In this chapter, we attempt to reconstruct the political discourse that shaped notions of gender, community and class among the cotton mill labourers. We would also try to establish the various interconnections and interfaces among these group identities. The emerging cultural practices at the workplace are sought to be situated in the context of the dispersion of contemporary social values. "Instead of studying the sexual behaviour of men in a given period -- what men thought of sexuality -- one would ask, whether in this behaviour, in these representations, a whole discursive practice is not at work." In a similar vein, but on a more modest plane, we discuss the issue of community. For example, when we discuss the issue of caste, we situate it in the varying orders of meaning that it generated for the workers and the management and the social implications emerging from such codifications. And towards the end of the chapter

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we discuss the perceptions of the state and its institutions, the unions and their practices as also the various other factors regulating workers' lives - in sum, social control over the workers, and their response to it.

At the time when the cotton textile industry grew and established itself in the Madras Presidency, social space was highly segmented along the lines of caste roles assigned a priori at birth, alleys the common use of which by all castes was possible only if they were designated as such, paths which some dared not tread, and attire which fetched ridicule if it transgressed the caste-specific dress code deemed appropriate for the wearer were facts of life. Most communities were closely knit together not only by kinship bonds but also by residence in communal clusters. In fact, most of the mill worker cheris were based on caste exclusivity. In Madras, there were the Adi Dravida dominated cheris which were burnt down by caste Hindus and Musal-

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2. Home Poll (Secret), 13/1/39, N.A.I.

3. P. Muthiah Naidu Private diaries, Part I, Harveyappatti Colony, Madura, p.31. A particular instance is cited where a worker for wearing clear white Veshti was ridiculed by the maistri.
mans during the violence in 1920. In Madurai, the Harveypatti colony of the Madura Mill was occupied primarily by the Naidu supporters of S.R.V. Naidu. In Coimbatore, even today, a respondent, Ms. Lakshmi of the CMWU, pointed out streets (Therus) as belonging to particular castes, e.g. of the Naidus, Gounders, etc. And there also still exists the 'scheduled class' (sic) village of mill workers in Selvapuram.

These separate identities got further sustenance from communal recruitment of factory workers. In the beginning, as we discussed earlier, the maistri was the recruiting agent as well. Later, the union assumed this role. The reason why conflict between the Madura Labour Union (MLU) and the Madura Textile Workers’ Union (MTWU) became very sharp was the general opinion that the MLU recruited only members of the Naidu community, who were its main plank of support. The MTWU wanted the management to involve it too in the business of recruitment. It is pertinent to our understanding of caste to note that such practices promoted closer kinship ties and community solidarity in the mills.

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In times of strife, groupings are articulated more complexly, with community interfacing with caste. In Coimbatore when Pallar workers came into conflict with caste Hindus, the dividing line was that of caste. In Madurai, where the Naidus were pitted against the rest and, in Madras, where caste Hindus and Musalmans found themselves in united opposition to the Adi-dravidas, caste is overlaid by community as the organising principle of group solidarity.

The quasi-religious origin of the Madras Labour Union -- the union had been founded by a section of workers who broke away from the Gunavarshini Sabhas organised to conduct religious discourses among the workers -- did not come in the way of the union acquiring a secular character under the leadership of T.V. Kalyana Sundara Mudaliar and Chakkara Chettiar. That however cannot be stated for the BOS Sangam in Madurai. It was formed by a Musalman (reserved constituency councillor of Madurai) named S.A.F. Ibrahim Sahib. This union sought to represent interests of the Musalman community of labourers and therefore, was looked at with disdain by the MLU

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leaders.

Early in 1920, in Madras, in the nascent phase of the worker's movement, there was rivalry between the Adi Dravidas on the one hand and the caste Hindus and Musalmans on the other, over the issue of the former group's non-solidarity with the strike at the B&C Mills. This culminated in loot and arson, the burning down of the huts of the Adi Dravida cheris. Further distancing of the Adi Dravidas from the rest of the workers resulted. In fact, the workers' morale was also at a low ebb. The long enquiry instituted to probe the incidents -- the Ayling Committee -- submitted its report with suggestions for financial assistance to the Adi Dravidas for resettlement. Interestingly, a sum of Rs. 20,000 was allocated for rebuilding the huts of the Adi Dravidas while little was earmarked for the other 149 huts of the caste Hindus and Musalmans affected in the strife. This differential treatment meted out was commented upon by Diwan Bahadur Venkataraman Naidu as unfair. Obviously, this created further bad blood among the

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9. Ibid.
communities and helped reinforce separate identities.

