

# THE GROWING BURDENS OF WOMEN

## **Porter Women In Pune**

THIS is a summarised version of a study of hamal women in Pune whose work covers transport of various kinds of goods on the head or in handcarts from trucks or railway wagons to godowns, from godowns to shops or from shops to the residence of individual customers. The related activities of repair and maintenance of gunny sacks in which most of the goods transported are packed, and upkeep of the main godowns, are also included. The survey is based on personal interviews with 75 women working in five main centres of the city.

The hamal women studied in this survey are part of a population of women employed in "gainful economic work", a population which has actually been shrinking in India in recent years. The question of women's employment which is the central idea motivating this study, is of the utmost importance for all those who are concerned with the emancipation of women. The extent of women's unemployment has often been hidden where statistics have been based on the assumption that the woman is essentially an economic dependent. It was only in 1961 that the Indian census for the first time classified the total population into workers and non-workers, and working women appeared in the category of workers in their own right.

The degree of participation of women in gainful work has changed over the years and the nature of the change and its effects have been the objects of economic and sociological investigations. The growth of industry from the early decades of the 20th century brought a number of women to work in plantations, mines and textile mills. The number of women employed in "traditional" occupations—agriculture, artisan work and petty trade—declined from 34.44 per cent of the total working population in 1911 to 17.35 per cent in 1971.

The job opportunities for women that have expanded in the last decade or two are mainly in the fields which demand a certain amount of skill and education. The unskilled women workers whose traditional occupations are being destroyed by



—Jolly Rohatgi

mechanization, have very few openings in the organized sector. As a result a large number of women seeking work in manual occupations in urban areas can find work only in the unorganized sector like *bidi* industry, construction work, casual work, and very importantly, domestic service, while many have to remain unemployed.

This study was not taken up with the hamal women as the "object" of study and the "researcher" viewing them from a distance "objectively" to measure, dissect and analyse. The study involved continuous dialogue with them, that could help build up a better understanding of the problems of hamal women as part of the wider problem and to explore with them, how they as a group could be linked up to the wider women's emancipation movement.

Between 1961 and 1971, there has been a decline in the proportion of working women from 10 to 7.4 per cent. The number of women engaged in trade and transport remained stagnant, those in construction work, manufacturing and in various services recorded an increase, but there was a sharp decline in the number of women occupied in household industry. The establishment of factories in and around Pune during the 60s made for sizable expansion of industrial employment. But the opportunities for female employment were limited mainly to the electronics and pharmaceutical industries and packaging work in some units. In other factories, menial jobs or coolie work is the only work available for women workers if illiterate, and clerical jobs if they are educated.

The number of female workers has declined from 16 per 100 male workers in 1961 to 12 per 100 male workers in 1971. There is thus a meagre choice open to the uneducated woman who comes

to Pune and is forced to seek work due to rising prices, the uncertainty of her husband's income, or desertion or widowhood. The employment opportunities in the type of hamal work that the women do are also on the decline.

The number of female workers per 100 male workers has been noted to be as high as 240 among *bidi* workers, 171 in domestic services, 79 in garbage and sewage disposal work, 27 in headload and handcart transport. In most other types of manual work, small trade and construction work, it varied between 10 and 220. It was 65 for teachers, 60 for nurses and around 15 in the white-collar occupations.

### **Moving to the City**

Most of the hamal women are migrants from rural areas around Pune. Migration from the poor drought-prone areas of Bhir, Sholapur, Osmanabad was reported, some families migrating during the 1971-1973 drought period.

Most of the hamal women belong to agriculturist families. They migrated to the city because of landlessness, unemployment and starvation in the village. Very often, the men migrated first and the women came later. Women made the move as they became the principal breadwinners due to the death, desertion or ill-health of the husband. The process of the shift from the village to the city is illustrated in the following cases.

Manjulabai is the wife of a hamal. She was married at the age of 10 to a 24 year-old agricultural labourer, Shivaji. She continued to live in her parental village which is about 35 kms away from Pune where Shivaji lived. Manjulabai's parents have a little land and supplement their income by working as agricultural labourers. This arrangement continued for 10 years. Shivaji and his wife would meet about once in six months. They had five children, four of whom are surviving.

