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978-1-107-02572-1 - Informal Labor, Formal Politics, and Dignified Discontent in India

Rina Agarwala

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Informal Labor, Formal Politics, and Dignified Discontent in India

Since the 1980s, the world's governments have decreased state welfare and increased the number of unprotected "informal" or "precarious" workers. As a result, more and more workers do not receive secure wages or benefits from either employers or the state. What are these workers doing to improve their livelihoods? *Informal Labor, Formal Politics, and Dignified Discontent in India* offers a fresh and provocative look into the alternative social movements informal workers in India are launching. It also offers a unique analysis of the conditions under which these movements succeed or fail. Drawing from 300 interviews with informal workers, government officials, and union leaders, Rina Agarwala argues that Indian informal workers are using their power as voters to demand welfare benefits (such as education, housing, and healthcare) from the state, rather than demanding traditional work benefits (such as minimum wages and job security) from employers. In addition, they are organizing at the neighborhood level, rather than on the shop floor, and appealing to "citizenship," rather than labor rights. Agarwala concludes that movements are most successful when operating under parties that compete for mass votes and support economic liberalization (even populist parties) and are least successful when operating under non-competitive electoral contexts (even those tied to communist parties).

Rina Agarwala is an assistant professor of sociology at Johns Hopkins University. She holds a BA in economics and government from Cornell University, an MPP in political and economic development from the Harvard Kennedy School of Government, and a PhD in sociology from Princeton University. Agarwala is the co-editor of *Whatever Happened to Class? Reflections from South Asia* (2008). She has published articles on informal work and gender in *International Labor Journal*, *Political Science*, *Research in the Sociology of Work*, *Theory and Society*, *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, *Critical Asian Studies*, *Social Forces*, and *Indian Journal of Labour Economics*. She has worked on international development and gender issues at the United Nations Development Program in China, the Self-Employed Women's Association in India, and Women's World Banking in New York.

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Acknowledgments

Nearly twenty years ago, I arrived on the front door of a women's organization in India, eager to begin my internship and oblivious to the journey I was about to begin. As I entered the office, a tall woman from Kutch stared at me with a perplexed expression. "Have you come for the march for rag pickers?" she asked. In response to my blank stare, she squatted next to me to explain the march and other activities of the trade union for informal women workers that I had unknowingly come to work for. The lesson continued for the next year and a half, where the members and staff of the Self-Employed Women's Association (SEWA) patiently introduced me to the informal workers I had seen but never noticed, challenged me to think beyond the development models I had so diligently learned, and inspired me to realize the voices that women workers were asserting every day. I thank SEWA, and especially Elaben, Reemaben, and Ushaben, for changing my worldview forever.

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Abbreviations

ADMK	All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam
AITUC	All-India Trade Union Congress (CPI-affiliated)
BJP	Bharatiya Janata Party
CII	Confederation of Indian Industry
CITU	Congress of Indian Trade Unions (CPM-affiliated)
CPI	Communist Party of India
CPI(ML)	Communist Party of India (Marxist-Leninist)
CPM	Communist Party of India (Marxist)
CSW	College of Social Work
DK	Dravidar Kazhagam
DMK	Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam
GDP	gross domestic product
GOI	Government of India
ICLS	International Conference of Labor Statisticians
ILO	International Labour Organisation
ILP	Independent Labor Party
INC	Indian National Congress Party
INTUC	Indian National Trade Union Congress (Congress-affiliated)
KMC	Kolkata Municipal Corporation
LPF	Labour Progressive Federation (DMK-affiliated)
MLA	Member of Legislative Assembly (state government)
MP	Member of Parliament (national government)
NCP	National Congress Party
NMPS	Nirman Mazdoor Panchayat Sangam
NSS	National Sample Survey on Employment and Unemployment

NSSO	National Sample Survey Organisation
OBC	Other Backward Caste
PWP	Peasants Workers Party
RPI	Republican Party of India
SDP	state domestic product
SEWA	Self-Employed Women’s Association
TMC	All India Trinamool Congress
TMKTPS	Tamil Maanila Kattida Thozilalar Panchayat Sangham
UF	United Front
WBIDC	West Bengal Industrial Development Corporation