The use of Adi Dravidas to break strikes appears to have been a widespread practice; so much so that a story narrating the plight of a maistri who lost his job because of union activity also discusses the issue 10 of paraiyar serving as blacklegs. These poor paraiyar went back to work with police protection arranged by the manager. The story was written by V. Vishalakshi Ammal for the Panchamritham in 1925.

In Madurai also, we have evidence as early as 1931 of labour being sought to be divided on caste lines. This is not to say that there were no differences among the workers even otherwise. But caste tensions were running high in 1931 during the course of the major strike of more than six weeks involving over 8,000 workers. There were among the workers some 1,000 who belonged to the so classified criminal tribe of Kallars. During the strike, more than one attempt was made, possibly unauthorized, by the police officials, to induce them to rejoin work in an effort to break the

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10. V. Vishalakshi Ammal's short story "Plight of Maestri Govindan" in Panchamritham, Feb.-March, VI No.11, 1925, Madras.
strike. Apparently, such pressure was put owing to their vulnerability to subordination arising from the fact that they were recipients of advances from the government to settle down. The Kallar community as it is, as under state surveillance, being considered dangerous.

Later, in 1937, in the dispute at Madura Mills between male ring-framers and the management too, S.R.V. Naidu expressed, that he feared the management would attempt to break the strike by using Kallar labour. The District Magistrate promised to ensure this did not happen, but obviously it created dissen­sion among labourers on caste lines.

Labour engaged in the mills of Madurai were not only Naidus, Kallars and Thevars but also a sizeable number of Musalman and Christians. In fact, in Madurai, there were reports of clashes between these


12. Ibid.

13. Development Dept. G.O.2735, 7-12-1937. Later when a major strike was on S.R.V. Naidu refused to believe the management’s campaign that Thevarmar apologised to the management for having been part of the strike. And argued that they were united at a labour meeting where workers lauded in agreement with him as a divisive tactic of the management, (Dev. Dept. G.O.1050, 21-4-1938) clearly showing the attitude of the Harvey management.
communities - Hindus and Muslim mill labour at the Rajah mill in 1938. This led to arrest and conviction of the rioters, resulting in their imprisonment. That Madurai constantly witnessed clashes between Hindus and Musalmans on the occasion of a temple festival or Muharram, was obviously conducive to creating such fracturing of identities in the working class too. It is in this context that the minority's perception of S.R.V. Naidu as a Hindu leader gets vindicated by his visualisation of the victory of the labouring community in 1938 as the result of the divine dispensation of Goddess Meenakshi. Therefore, it was but in the order of things for community based unions to come up. It was in Madurai that a formal Muslim labourers union had been established as has already been discussed. The motivation for separate union stemmed from the reserved separate electorate politics of the 1930s, undoubtedly expressing a point of view of a section of Muslims and their perceived need to be a pressure group. So much so that in the 1938 agitation at the Madura mill, S.R.V. Naidu sought the help of the Maulana Sahib to

request the Muslim workers to refrain from joining work. Later owing to indiscrete remarks by S.R.V, his union was not permitted to campaign in the Musalman settlements. In the private journal of P. Muthiah Naidu, he describes the Muslim Cangam as formed by the bigoted people and which was not recognized by the management. Considering the fact that he was a labour school teacher, it is reasonable to conclude that such perceptions were extensive and influential. And that they had the immanent potential to generate communal tension. In May 1946, there was a major communal riot in Madurai in which workers were reported to have been extremely active.

At the Harveypatti labour school, during the celebration of the annual day both Selvapathy Chettiar and Kanniah Naidu (President of MLU), stressed the necessity for communal harmony. This was considered the parameter to measure the success, happiness and

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16. Eamon Murphy, *op.cit*


achievements of the workers of Madurai. And the unions were on guard against communal tensions and discouraged such mobilisation and employment at a general plane. However, as we noted before it was the MLU union which was perceived by the MTWU as being the Naidu union, and therefore as representative of a sectarian identity. 21

In Madurai, apart from Madura Mills, the Meenakshi and Mahalakshmi Mills also employed a sizeable number of Kallar labour. They came under the purview of the Criminal Tribes Act which placed severe limitations on their movement which was opposed as early as 1920. George Joseph at the time took up their cause. "It is said that about hundred Kallars were arrested because they refused to present themselves for registration." Both the MTWU and the MLU sought to bring changes in the Act. Early on, S.R.V. Naidu argued for the need to liberate the Kallar labourers from the obligation to report at the local police

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21. Interview with M. Karmekham, Secretary of MTWU during the period, Madura, 1990.