Three years ago, conditions in her village became so difficult— "I was starving" she said— that she came to Pune. She found work in the vegetable market. She is now 32. Her husband is already an old man, exhausted by over 20 years of hamal work. He does not work regularly any more. Their son who is 16, works in a hotel in Bombay. He sends Rs 20 a month. There are four other children, including a baby.

So also, Radhabai was married when she was six years old, to a 12-year-old boy from her village. Her father was a peasant who had three acres of land. When he was 16, her husband was bitten by a snake, the wound never healed and it became difficult to continue his work as an agricultural labourer. After reaching puberty, Radhabai started working. She bore two children. Her husband's leg became much worse so they decided to move to Pune and have it operated upon. There, Radhabai found work and after the leg was amputated, the couple decided to stay on in Pune. Radhabai has since helped many of her relatives to migrate to Pune.

### **"Who Wants the Headache"**

#### **—Relations with Men**

All the 75 women interviewed were married but 25 were not with their husbands. Out of those living with their husbands, the

woman was the breadwinner in seven cases. The husband had taken another wife in two cases and even though living under the same roof, the women had to support themselves. There were six cases of desertion by husband. In one case, the woman was childless, in the other cases, the women had both sons and daughters to support. Another woman had left her husband after a quarrel.

There were 19 widows and two who had remarried. There are no social or religious restrictions on widow remarriage in the communities (Marathas and Dalits) to which the hamal women belong. When asked why remarriage is not frequent, the women said emphatically that they did not wish to remarry: "Who wants the headache of childbirth every year and you can never rely on a man to keep on bringing money home; it is best to be on one's own."

On the whole, neither widowhood nor desertion is considered a calamity. Some of the women we interviewed expressed a cynical view of the prospects of their married daughters. A woman who had recently got her daughter married, said: "Time only will show whether he looks after her or not. Her elder sister returned to stay with me after two years. Anyway, I have done my duty by marrying the younger one now."

Most of the women had been married between the ages of 8 and 13 years. The daughters of the women were married at the age of 13 to 16. The women say: "In our community, if a girl is unmarried and is grown up, the people call her names." The average number of children born was four. 25 per cent of children born were not living. One woman aged 45 had borne 11 children, nine of whom died in infancy and one boy died at age 13 by falling into a canal. Six of the women who were in their thirties, had undergone tubectomy operations. They found it a welcome release after having had three to four children and five to seven pregnancies.

### **Dalits Not Allowed**

Conditions of work differ in the five major centres. About 50 women work in the central wholesale foodgrains and groceries market at the centre of Pune city. Wholesale and semi-wholesale trade of cereals, pulses, jaggery, chillies, tamarind and other spices is carried on in this area. The total annual turnover in 1975 was about Rs 400 million. Women mainly do the work of delivery of goods to retailers, sorting, unloading of goods, and opening and re-sewing of sacks when goods are sampled. There is no standard rate of payment for these tasks and the rate is arrived at through an agreement.

The women usually come to the market at about 9 a.m. and stay there till 7 in the evening. Most of them are casual workers and keep waiting till some shopkeeper or customer calls them for some task. The amount of work they secure varies from day to day and the work is slack during the rainy season. There is no shelter for the women from either sun or rain.

The major problem for the women is the uncertainty of work. Their earnings on a good day in the busy season vary between Rs 1.50 and Rs 3. They are on the look-out for work about ten

hours daily but the actual hours of work are variable. Most of the women are of the Maratha castes. Dalits are not allowed to work here because food grain and edibles have to be handled.

The women are residents of the same area. They have to keep an eye on their housework and children while waiting for work.

600 men and 50 women work at the central vegetable and fruit market. Work in this market is fairly steady throughout the year. Work begins at 4.30 a.m. and the busiest hours are till 11 a.m. Women usually wait till 2 p.m. for their payment. Sometimes, when there are late arrivals, they have to wait till 5 or 6 p.m. They have no choice in this, either because their employers compel them to stay or because they cannot afford to miss a little extra income. One woman, for instance, said that on the previous day, she had earned Rs 2.50 after a working day of over 12 hours.

