

All That Glitters Is Not Gold

Women Bangle Makers Of Ferozabad

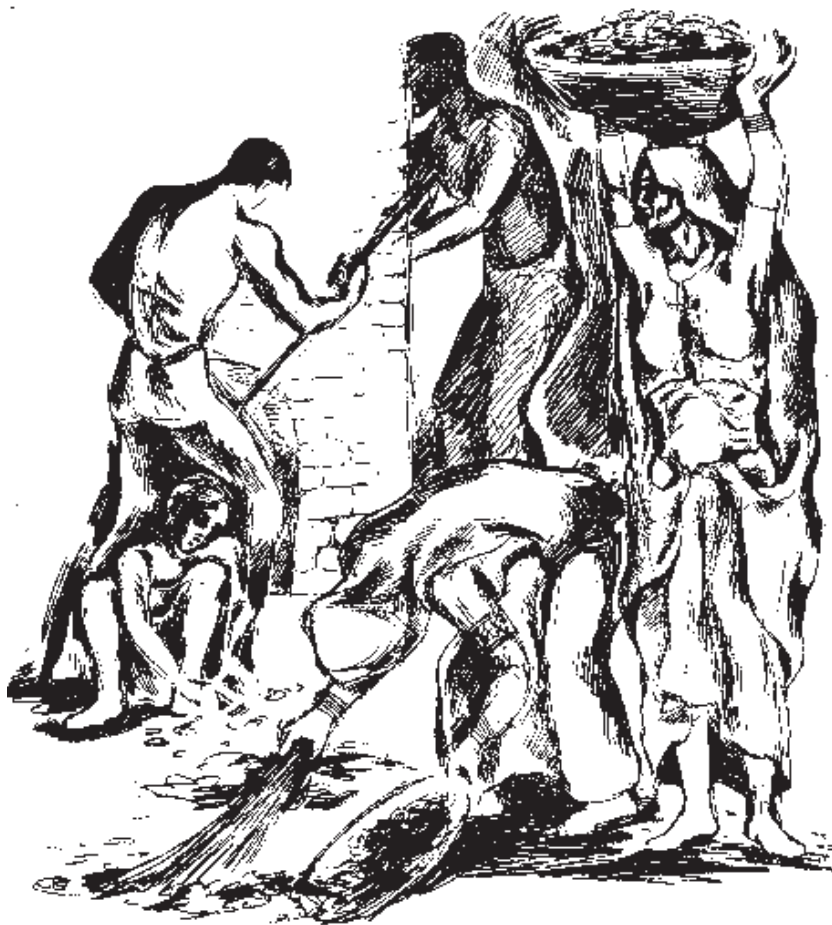
FEROZABAD is famous for its glass industry. Glass bangles are a major product of this industry. Other products are utensils, ornaments and toys.

Of the town's total population of 300,000, about 175,000 are engaged in the bangle industry. Of these, 100,000 are men, 50,000 women and 25,000 children. Most of these labourers belong to families that have been doing this work for generations. Some came to Ferozabad in search of employment and joined the trade.

Some local organisations have had a degree of success in working for the rights of men and children labourers but no initiative has been taken to highlight the problems of the women. We talked to about 65 women and watched some part of their work both at the factory and at home.

How Bangles Are Made

Each bangle goes through several processes before it is ready for sale. Each process is undertaken by a different set of workers. To begin with, glass is prepared by heating several chemicals including colouring agent in a kiln at a temperature of at





Working at home

least 1500 degrees celsius. Later, bangles are prepared on hand operated machines.

About 75 percent of the factory workers handling this process are men and the rest young boys. The various mechanical processes are handled by skilled male workers such as operators, firemen, chemists. Unskilled workers do the work of conveying the halfmade bangle from one machine to another.

The work of cleaning the premises, carrying the coal and the raw materials and sorting the broken fragments of glass, is done wholly by women and girls.