23. P.W.D(L), G.O. 64, 6-1-1945. This was one of the demands of the M.T.W.U.
station everyday. Such monitoring and restriction of the movements of those who came under the purview of the Act constituted gross violation of their civil rights. The presumed need for a trade off between the rights of society's mainstream and those of others also reproduced and perpetuated separate identities.

A number of problems also stemmed sometimes in the very practice of politics pursued by the unions. e.g. S.R.V. Naidu in the course of a major strike in the Madura Mills in 1937 attributed the victory of the workers to the divine dispensation of the Goddess Madura Meenakshi. During the strike, the deity was in procession during the festival in South Masi street. One of the wheels of the chariot of the deity had come apart. The workers rushed to help fix the cart and the procession continued. Thus, when the MLU celebrated victory it was seen to have been due to the deity's divine grace. In the context of different communities comprising the workforce as in Madura Mills, such notions obviously were seen as representing the identity of the Hindu worker. And therefore, in this kind of

25. Ibid. p.36.
mobilisation lay the ground for separate community unions as e.g. the BOS of the Musalmans under S.A.F. Ibrahim Sahib to represent their interests as a community too.

However, there was no homogeneous bloc of Hindu workers in opposition to the Musalman union. There were the Naidus whose power was in their belongingness to the Madura Labour Union. In 1938, some of the Naidu mill workers of Madurai had even sought to start their own union when they had problems with S.R.V. Naidu. Similar caste solidarity is operative when the Maravar mill hands of Madurai, in the course of the strike in 1938, decided to oppose any victimisation of their kin.

In Madurai, the Harvey management in their various mills gave concessions, bonus and gifts to the workers on the occasion of festivals for different communities. They were given twelve and a half percent discount on the occasion of Diwali, for Christmas and on Id. Some

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28. Eamon Murphy, op. cit.p, 193.
29. Dev. Dept., G.O. 86, 10-1-1939. T.N.A.
30. IFA, working of for the year 1946 in Madras Presidency, Appendix- iii. T.N.L.C.L.
mills encouraged practices such as separate canteens for the Hindus and the Muslims. At the B and C Mills, the dining shed was partitioned into compartments for different communities. Such practices obviously were responses to the prevailing social conditions, but then, they transplanted notions of communal difference into the modern mill culture. Not that separate eating was not a norm otherwise in society. But then, if a management went to the extent of keeping a brahmin cook so as to gain the acceptance of the workers, it speaks volumes of the attitude of the management and the times. In the Madras Legislative Assembly, it was recorded as late as in 1949 that private hotels did not employ harijans as cooks or waiters. In the Madura Mill practice of celebrating every community’s festival in grand style, by giving incentives to the particular group, lay the nascent "secularist" practice of the modern Indian state. But then, pressure also came from the workers


34. Madras Legislative Assembly Debates, Question no. 159, November 22, 1949. T.N.A.
for the mills to observe such customs -- as is attested by their absenteeism on various religious festivals. Instances of workers staying away from work for Ayudha Puja, Vinayaka Chathurthi, Pongal, Adi Amavasi and Arudra Darshanam are numerous. During 1947-50, the period of cloth shortage, the Madras government itself sought to ration the sparse cloth available for sale on religious lines: Hindus being favoured on the occasion of Diwali, Muslims on Id and Christians on Christmas. At the Mahalakshmi Mill, the celebration of Ayudha Puja was performed with a contribution of two annas per head from the workers too. Cultural practices inscribed in the work place was, therefore, of the dominant Hindu owners leaving room for the alienation of other communities.

Yet, on another plane, there are examples of

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35. Fortnightly Report for Madras Presidency, 1st half, January 1939.

36. The Hindu, August 11, 1946. Supply of mill cloth for Ramzan, Sale to be restricted to Muslims till August 28. During the war Cotton control orders restricting movement of cotton goods was in operation as production was also to meet war needs. After Independence the government restricted the expansion of looms in the textile sector in an attempt to promote the handloom industry.

37. Award of Industrial Tribunal, 1946, Madras, 1947, p.66. It was stated by Periaswamy, a worker who asked his co-workers to not contribute to the Puja when the management was denying them their rightful increment and bonus.
intercommunity integration for union work. In Coimbatore, the Coimbatore Labour Union (CLU) established in September, 1921, had as its president, a brahmin N.S. Ramaswamy Ayyangar, and as vice-president, Muhamad Sultan Sahib, a Musalman. However, in Coimbatore too, caste and other groupings are visibly at play during moments of strife in workplace politics. Very early on, Gandhiji asked C. Rajagopalachari as to whether the contents of a letter written to him by Chinnapavu about the miserable plight of Adi Dravidas of Singanallur (a mill suburb) were true. If it was true, Gandhiji suggested, amends should be made.

