packaged, and sold to distributors.

For my study of informal workers' movements in these two industries, I combine a comparative analysis across 3 Indian states (Tamil Nadu, West Bengal, and Maharashtra) operating under different political parties with a micro-level ethnography. My evidence draws on 140 in-depth interviews with informal workers in the bidi and construction industries—all of whom are members of an informal workers' organization. I examine 6 unions and 1 NGO. Informal workers' unions in bidi are affiliated to the Communist Party of India-Marxist, and those in construction are politically independent. In addition, I draw from nearly 180 interviews with government officials and union leaders.

Rather than fighting flexible production structures and demanding traditional work benefits (such as minimum wages and job security) from employers, *bidi* and construction workers are using their power as voters to demand state responsibility for their social consumption or reproductive needs (such as education, housing, and healthcare). To operationalize their demands, workers in both industries have attained Welfare Boards, which are quite advanced in some states. For construction workers, Welfare Boards provide education scholarships, pensions, wedding and funeral expenses, and disability insurance. For bidi workers, welfare boards provide health care clinics located in the workers' slums, education scholarships, and houses in women workers' names. Both boards provide workers with identity cards.

In addition to tapping material benefits, informal workers are politicizing their unique class and gender identities to offer politicians a distinct vote bloc. Like formal workers, informal workers are addressing the sources of their exploitation in the class hierarchy. To join a welfare board, unions must certify workers' informal work status, and the boards' benefits are tailored to the specific needs of informal workers. Unlike formal workers, informal workers are forging a class identity that connects them to the state through their social consumption needs and forces the state to recognize their work, *even* in the absence of formal employer recognition. This recognition is provided through the state-certified informal workers' identity card. Given the mass numbers of informal workers, informal workers are using a rhetoric of *citizenship* – rather than labor – rights to frame their interests and attract the attention of elected state politicians. To mobilize the dispersed, unprotected workforce without disrupting production, informal workers are organizing at the neighborhood level, rather than on the shop floor. To this extent, bidi and construction workers also appear to be employing a strategy more akin to “social movement unionism”.

Informal workers are also addressing issues arising from the intersection of class and gender. Women workers have long fought to expose the interdependence between reproductive and productive work, as well between the private and public spheres. Informal work, which has until recently been considered “feminine,” sits at these very intersections. Therefore, women are active members and leaders in informal workers' movements. Their efforts are finally establishing state responsibility for informal workers' reproductive work

burdens and state recognition for productive work in the private sphere. Such support has empowered informal women workers to challenge patriarchal assumptions in the private and public spheres.

In the process India's bidi and construction workers are "making" a new class, adding this new class to the panoply of claim-makers in India's democracy, and redrawing a contemporary version of a welfare state. Although informal workers in India have not yet secured guaranteed social rights for all citizens (as did formal workers in Western Europe), they have secured some welfare benefits and a voice for a previously invisible labor force in parts of India. These findings illustrate how the deeply entrenched relationship between states and social movements is historically contingent, interactive (i.e. changes in state power structures influence social movements and vice versa) and dynamic (i.e. its form and nature changes across time and space). That these findings emerge from India lend important insights into how recent changes in the relationship between state and informal workers are yielding an alternative model of development.

With regard to the conditions of movement effectiveness, I find Indian informal workers' movements are most successful when operating under pro-poor, populist party leaders who support economic liberalization (such as in Tamil Nadu) and face electoral competition with other parties. They are least successful when operating under electoral contexts with entrenched, hegemonic leaders who resist economic liberalization, including those tied to left-wing, communist parties (such as in West Bengal). Competitive, pro-poor populism gives informal workers an opportunity to appeal to politicians' desire to stay in power by offering their (claimed) access to a unified, mass vote bank. Liberalization efforts give informal workers the opportunity to frame themselves as key pegs in the state's economic agenda of flexible production. Informal workers who capitalize on these conditions are able to offer their political and economic support in return for state-provided welfare benefits. These findings explain why informal workers' new strategies have led to state-supported benefits for some workers, despite the rhetoric of declining welfare spending throughout India. As well, these findings suggest that social movement structures have a limited capacity to predict informal worker movement success in the absence of a conducive political and economic framework from above.

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