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Made in South Asia: Centering Labor in Textile and Garment Manufacturing Work, 1970s to 2020s

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Rukmini Barua, *In the Shadow of the Mill: Workers' Neighbourhoods in Ahmedabad, 1920s to 2000s* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2022).

Maura Finkelstein, *The Archive of Loss: Lively Ruination in Mill Land Mumbai* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2019).

Lamia Karim, *Castoffs of Capital: Work and Love among Garment Workers in Bangladesh*. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2022).

Kanchana N Ruwanpura, *Garments without Guilt?: Global Labour Justice and Ethical Codes in Sri Lankan Apparels* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2022).

Mallika Shakya, *Death of an Industry: The Cultural Politics of Garment Manufacturing during the Maoist Revolution in Nepal* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2018).

Abstract

Labor in the textile and garment industry is at the heart of a series of recent books on South Asia. Together these books document the different scales at which textile and garment work has been structured and restructured over the last century, and its implications for workers, their health as well as collective solidarity. Across the countries of Bangladesh, India, Nepal, and Sri Lanka, the industry developed and declined in vastly different temporalities and rhythms. Yet, as these works reveal, workers have often been confronted with similar challenges brought on by the boom-and-bust cycles of industrial development. In each case, textile and garment workers have been forced to navigate transitions to premature deindustrialization, closure, or national/transnational industrial policy changes. The books center workers and their long "post"-industrial or industrial "afterlives," as they cope with the dramatic changes in the global manufacturing of textile and garment.

Keywords: industry; garment; South Asia; manufacturing; deindustrialization

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In recent years, labor scholars have made repeated calls for a more global history of labor that extends the current geographical, conceptual, methodological, and disciplinary bounds of labor history.[1] Disciplines like geography and migration studies have better addressed this challenge than labor history. Furthermore, they have sought to complicate the simplistic local–global binary, showcasing how capital and labor operate at multiple scales, from the local to the urban to the regional, national, and global.[2] These scales are not always arranged in a vertical hierarchy but flow along multiple axes that connect seemingly disconnected spaces of production across the world. They both shape and are shaped by workers' concerns about welfare, health, safety, and collectivization. The multi-scalar nature of global industry and its impact on workers serves as a common theme of five new books on textile and garment work in different South Asian countries. They outline how workers have variously, at different scales of their neighborhoods, cities, and countries, organized, resisted, or resigned to changing conditions of textile and garment work.

Over the last few decades, the garment industry has undergone constant restructuring across different scales, making it susceptible to shocks caused by global shifts in capital, trade policy, availability of raw materials, and migrant labor flows. Across both historical and contemporary labor studies, workers in the textile and garment industries have struggled with persistent irregularity of work.[3] The books focus on industries in the South Asian region, specifically in Bangladesh, Nepal, India, and Sri Lanka. For workers across these countries, the continued uncertainty of work has forged a set of unique challenges. What's more, labor uncertainty has become increasingly interwoven with issues of housing insecurity; challenges related to family life, health, and old age; and indebtedness.

Mapping the long histories of textile work and urban industrial neighborhoods

Two books on the deindustrialization of the Indian textile industry in the cities of Mumbai and Ahmedabad map these changes through a focus on the scale of the city and its industrial working-class districts. In both cities, the textile industry has been primarily analyzed through the departure point of their closure in the 1980s and 1990s.[4] The books highlight the continuities before and after the moment of closure at the end of the century and contest a linear story of decline. They ethnographically establish the overlapping developments in the industry as informalization set in and as work staggered on at a slow pace with increasing discrimination against workers from nondominant caste groups and Muslims. In addition, the books broaden the spatial focus of the industries by analyzing how industrial closure precipitated a wider reconfiguration of working-class districts in Mumbai and Ahmedabad.

In contrast to much of the existing scholarly literature that has focused on deindustrialization, Maura Finkelstein's 2019 book *The Archive of Loss: Lively Ruination in Mill Land Mumbai* draws attention to that which is still alive—that is, to those mills that continued working in the long twilight of deindustrialization in central Mumbai's working-class neighborhoods. Specifically, the book considers the paradox of a state and public discourse that frames mill lands as ruinous spaces, even while many still live and work within the realms of the few functioning textile mills that

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remain in Mumbai. Although the existing mill workers are still working and living industrial lives, Finkelstein deftly shows that their ultimate elimination from this work is imminent. Workers are aware that the mill lands are attractive sites to accommodate new imaginaries of the city as a hub of multinational finance in a rapidly globalizing economy. These new urban visions imply an erasure of working-class life—not just of factories but also of workers' housing and community spaces—from the landscape of central Mumbai.