During the major agitations of 1937-38, there are innumerable instances of managements' attempts to break strikes using labourers of the 'depressed classes -- the Pallars'. This was reported to be so at the R.K. Mills and at the Lakshmi Mills. At the R.K. Mills, the Pallar women coolies were brought from the neighbouring Puliakulam village. This created tension in the Palla quarters and soon, the harijan settlement there.

39. Mahatma Gandhi Collected Works, V.46, April-June, 1931, ICWA.
was attacked by angry strikers. At Saroja Mills, too, the management attempted to continue work with women coolies from the Pallar villages. But N.G. Ramaswamy prevailed upon these workers by threatening social boycott of the community. So the measure did not succeed. At the Lakshmi mill, the management tried to create caste dissension by complaining that a Karumbar -- a lower caste -- woman who was working during the strike was roughed up by women strikers. But, according to the memoirs of P. Jeevanandam, one of the earliest Communist labour leaders of the presidency, the management could not succeed. At the R.K. Mills, during the strike, tension was reported between factions of Naidus and Thevars.

The issue of caste and union differences became important factors of strife in the Lakshmi Mills, in

41. Ibid. letter of SDM, dated 27-7-1938.
43. Ibid.
the post-1945 years. The union perceived the deployment of some new reelers as a measure to curb the Communist women. Everyday there was some cause for retrenchment leading to an impasse between the management and workers of the reeling department. The union here was Communist and thus, when 38 new reelers were sought to be appointed by the management, of whom 21 were Pallar, it created unrest between these new recruits and the Communist women in the reeling department. These new women were also supported by the rival Congress union. Thus, this agitation became not only one between labourers of different unions, but also a source of caste conflict among labourers. Matters precipitated in the management declaring lockout in the mill.

The Coimbatore Mills were predominantly owned by Naidus, Gounders and Chettiars. These mill owners continued traditional practices such as giving feasts and gifts when a child was born, on Diwali and such other festivals. Mainly practised were Hindu customs such as for Pongal and Diwali, the main festivals when

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48. Ibid.
workers were disbursed clothes and bonus, though a survey of the composition of the workforce by the RCL showed there were some 12% Musalmans and 7% Christians. Some of the Roman Catholic workers attempted to form a workers' union under the Communists. The bishop of Coimbatore disapproved of this and asked the Catholics to form their own union, and thereby represent their interests to the managements, and not be influenced by the heathen non-believers. At this time, the Coimbatore Mill Workers' Union took up a demand that the three town mills close on Sunday instead of Tuesday so as to be convenient for Christian workers attending the mass. However, in Coimbatore, we do not witness the kind of cross-community clashes as in Madurai. When the management of Choodambikai and Dhanalakshmi Mills sought to recruit Musalman workers as blacklegs, the CDTWU pointed out that the measure could result in communal friction, and therefore asked the

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49. Development Dept. G.O.2560, 16-11-1937, various correspondence between the SIMOA and the government make lengthy presentations of the benevolence of the mill owners towards their 'ungrateful' employees.


conciliation officer to stop the management making such recruitment.

Unlike in Madurai, managements represented a more homogenised Hindu ownership in Coimbatore, as has been noted. Hence the practices espoused were those of the Hindu community. It was additionally given life to by the workers themselves demanding holidays on occasions of Hindu ritual significance. But then, here too, there were caste differences, so much so that interdining or intercommunity marriages were far and few between. People like Kaliannan, an activist of the Communist CMWU who had an inter-caste marriage, were exceptions rather than the rule. Attempts were made to take up questions of social reform, as in a Bill to remove civil disabilities, but as stated by M. Raman to the Madras legislature, that "not only Adi Dravidas, but also Musalmans and Christians were prevented (sic) the use of public places."

Thus, in the traditional society in which these

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54. Interview with M. Kaliannan of the CMWU, who stated how conservative the society was in the villages where the mill workers lived. There, separate space of caste, community were the rule and his marriage which was intercaste was rare among workers.