The second stage is that of heating the halfmade bangle and bringing the two ends of the circlet in tandem with one another. This work is known as *jhalai* and is done only by women. The third stage is that of joining the two ends of the circlet together. Seventy five percent of the workers who do this are men and boys and 25 percent women and girls. These two tasks are not done at the main factory but at small units where kerosene oil lamps are used for

heating and lighting. More than half the workers do these operations in their own homes.

The work of cutting designs on the finished bangle is done in large factories with the aid of electricity or diesel operated machines. Very few women are employed in these factories. Recently, women and children have begun to do this work

in their own homes with small electric machines.

After this, the bangle is baked in another unit, and finally the carved design is filled with a substance that contains a small proportion of gold, and again baked until it begins to shine. About 75 percent of workers on this process are women and the rest men and children.

Low Paid

Sukhdevi, aged 45, migrated to Ferozabad from a rural area about 25 years ago and, since then, has been doing *jhalai* work at home. She has six daughters. Three of them are now married and two others help her with the work. Sukhdevi, helped out by her two daughters, earns about Rs 75 a week.

Sukhdevi says that some male contractors deliver the bangles to her house in the evening and pick them up the next morning. She works from 7 to 11 p.m. and again from 3 to 9 a.m.

Her husband works at joining bangles but now has TB and is undergoing treatment.

Sukhdevi is responsible for running the house, doing all the housework and for saving to get her daughters married. She was not able



Dhanmanti and her daughters at work

to educate them. Her oldest daughter is married to a tailor who beats her up and does not contribute to the household, so she too takes in *jhalai* work at home.

Health Hazards

Sukhdevi says that the work entails squatting, bent over kerosene lamps, for long periods. This causes backache and fatigue. Most of the women also develop TB sooner or later.

Angoori, a widow, whose husband died of TB, adds that the eyesight is adversely affected by the strain of the work. The house gets filled with smoke and one inhales soot.

She had separated from her husband in his lifetime and returned to her parental home in Ferozabad. She has three sons and a daughter whom she brought up singlehanded. She is able to earn about Rs 10 a day. She says that the contractors who farm out work to women take a heavy cut from their wages with the result that women earn less than men who work in the factories, even though women work longer hours than men.

Often, work is not available, and the women have to survive on loans. Financial difficulties made it

impossible for Angoori to educate her children as she needed their help in the work.

Dhanmanti, aged 45, was also unable to educate her only son although she was very keen to do so. Her husband has no regular employment. He is bad tempered and beats her. With the help of her twin daughters aged 18, she earns about Rs 15 a day. She is worried about her daughters' marriage. She remarks that the men in the factories go on strike and get an increase in wages, but women cannot do this.

In The Factory

Dulari, aged 40, works in a factory. She sorts broken fragments of glass into heaps according to their colour. She works about 10 hours a day, carrying loads of glass and sorting them and earns about Rs 13 a day. She says there is a lot of injustice in the factories and no security for the women. Physical and mental problems create a lot of tension. She is forced to do this work because her husband died four years ago and she has three daughters, two of whom are unmarried. She says: "The men who work with us are paid Rs 20 to 30 a day. True, they do different work but we also toil

as hard and we work longer hours than they do. Yet, we are paid only Rs 13. To whom can we complain?"

Ramdevi does the same work of sorting glass in another factory. She is a widow with two married sons who live separately from her. She has to support herself and her daughter. She gets only Rs 6 a day for eight hours of work. With this she buys the daily rations, and gathers wood to use as fuel. When she complains, the employers say that she is paid less than other women because she is not able to complete the same quantity of work. Ramdevi wants her daughter to find employment but hesitates to bring her to the factory because the atmosphere there is not desirable for a young woman. So she plans to teach her *jhalai* work which can be done at home. They have to save money for the girl's marriage.

Ferozabad is known as *suhag nagri*, the town of married bliss, because bangles, the symbol of the Indian woman's marital status, are manufactured here. But no one gives a thought to the condition of the women who manufacture those bangles.

(translated from Hindi)