The market stalls are damp. Continual working in this dampness affects the health of the women. Most of them suffer from fever or chronic joint pains. They cannot go to the doctor because that would mean losing the day's earnings, and they cannot afford even the nominal fee charged by the government hospital. The women drink tea in the market but do not eat the cheap meal provided, partly because these meals are not cheap enough, and partly because it is not socially accepted for women to eat out. The women who work for specific dealers are paid between Re 1 and Rs 3 while the casual workers earn about Rs 1.80.

As work in the market starts at 4.30 a.m., the women have to set out from home long before it is light. They walk in groups and have been threatened at times. They say "We can look after ourselves" but admitted this would be nearly impossible if they had to go to work alone. Here too, Dalit women are not employed. The employers overwork the women and treat them harshly. However, the women are ready to speak for themselves and support each other when conflicts arise.

### **On the Edge of Starvation**

About 30 women work in the timber market. Their hours of work are from 8 a.m. to 5.30 p.m. Conditions here are worse than at the other two markets. There is considerable unemployment—much of the day is spent in waiting for work. There is no shelter for them or their children. The work too is physically tougher. The women who pull handcarts usually work in pairs and the weights they carry are quite heavy. They have to go on working, ignoring ill health, and the rate of infant mortality and miscarriage is high.

Sitting in the open, the women are often harassed by drunken men. They live in conditions of extreme poverty and destitution. Alcoholism is widespread among the men—drunken men may be seen even in the daytime. The hutment colonies are particularly insanitary and crowded. Most of the women are Dalits. They do not form close-knit groups as do the women in other areas. They cooperate only to the extent of looking after each other's children while waiting for work. In the brisk season, women earn about Rs 1.80 a day. In other months, the income is even smaller. This

group represents the absolute borderline between the lowest paid form of unskilled work available in cities, and utter destitution or starvation.

At the railway goods yard, women are employed to unload coal. 22 women work here as a team, sharing the work and the payment among themselves. They remain in the yard from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m., waiting for the wagons to arrive. Sometimes the wagons arrive late, and they may have to work till 10 or 11 p.m. The women dare not leave the yard for even a short time, because when the wagon arrives, it must be unloaded immediately, and anyone who is not there loses her share of the earnings. One woman said: "If I go home, which is nearby, to feed my children or to visit the hospital, there is always some confusion. Work arrives while we are gone and we lose a day's earnings."

Each wagon takes about an hour to unload, with eight women working on it. Some climb up on the wagons and shovel the coal down, others stand below and fill it into sacks while the rest stitch the sacks and carry them to the godown. The wagons are dark inside, there are rats running around, and the work of unloading stirs up a lot of dust. As a result, many women develop opaque films over their eye pupils. There is no place to keep the children. Some women sit with them under empty wagons to shelter them from rain and sun. One woman's son was killed in the yard when a weight fell on him.



-Jolly

Earnings vary widely from day to day. Sometimes a number of consignments come in and the women can earn upto Rs 5 by working till midnight. On the other hand, when we met the women, they had spent 15 days with no work at all. Usually, They earn an

average of Rs 2 a day, that is, less than Rs 50 a month when the pattern works itself out. The system of payment is weighted against the hamals. The trader pays the agent who in turn pays the truck driver. The hamal gets paid only after all these intermediaries have taken their cut. So the hamals' struggle for higher wages also meets a united opposition from all these middlemen.

Yet, the hamals have struggled to obtain a fixing of rates. They once struck work for 14 days. The women are militant and ready to join the struggle. They are all involved in Dalit organizations. They attend the birthday celebrations of Dr. Ambedkar. A sense of collective organization is evident among these women.

30 women work at the government foodgrains godown. They come to work at 8 a.m. but there is no fixed time of release. They have to stay till 9 or 10 p.m. if there is work. The work involves sweeping of the buildings and keeping a watch for leakages. The monthly rate ranges from Rs 200 to 290, according to seniority. These women fall into the organized sector, have regular work and fixed rates of payment.