55. Home Poll (Secret), 13/1/39, N.A.I.
mills came into being, were also transmitted earlier cultural practices of caste and community that created distinct identities. There were the Adi Dravida Association, the Kallar community association as also a National Christian Association in Madurai and the Catholic Indian Association in Coimbatore. These two Christian associations, however, were in full solidarity with the Congress with whose support they envisaged their progress in free India. The issue of the harassment of Kallars, troubled constantly by the need to register under the Criminal Tribes Act as we have stated before, was taken up and, by 1946, no fresh registration under the Act was allowed and it was proposed to do away with the Act too. However, we do find that there is continuing onslaught on socially insecure castes as during the repression let loose by the Congress goondas in the 1947-48 years when a whole village of the 'depressed classes' was attacked in Selvapuram, Coimbatore. The attack was provoked by

56. The Hindu, April 112, 1946. Report on the National Christian Association in Madura, also The Hindu, April 29, 1946, formation of a Catholic Indian Association in Coimbatore. Also The Hindu, Jan. 23, 1940. Formation of Southern Indian Labour Federation where Adi-Dravida Association sympathisers were stated to have come.

57. The Hindu, 24-9- 1946, Madras.

58. Public General (Confidential) G.O.2366, 31-7-1947, T.N.A.
their resolve to defy the Congress union's threat that they would be finished off, if they continued to support the communists. The Christians in Coimbatore, had their own union by 1951 with a membership of over three hundred and fifty.

Gender Relations and Ideology at Work

Relations established between men and women, perceptions of women's roles, symbols of womanhood in the various aspects of everyday life and the position women were ascribed in the new mill dispensation constitute our theme. Interwoven in these instances of gender relations are notions of womanhood and the social position of women at large -- male perception, female negotiation and, in their interaction, the reproduction of the ideology of womanliness and its other, manliness in the world of labour.

The managements utilised the issue of female workers (blacklegs to the workers on strike) being threatened, molested or accosted by strikers to lodge complaints with the police accusing the workers on strike of rowdyism and unruly behaviour. Deeply

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59.Dev.Dept. G.O. 3897, 29-8-1951. T.N.A.
embedded in such instances, and routed through them, were socially ascribed values of women's honour and respectability and patriarchal protection. In a similar vein, when unions complained of women workers facing indignities inside the mill, similar principles were operative, in addition to legitimate concern for the individual rights of the women. These are also pointers to the values, ideas and perspective of the times on the gender question, which we discuss in this section.

Our earliest instance of direct conflict between men and women is in the Madura Mills in 1920. When the women workers organised a strike against the indignities they faced at the hands of the maistri and mill management, many male workers did not initially cooperate. They continued work and demanded that mill work continue as they were not either interested or involved in the strike which was entirely at the behest of women. Soon enough with the intervention of the Nationalists, George Joseph, the union leaders and Sister

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60. Swadesamitran, April 14, 1920, Men reported for work and demanded they be paid wages as they were not on strike on the 12th of April. Also Swadesamitran, June 3rd, 1920, When a storekeeper Maskiri Nathan of the Tuticorin mills wondered "what use complaining against Guruswami Naidu Maestri who has been working for 35 years. The honour and chastity of women who have been acquiescing to him all these 35 years, is it going to be violated now." He was not allowed to speak further but it gives us some inkling as to male perception of the value of this strike.
Balammal, it became a major agitation. Again, in September 1937, there were strained relations between male and female workers in the same mill. The management introduced two weeks' consecutive night shift for the young male ring framers against which the men struck work. The management argued that this hardship had to be adjusted to by the men, for only this way they could accommodate the 619 women who had lost work in January 1935 with the introduction of night work. The union leader S.R.V. Naidu sought to convince the male ring framers to accommodate to the new schedule promising that he would try to prevent future entry of women into this department. This obviously generated disgust for the union in the women who continued to work. Thus the issue divided the male/female workers on differing interest.

The arbitrator of the dispute, C. Iyer, while referring to S.R.V.'s suggestion to stop further entry of women in the department considered it "unsympathetic if not unchivalrous, as if only men deserved jobs."

61. Development Dept. G.O.2153, 21-9-1937. Here initially women continued to work on account of which there was dissension within the labouring community.


63. Ibid.
That the women of Madura Mills continued to work, without supporting the male ring framers showed assertion of the principle that their representation was necessary for their involvement in the union's actions, and that they were unwilling to be meek followers.