In the physical archive of the state, as well as those of Mumbai's dominant trade unions, textile work is already dead. There is no mention of those still working in the functioning factories. Even ongoing political struggles for access to affordable workers' housing frame the demand as retrospective—that is, as a form of reparation for prior work and contributions to the city in the past. But by conceptualizing the archive as built on time, events, and the physical bodies of workers, Finkelstein's work demonstrates how the discourse of imminent closure rapidly and prematurely deteriorates workers' bodies and health. As Finkelstein observes, the anachronistic and multiple temporal narratives of deindustrialization remake central Mumbai into "simultaneously industrial, deindustrializing, and postindustrial" (161). Through this challenge to linear narratives of deindustrialization, the book reconceptualizes Indian industrialization as a story of incomplete and uneven closure that fundamentally reshaped workers' belonging in the city, forcing them to resign to poor health, lack of access to affordable housing and a sense of abandonment amid a changing Mumbai.

The Indian city of Ahmedabad followed a similar trajectory to that of Mumbai. Historian Rukmini Barua's 2022 book *In the Shadow of the Mill: Workers' Neighbourhoods in Ahmedabad, 1920s to 2000s* maps the continuities in informalization of textile labor and its socio-spatial ramifications for Ahmedabad. Using the working-class neighborhood as a "scale of social practice" (9), Barua shows how the growth of informal labor set in long before the closures and was deeply linked with the sharpening of caste and communal divisions on the shop floor.[5] Informalization grew alongside such divisions and discrimination against workers from nondominant caste groups (Dalits) and Muslims. When the industries started to close, the latter were not only the first ones to be fired, but they also lost rights to their homes in working-class neighborhoods. As working-class districts became sites for frequent Hindu–Muslim riots in the 1980s, the intercommunal nature of working-class neighborhoods started to dramatically change. Muslims were particularly fearful for their safety in Hindu majority neighborhoods and started to move out of these shared spaces. When the state passed the Prohibition of the Transfer of Immovable Properties in the Disturbed Areas Act, the law was meant to protect neighborhoods affected by the riots (i.e. areas that were dubbed "disturbed") by prohibiting hasty flight and the sale of property of minority communities concerned about their safety in mixed Hindu–Muslim mill worker districts. But in practice the Act, by labeling areas as disturbed, promoted the communal identities of neighborhoods. Neighborhoods became known as Hindu and Muslim areas, forcing minorities to develop informal ways of moving out of these spaces. For example, Muslim workers moved out of mixed neighborhoods even as their properties did not change formal ownership. They signed informal deeds that allowed them to transfer possession and occupation of apartments to Hindu residents. In the decades since, and particularly after subsequent riots, the Act has been expanded to

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include newer "disturbed" areas, thus accelerating these informal sale arrangements and thereby deepening ghettoization in the city. Through this rich scalar analysis of working-class Ahmedabad, Barua illuminates the long history of how informalization spilled outside the factory gates and thus reshaped communal, spatial, and social life in the city.

In addition to the transformation of existing working-class districts, *In the Shadow of the Mill* also documents the parallel expansion of new working-class neighborhoods in the outer eastern periphery of the city—a result of the Indian federal government's decision, starting in the 1970s, to promote small-scale industries over large factories in order to boost employment flexibility and create jobs.[6] Long before the textile mill closures in the 1980s and 1990s, this policy was already shaping a new future for industrial Mumbai and Ahmedabad. Today, small workshops dominate its new working-class districts, which are located away from the hitherto central textile mill districts. This phase of reindustrialization marked a clear departure from the large textile mill industries. It was characterized by a semiformal workforce and has reoriented Indian manufacturing towards an informal, labor-dependent regime of small manufacturing.

Industrial work, national identity, and international garment work

Between the 1970s and the 1990s, as India went through parallel processes of industrialization, deindustrialization, and reindustrialization, its neighbors in Nepal, Sri Lanka, and Bangladesh encountered a different set of economic processes. Although textile and fabric production has always been a global industry, starting in the 1970s its globalization took a new form because of readymade garment production. The Nepalese, Sri Lankan, and Bangladeshi national identities were to become closely intertwined with their access to global garment markets. Under the 1974 Multi-Fibre Arrangement (MFA), a trade agreement signed between the United States and several Asian countries, a quota system was introduced by which exporting countries would enjoy exclusive access to the US market. After just two decades, the MFA was dismantled in 1995 (with its eventual expiry in 2005) after a new global free trade regime was introduced by the World Trade Organization.