There are 300 men and 50 women doing the work of mending and cleaning gunny sacks. Women work from 9 a.m. to 6 p.m. with one weekly holiday. Their work is done on the open road or in any unoccupied space between buildings. The "workshops" are often dark, rat-infested and damp. Sewing the bags in semi-darkness strains the eyes badly. Also, the bags contain substances like chillies, fertilisers and cement which cause injury to the eyes after long exposure. One woman says: "I have to stack heavy bundles of sacks in a shed. The atmosphere is full of cement dust. My clothes wear out very fast and the dust settles on my face and body, and however hard I try to cover them, gets into my eyes also. In a few years, I will not be able to thread the needle with which I sew these bags." She is 41 and has been doing this work for 20 years. Most of the women complained of unhealthy working conditions. One said she falls ill every couple of months because of the damp atmosphere.

There is a standard rate of payment of Rs 4 for 100 bags for a woman and Rs 5 for 100 bags for a man, even though both do exactly the same work. But there is no guarantee that work will be available every day, so the average monthly earnings of the women are far below Rs 100. A large number of these women are Muslims or Dalits.

### **Unending Toil: Still Below Poverty Line**

Women workers formed 55 per cent of the total workers and accounted for about 40 per cent of the total earnings. If the poverty line is put at Rs 45 per month per adult unit, 55 per cent of families were living below poverty line.

The most frequent reason given for taking loans was to meet household expenditure. In one case a woman said there was still an amount of Rs 3,500 outstanding on a debt her husband had incurred at the time of their marriage 15 years ago. Dowry is not customary but several women reportedly spent sums of Rs 1,000

to 2,000 on the marriage ceremony of children. Illness also pushes families into debt. Most hamals borrow from relatives and neighbours. Moneylenders are reluctant to lend to them.

In most cases, it is the women's direct responsibility to stretch the budget to cover the family's needs. Most of the women whose husbands are earning, know approximately how much he is earning, though in several cases, he hands over only a part of the amount to his wife for household expenses.

### **"Woman's Work Is Never Done"**

"Man's work is from sun to sun but woman's work is never done." This is how Shantabai describes her situation. She gets up at 2 in the morning, walks a quarter mile to fetch water for the day, cooks a meal for her son. She herself only drinks a cup of tea, cleans up, and starts walking to the vegetable market at about 3.30 a.m. Three other women accompany her. She uses the public latrine at the market because there is no latrine rear her home. Work starts at about 4.30 a.m. and she is busy carrying loads, sorting the produce, weighing it and so on till about 10 a.m. She has to wait till 1.30 or 2.30 p.m. in case her employer wants anything done. In any case, she is paid her daily wage only after 2 p.m. In the afternoon she has another cup of tea. Thus she has by 2 p.m. worked for almost 12 hours with only two cups of tea as nourishment. She then goes home, cooks her lunch, eats and sleeps till 5 p.m. When her son comes home she has to start cooking the evening meal, do the washing and cleaning. She rarely goes to bed before ten. Then, less than five hours later, she has to start the routine all over again.

Hamal women do all the housework, even when the husband is unemployed and the woman working full-time. So all the women have a working day from 5 a.m. till 10 p.m. at the earliest. Some of the women just drink tea in the morning if there is any in the house, work all day, then use the day's earnings to buy food in the evening, if there is any earning.

The women purchase daily necessities like grain, *gur*, firewood and oil in the evening, out of the day's earnings. As the purchases are made in small quantities, the women have to pay higher prices. Even though the meal they cook is very simple, the women have to spend a lot of time getting the grain milled, cooking *rotis* using a combination of kerosene, coal, wood or sawdust as fuel. The time spent is more because the women have to perform all the tasks with very primitive equipment. They spend about six hours every day in cleaning, cooking and washing.

### **One Room, No Latrine**

Unskilled manual workers with a very low and uncertain income find it impossible to get access to urban housing. The rent of even the most modest permanent housing is more than their average monthly earnings. So they are forced to take shelter in the vast hutment colonies or *zopadpattis*. The shelters are mostly makeshift. Some women also live in a single room in a tenement with a family of six or seven. Two women had no home at all. One who was deserted by her husband and turned out by her brother too, was sleeping in a verandah with her aged mother.