In fact, when a major strike was launched by the MLU in early 1938, the response from the women workers was lukewarm. Normally extremely active during struggles, women and Muslims were reported to be keen on joining back work. During the long strike, food and money were supplied to the strikers' families. The manner of their distribution gave rise to some misperceptions. According to the district magistrate's report, women and Muslims were keen to join back because they were not beneficiaries of the distribution. On the other hand, according to P. Muthiah, a very handsome share was distributed amongst the Muslims. Whatever be the reason, the movement thus was fractured on lines of gender and community. This

64. Development Dept. G.O.1050, 21-4-1938, op. cit.

65. Ibid. Report dated 25-3-1938. It was reported that Muslims residing in Goripalayam were keen to return back for work in the mill.

was easily possible given the material constraints involved in the workers sustaining themselves in such times on meagre funds.

In the Mahalakshmi Mill, Madurai, during 1938, when Muthuramalinga Thevar was fighting with the management for recognition of the MTWU, the management continued working the mill with women coolies. The union objected to it for these women were kept inside the mill and overworked. Even their husbands were not allowed to meet them, according to the union.

Such attempts by managements to continue work with women coolies obviously generated gender tension. And it is here that issues of molestation and complaints of jeering of blacklegs by the strikers are made by managements to the police. But then unions too complained that their women members were harassed by the mill officials for doing union work.

In 1938, the CDTWU reported that their union office was flooded with reports especially from women workers that "they were subjected to all sordid indignities inside the mill by maistris as also others

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67. Ibid.

68. Development Dept. G.O.2532, 12-10-38, T.N.A.
unconnected with the mill, on account of their working for the union." The CLU and CMWU also made such complaints. Such complaints came from the mills in Singanallur, too.

The management-supported R.K. Mills workers union wrote to the police that "(T)he strikers used bad language at the female labourers and threatened to molest them." This was during the general strike in Coimbatore for increased D.A. in 1941. At Lakshmi Mills, Koilpatti it was on the charge of molestation of women workers that some male workers were dismissed from service by the management during the strike in 1944. In the course of the major agitation in 1948, the Superintendent of Police of Coimbatore District reported that the strikers in the village demanded from the wife of a loyal worker that she persuade her husband from going to work.

At a later period, too, we find that the mill managements constantly used various categories of

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69. Ibid.
70. Public Works and Development (L), G.O.2109, 29-8-1941 T.N.A.
71. Public Works and Development (L), G.O.1027, 5-4-1944 T.N.A.
labour to break strikes. When the unions in 1941 demanded a respectable wage with increased D.A. in Coimbatore, the management sought to continue work dismissing union leaders. At the Asher Mill, four doffing boys were replaced by two new women workers. Such instances of strike-breaking by inducting women labour was most common in Coimbatore, creating discord between men and women workers as also between unions.

Contest for occupation also generated gender tensions. That women were being employed for overtime work was the complaint of a Communist union member, Mariappan, of the Rajah Mills, Madurai. He wanted the union to ensure that overtime work be reserved for men alone. Likewise, a complaint was made by the CMWU of Rajapalayam, demanding that the management stop the practice of transferring female workers from the reeling to the spinning department to replace higher paid male workers. To Mariappan, the demand to preserve overtime work for men only stemmed from a patriarchal notion of the "secondary nature of women’s work".

73. Home Poll (L), 12/1/1941/Report of 24-7-1941, N.A.I.
75. Public Works and Development (L), G.O.998, 9-6-1943 T.N.A.
Similarly, the management employed women at lower wages owing to an understanding of female wage as 'secondary' and female capacity as lower than that of men. M. Foucault's classic statement on sexuality seems appropriate to the predicament of women mill workers -- "Sexuality is not the most intractable element — in power relations, but rather one of those endowed with the greatest instrumentality: useful for the greatest number of manoeuvres and capable of serving as a point of support, as a linchpin, for the most varied strategies."

Another avenue of tension and strain for women workers, affecting gender relations was the women worker-maistri relation. The domination and sexual harassment of women by maistris in the mills were common. In fact, most women were careful to keep the maistri happy, to be in his good books for fear of losing wages as fines for poor reeling and for wastage of cotton and breakage of yarn. Complaints about these were made to the RCL investigators as also to the

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77. Madras Labour, 1938, Madras, p.161. It was stated by women workers that if time keeper was not on good terms with a woman, it was easy to mark her absent. This has also been discussed in Chapter III.

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Arbitrators of disputes in mills in most places. Hence the culture at the workplace that evolved was not one automatically co-opting women as equals. Rather, the prevalent norms, values and role models of womanhood, permeated at every plane to recreate and reinforce the power relations implicit in them in the mill too.