In her 2018 book *Death of an Industry: The Cultural Politics of Garment Manufacturing during the Maoist Revolution in Nepal*, sociologist Mallika Shakya likens workers' experiences with the MFA to a tsunami that hit hard but then suddenly disappeared. Shakya examines how the industry's sudden boom and equally sudden bust shaped Nepalese national identity. In the initial years of the MFA, workers tended to migrate from the plains that spread across the India–Nepal border, but as work grew, this migration included a large proportion of people from the hill regions in Nepal and around Kathmandu. In terms of business owners, those with resources and political connections, particularly Indian businessmen who sought to profit from the burgeoning market, invested in the "mass" garment sector and began producing standardized garments for US consumers. Meanwhile, others, like ethnic minorities in Nepal, sought to build niches around particular types of garment "craft" work, albeit with a smaller market. It was the Nepali-run "craft" sector that proved to be more resilient as the MFA's expiry approached and American brands stopped importing from the "mass" sector.

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Yet, as the MFA expiry started to become a reality, national and international policy analysts agreed that the collapse of the entire Nepalese industry was imminent. This discourse framed Nepali industry as fake–that is to say, a largely Indian-run enterprise on Nepalese soil or simply a front through which Chinese goods passed. Shakya shows how workers resisted this characterization through the organization of a militant garment workers' trade union movement in the early 2000s. Workers formed alliances with the Maoist political movement in Nepal that developed deep roots in the urban, class organizations that existed in and around garment factories of Nepal's capital, Kathmandu. In the end, they failed to reverse the MFA expiry or secure compensation schemes; in fact, after the MFA tsunami, large numbers of unemployed garment workers migrated abroad in search of new employment opportunities. Nevertheless, such activism ended up forging a garment "after-life." For many ex-garment workers, their identities as garment workers persisted. For some, this often meant gradual, hesitant, and long-drawn exits from the industry. For others, it also meant ongoing participation in union activities, which continued to contest the erasure of Nepali identity in garment work. Though the industry died, it left an indelible mark on the macro-political landscape of Nepal.

In contrast to Nepal, Sri Lanka and Bangladesh are known around the world for their "successful" garment industries. In large part, this is due to how they survived the MFA tsunami. In her 2022 book *Garments without Guilt?: Global Labour Justice and Ethical Codes in Sri Lankan Apparels*, Kanchana Ruwanpura outlines the long history of garment work in Sri Lanka and its transition to producing niche apparels (in contrast to the mass garment sector of Nepal, India, and Bangladesh). During the mid-2000s, when the MFA quotas were dismantled and garment manufacturing was forced to open up to global competition, news of abhorrent labor practices, factory collapses, and poor working conditions in South Asian garment factories were also sparking new global debates about the ethics of global manufacturing. Ruwanpura shows how the Sri Lankan state sought to brand its garment industry as "ethical" to distinguish itself in the new arena of competition.

The book shows how the emergence of ethical branding was deeply connected to the end of the civil war in northern and northeastern Sri Lanka in 2008 and 2009, an event that opened new regions to business expansion. As part of its ethical rebranding campaign, the Sri Lankan state and industry aligned with transnational consumer-led campaigns supporting ethical production, while reducing labor protections to superficial factory inspections. For instance, in the new ethical regime, health and safety norms are superficially inscribed through global supply chains but are frequently in misalignment with workers' actual concerns. Similarly, in Ruwanpura's ethnography, conducted in the post-war zones, we also see how the premise and promise of job creation is forwarded by the Sri Lankan state and business to undo social harm, even as minority, Tamil-speaking workers continue to navigate everyday challenges in a society marked by a long history of ethno-nationalism. This shift has quelled the power of the country's strong and active labor movement, which helped to secure crucial pension and union reform between 1977 and 2008. The book demonstrates how the ethical claims of the Sri Lankan garment industry are put into sharp relief when considered through the eyes of workers navigating an industry offering fewer

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workplace protections and built on a post-war social fabric and an emergent economic crisis.