Another sleeps in a shed adjoining her employer's shop.

Water taps, bathing places and latrines are either inadequate or non-existent. The women have to fetch water from common taps and use public latrines. Often, 40 or 50 families use one tap and women have to wait in long queues to get one bucket of water. Disputes and quarrels are frequent. The water is available only for a few hours in the morning and evening. This imposes a rigid schedule. Some women, for lack of any other source, fetch water from the canal, even though this is prohibited. If there is no latrine available, women use some open space in the early hours of the morning. Due to lack of adequate surface water drainage facilities, the waste water stagnates and due to lack of garbage disposal arrangements and latrines, the surroundings of the huts get littered. Electric light is very uncommon.

### **No Money For Medicine**

How do the women bear the strain of arduous work, domestic tasks and frequent childbirth? It was interesting that most women confidently asserted their health was "good." Good health for many meant the absence of any incapacitating ailment. They consider themselves not only fortunate but well, if they can keep going and manage to do the day's work. They have neither time nor money to spend on medical treatment.

Those women who suffer pain in the joints, and catch colds or slow fevers from time to time, do not take any treatment. They say that when they feel weak or faint, they drink a glass of water, lift the load and get going. The result of the long neglect of health and overwork is that the women age fast. They start looking old women around the age of 35.

### **"Democracy" Not For Women**

The Hamal Panchayat is a trade union which ensures employment for its members by preventing newcomers from entering the trade. Interestingly, the inspiration for starting the union in 1957 came from a group of female workers—the sweepers who demanded a free supply of working clothes. One of the original organizers of hamals told us: "We felt that if even these women could press their demand and win by acting together and going on strike, why should not we too?"

Whereas in the grain market, the hamals can paralyse work by going on strike, their bargaining power is less in the timber market, where employers can get along with stacked wood for some time. The hamals are able to close down the activity of the railway yard, as they demonstrated in their 1971 strike, demanding fixed wage rates and recognition of the union.

The functioning of the unions is fairly "democratic." Representatives meet weekly and convey decisions to the rank and file. However, this democracy does not extend to the women. Though women participate in strikes and agitations, they do not have a proportionate share in decision-making or day to day functioning of the union. When questioned, they talk vaguely of the increase in wages, but are quite clear in their assessment: "What can the union do if there is not enough work to go around?" Women in the timber market are apathetic to the union.

Two of them had left it because they found it of no use and two had never heard of its existence.

The role of the union is restricted to defending the employment of a limited number of members and providing some welfare services like cheap meals and a fund for giving widows some financial help.

### **Urban Tensions, Rural Living Standards**

Participation in economic activity outside the home has not widened social horizons for hamal women, neither has the membership of the union. Their primary social links are still village, caste and blood ties. Where foodstuff is handled, entry into hamal work is barred to Dalit women but the union has not taken up this issue.

Employment in cities is expanding for white collar workers and skilled workers. Women have little access to education or training facilities. When poverty forces them into the city, they are compelled to accept the lowest form of labour at abysmally low wages. As more men are unemployed, more women are forced to look for jobs but there are far fewer jobs available to illiterate and untrained women. Widowhood and desertion turn women into the sole supporters of families.

Though they left their villages because they were starving, their condition is hardly better in the town. They cannot always



afford even one meal a day. The rise in their money income is counteracted by the fact that in the town, they have to pay for everything including firewood which was usually gathered from the forest in the village. In about 55 per cent of cases studied, the families were not able to get even the minimum food requirements. The consequent undernourishment results in emaciation. It also stunts the growth of children and affects their mental development.

After coming to the city, the women's lives are a monotonous round of toil unbroken by the festivals and fairs of the village. The only religious observance all the women manage is fasting. This is convenient in families where there is not enough to eat and where the woman in any case eats least. Hamal women have scarcely any leisure and no forms of relaxation or entertainment. Few women go to the movies; only the younger ones said they try once in two or three months if they can afford it. Also, the strain of housework increases in the city, because the number of women in the household is smaller. The communal nature of some of the women's chores is destroyed. The unhygienic conditions of slums are also more injurious to health than are the conditions in the village. The social set-up and norms continue to be

traditional. Early marriages persist. Childlessness is a stigma for the woman. The woman has an inferior status in the family. Men do not help with house-work. Though it is not a viable social alternative for women to remain unmarried, they do not waste many tears on a husband who dies or deserts them.