When women were insulted at the mill by the maistri or by striking men workers, calling them names when women did not strike, jeering at them for being strike breakers, the modality of oppression was a language of abuse, which described them, rather accused them of loose morals and indecency. Undoubtedly, men too faced various problems, but these were different, in the symbolic realm. To a woman in a tradition bound conservative society, aspersions on her character would certainly produce the additional psychological trauma of insecurity and vulnerability. Such violence to the self-respect of women limited their ability to make free choice on any issue. Thus "Language like capital is an instrument of domination, a carrier of cultural power." 78

It is here that the images of women that the

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various unions sought to create is interesting. Though most unions represented issues of the women workers in their memorandums and attempted to involve women, most of their ideas remained tangential to their practice. For example, when N.G. Ramaswamy Ayyangar conducted a major struggle of Coimbatore mill workers in 1924, he appointed his wife as the President. That he did so was to exploit the possible "chivalrous treatment that she would get as restrictions were imposed on him by the administration." At the time he had just been released from jail and was restrained under orders of Section 144. His plans "to work through his wife", however, misfired owing to the mismanagement of affairs by B. Shiva Rao. Here it was 'gender ideology' that permeated even decision making by the union leader.

S.R.V. Naidu, when describing the conditions of women workers in the factories to the RCL said, "The condition of women workers was more unsatisfactory than that of men because of their domestic work, they are unable to attend meetings and their wages are lower. The absence of woman jobber leads to many complications." But, then there was no rethinking on

80 Ibid.
81 Ibid., p.173.
the domestic role/duty of women in his discussion of women's status. Besides, it was S.R.V. Naidu, who sought to overcome problems in the ringframe department of Madura Mill by restraining their access to this department. At another plane, he tried to bring changes in their conditions of work by asking for female maistris and better wages.

Also growing was the perception that women's mobilisation was crucial to the health of the trade union movement. So much so, that Shiva Rao observed, "The trade union movement cannot grow strong and healthy without women's active participation in union work." In a public meeting at Madras in 1926, he said, "The workers at any rate had only their employers to deal with, but the women had to serve both the employers and the employees". These extremely difficult conditions of existence of women were brought out in the survey conducted by the Women's Indian Association in 1926. They came to the conclusion that it was typical for a woman worker to commence work in the home at 4 a.m., rush off to work at 6.30 a.m. and then come back to the drudgery of housework only to

82. Ibid., p.412.
83. Ibid.
be beaten by a drunken husband at night.

The MTWU of Muthuramalinga Thevar even sought to enrol women members by reducing their subscription fee to 2 annas, half the regular amount. The various unions in Coimbatore, Madras and Madurai, demanded that the conditions of work for women be radically transformed with creches, rest rooms, maternity benefit, women maistris and better wages. They also made special efforts to actively involve women in union work. The Coimbatore Mill Workers Union made a special sub-committees for women. Meenakshi Ammal was elected as its labour secretary and Mrs N.S.Ramaswamy Ayyangar as president. Similar efforts were made by the Madura Textile Workers Union. However, their perception of women's role in society did not depart from the traditional. None of them were different in their perceived role for women in society. Even in an

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84. C. Rajagopalachari Papers, Acc. No.1420, Letter from Nachiappa Gounder to C.R. dated 27-9-1937. Salem district described by Nachiappa Gounder as the first venue of total prohibition. Also in Acc.No.1424. It was noted that the anti-toddy campaign was launched in Madura, Salem and Coimbatore. Mentioned also are the working class villages which were the focus of the campaign.


86. The Hindu, 23-8-1927, Workers under arrest in Coimbatore, Madras.
issue such as maternity benefit for women workers, it was a perception of the exclusivity of female responsibility for reproduction that prompted the unions to demand proper implementation of the welfare legislation. For otherwise, the demand would have been that every working class family be provided with maternity benefit. A demand charter of the CMWU reads as follows: "This meeting deplores the way in which women workers are treated in the mills. Not only are they paid low, but also their welfare is least cared for. It is to be noted that they discharge the duties of both the workers as also a housewife." Such ideas, in turn, contributed to a social ordering where womanhood coalesced in domesticity and motherhood and vindicated contemporary mores. Thus an argument which was primarily raising the issues of "women's low wages" instead also articulated the patriarchal bias of viewing domesticity and reproductivity as exclusively feminine space, however unconsciously.