Anthropologist Lamia Karim's 2022 book *Castoffs of Capital: Work and Love among Garment Workers in Bangladesh*, is also set against a narrative of national "success." Like the Sri Lankan case, the Bangladeshi garment industry grew exponentially after the MFA expiry. Yet like Ruwapura, Karim shows how the erosion of labor rights accompanied this period of prosperity. Worker wages, for example, remained stagnant at $11 USD per month between 1994 and 2006, only rising to $22 USD in 2006 and $30 USD in 2010 (106). Using data collected from a survey of 100 garment workers, as well as an ethnography of sixteen older workers, Karim paints a vivid picture of Bangladeshi garment workers' lifecycles. Though existing scholarship has drawn attention to how the Rana Plaza collapse in 2013 led to the visibilization of the Bangladeshi garment workers' atrocious working conditions, Karim's ethnography documents the new challenges that emerged after 2013. When several governments and garment companies responded to Rana Plaza by signing the Accord on Fire and Building Safety in Bangladesh, factories that were noncompliant with safety standards were closed.[7] In those factories that remained open, wages were increased to $64 USD per month. On its face this was a positive development. However, in practice, workers faced severe setbacks because of new provisions that, for example, prohibited overtime. Prior to 2013, the bulk of worker earnings had come from precisely the extra payments afforded by overtime work. Although wages were formally increased for fixed hours, workers were paid substantially less for overtime work, which continued to occur dubiously outside the purview of superficial factory inspections. What's more, since 2013, Bangladesh's garment industry has also been driven by new investments by Chinese garment manufacturers, who in their search for lower wage rates, have created a façade of prosperity behind which the erosion of labor rights has rapidly occurred.

For Karim, these changes manifest vividly in the lives of older garment workers. In contrast to younger workers, who are more integrated into labor organizing, more willing to migrate for work opportunities, and less tolerant of patriarchal norms, older workers—and older women, in particular—have suffered. Their "post-industrial lives, that is life after they were laid off from factory work," reveal stories of varying degrees of disappointment (167). When workers enter their fifties, they are considered at the end of their working lives. No longer seen as fit for the workforce, many grapple with health ailments, their bodies living through the long afterlives of industrial work. Here, Karim complicates notions of decline, death, and failure in the garment industry. In the end, the success or failure of industries cannot be divorced from workers themselves, she shows. In Bangladesh, despite the social and economic mobility afforded in the recent years, for most long-standing workers, it comes at a price of bodily exhaustion and a tough post-work life filled with health challenges, loneliness, and a general lack of social support. These "castoffs of capital," as Karim calls them, are a reminder of the limits of neoliberal mobility.

Conclusions

The five books reviewed herein cover different time periods, products, and geographies in the complex world of South Asian textile and garment manufacturing. What are the

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implications of these histories, which span the last half-century? First, they showcase the limitations of the state or industrial archive, as we understand it currently. Official records tend to obfuscate the nonlinear temporalities of industrial development, as observed in the Indian case. In industries that close or fail, the archive may report this as a total failure, eliminating workers' continued attempts to work or their resistance to closure. In "successful" industries, prosperity is highlighted in state discourse and the official record, without equal mention of the accompanying erosion of labor rights that such success has often rested on. The case of Sri Lanka stands out in this regard. Workers encounter fractured, uneven effects of industrial closure, many laboring in the protracted twilight of industrial work, as in the Indian case, or in the prolonged afterlife of the industry, as in Nepal. In sum, the books show how the boom-and-bust cycles of garment work have broader and longer-term effects. Factory expansions or closures are not just about the gain or loss of work; they also frame concerns about health, family life, migration, and politics. And workers' bodies often serve as the archive for their forgotten histories.

Second, throughout this set of books, it is clear that workers' politics intersect with questions of caste, community, ethnicity, and gender. At some moments in history, the struggle for workers' rights led by garment and textile workers stemmed from or fed seamlessly into other social movements. At other moments, their assertions were co-opted by the state as it seeks to craft new visions of nationhood in a global economy. This is most clearly reflected in the ethnic and communal majoritarianism that took root in Sri Lanka and India, respectively, two movements that had their origins in the industrial and spatial restructuring of each country. In other contexts, like that of Nepal, radical alliances that cut across ethnicities were formed, but they were limited to the labor movement and ultimately rejected by the state. Bangladesh's garment workers organized under their shared gendered experience of exploitation, with many significant wins. Yet at a structural level, the state has reduced the labor movement's power and promoted a de-radicalized celebration of the female Muslim worker.

Collectively, the books reject industrialization and deindustrialization as singular phenomena and instead frame both processes as cyclical phases that follow each other in short-term boom and bust cycles. This is particularly true as states take up new agendas to suit industrial restructuring and policy. The books document these changes at the different levels of local working-class districts, through changes in national policy and identity, as well as through the transnational dynamics of export competition. The books' authors force us to go beyond the binaries of industrial growth/closure, job creation/loss and health/decay, and life/death. Across the cases, we see the overlapping and intersecting dynamics of these features, with industrial work and working lives situated precariously in the liminal interstices of these binaries. Illuminating these crevices, often with historically rich ethnographies, these works make important contributions to labor history, anthropology, and South Asian studies.

Notes

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