### **“Modernization” Throws Women Out**

“Towards Equality”, the report of the committee appointed to study the status of women in India in 1975, observes: “The transition to a modern economy has meant the exclusion of an increasing number of women from active participation in the production process. A considerable number continue to participate for no return and no recognition.”

Today, 94 per cent of women workers work in the unorganized sector. Thus, in India, as in many countries all over the world, women are moving not towards equality but away from it. Legal changes or schemes to provide education or health care cannot remedy the situation so long as women are being thrown out of gainful employment.

The hamal women are on the fringe of the huge mass of female unemployed who are being thrown out of jobs in larger numbers everyday. They are among the defenceless thousands who have lost their land in the village due to famine, poverty, so-called “natural” disaster. The city promises better things only from afar; when they arrive, the unskilled and illiterate can find no jobs so they drift into hamal work or similar occupations which only just manage to keep them this side of starvation.

Hamal work is one of the most arduous and lowest paid jobs. The women interviewed said they would like to take up any other kind of work, particularly some job in a factory. Female labour is paid at lower rates than male labour and there is a rigid sex-based division of labour. There is now a plan to move the wholesale trade in grain and other agricultural products to the Market Yard at Gultekadi outside Pune city. This will throw most of the women out of work because auto carriages, bullock carts and hand carts will be used to cover the longer distances and women have no access to driving of these vehicles. This is just one instance of how women lose ground when there is a major re-organization or modernization of the trade.

When the suggestion is made that the government plan to train women for skilled jobs in the industrial organized sector and arrange their entry into factory occupations, the objection is raised that this will make the problem of men’s unemployment still more serious. The question is : “Is gainful work a prerogative of men? Does not the Indian Constitution guarantee equality to all citizens—men and women?” The plan of development is meaningless unless it is so designed that the entire working population gets the opportunity of productive employment in congenial conditions. □

*[The full report is available at ICSSR Documentation Centre, (Sales Division) Ferozeshah Road, New Delhi 110001]*

### *The Old Playhouse*

*You planned to tame a swallow, to hold her  
 In the long summer of your love so  
   that she would forget  
 Not the raw seasons alone, and the  
   home left behind, but  
 Also her nature, the urge to fly, and  
   the endless  
 Pathways of the sky. It was not to  
   gather knowledge  
 Of yet another man that I came  
   to you but to learn  
 What I was and by learning, to learn  
   to grow, but every  
 Lesson you gave was about yourself.  
   You were pleased  
 With my body’s response, its weather;  
   its usual shallow  
 Convulsions. You dribbled spittle into  
   my mouth, you poured  
 Yourself into every nook and cranny,  
   you embalmed  
 My poor lust with your bitter sweet  
   juices. You called me wife,  
 I was taught to break saccharine into  
   your tea and  
 To offer at the right moment the  
   vitamins. Cowering  
 Beneath your monstrous ego, I ate  
   the magic loaf and  
 Became a dwarf. I lost my will and  
   reason, to all your  
 Questions I mumbled incoherent replies.  
   The summer  
 Began to pale. I remember the ruder  
   breezes  
 Of the fall and the smoke from burning  
   leaves. Your room is  
 Always lit by artificial lights, your  
   windows always  
 Shut. Even the airconditioner helps  
   so little,  
 All pervasive is the male scent of your  
   breath. The cut flowers  
 In the vases have begun to smell of  
   human sweat. There is  
 No more singing, no more dance, my  
   mind is an old  
 Playhouse with all its lights put out. The  
   strong man’s technique is  
 Always the same, he serves his love in  
   lethal doses,  
 For, love is Narcissus at the water’s  
   edge, haunted  
 By its own lonely face, and yet it  
   must seek at last  
 An end, a pure, total freedom, it  
   must will the mirrors  
 To shatter and the kind night to  
   erase the water.*

—Kamala Das