Much as unions were breaking ground by involving women in union work, the role model for woman or on woman remained much limited to the domestic. The communists during the second world war conducted widely

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87. Development Dept. G.O.791, 18-12-1948 T.N.A.
attended meetings for women and children in Madurai in 1943. The issue was demanding more ration rice and an end to the shortage of firewood at the procurement shops. This was taken up by both the MLU and MTWU among the textile workers. It cannot be denied that women were mobilised on such issues because the domain of the domestic, of cooking, of providing food for the home, was seen to be the woman's, though it was an issue that concerned the entire working class family. The rationale operative here obviously enough was the essential domesticity of woman. Such forms of mobilisation contributed to a reinforcement of the traditional notions of womanhood.

The Madura labour union attempted to involve women through special meetings. In fact in 1939, S.R.V. Naidu campaigned for unemployment insurance at least for the women workers. It was S.R.V. Naidu himself who also sought to overcome the problems for the male ring framers by seeking to prevent future employment of women in that department. Though the MLU encouraged education of girls at the labour school in the Harveypatti colony, the emphasis on the content of

88. Home Poll (I), 7/23/1943, N.A.I.

89. Fortnightly Report for Madras Presidency, 1st half December 1943; Also Indian Worker, V.2, No.14, 15th November 1946.
education to be imparted differed for boys and girls. Kanniah Naidu, presiding over the annual day function of the school, exhorted the girls to learn traditional folk dance forms of Kummi and Kolattam. This signified a patriarchal notion of gender roles and its continuity in the mill social life. Similar ideas were at work when a mill provided separate dining rooms for men and women (e.g. Rangavilas mill, Coimbatore) or making particular departments the near exclusive preserves of women workers. This segregation was, in turn, as much making use of "difference" as reinforcing it.

Similar messages get transmitted also in the modes of protest in which women were deployed. That they were deployed as the front line of workers' picket in front of mill gates was no insignificant detail. During the major strike at the Coimbatore mills in 1937-38, at Vasantha Mills, Coimbatore during the general strike for increased D.A. in 1941 and at

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90. **Indian Worker**, V.II, No.6, July 15th, 1945, Madras, p.2.
91. Development Dept. G.O.1588, 22-6-1939.T.N.A.
93. Public Work and Development (L), G.O.2109, 29-8-1941.T.N.A.
CS&W Mills in 1946, at the Choolai Mills, Madras in 1939 and at the Mahalakshmi and Meenakshi mills of Madurai in 1938, women were in the forefront, armed with brooms, shoes and cowdung or otherwise. That these women were placed/stood in front was an expression of the presumed 'lower vulnerability' of the women to police brutality, although the presumption did not always turn out to be correct. In Coimbatore, in 1946, the district magistrate's letter explicitly perceived this as the reason for use of women in the forefront by the union. That he did so was the receiving of the message as much as his espousal of similar notions of womanhood. The "use of women" was, no doubt, one step back as far as the union's espousal of gender equality was concerned. For the women it was a sign of their progress, of agency and break with received values of feminine passivity. Their act itself, in such large numbers, was a "cultural protest", a break on the tip of the iceberg of the

95. The Hindu, 1-3- 1939, Madras, Madras Mahajana Sabha Library, Madras.
oppressive structure. The spirit of unrest in the reeling departments of Coimbatore-based mills, as also in Madurai, was one such kind. Militant, conscious women agitators thus emerged; so much so that their protests made the conciliation officer of Coimbatore remark on the "quarrelsome nature of these women" on petty issues too.

And this break with tradition was most vividly expressed in the forties, in the coming into being of the image of the militant woman striker in the mills of Madurai and Coimbatore. At Coimbatore, the militant image of Ammuammal so enveloped the collective consciousness of the Communist mill union that her valiant martyrdom facing police bullets on November 11, 1946 is commemorated till today. Similarly, Andiammal Angammal and Karuppayee whose militancy remained undaunted in the face of police brutality, left their imprint on the collective psyche of the mill workers in Madurai. This activism of the women...


created the image of the radical, militant woman worker who stood in defence of the national flag, the hammer and sickle or the various other symbols of workers' self-respect. This image of womanhood was as much being created as coming into being from women's interaction in the political space. So committed were women that Jeevanandam, in his memoirs, recalled how women, during the strike meeting at Lakshmi Mills, were disciplined and even spoke out against a leader, Supree, for deriding the red flag and Marx. They shouted: "If you want to praise the national flag do so, but if you insult the red flag we will beat you up with a rolling pin."

Also came into being a range of symbols with which working class community identified. The Rabindranath Tagore Reading room was started by the MLU, in competition with the MTWU which had organised the Subhash Chandra Bose reading room in Madurai. In Madras, in 1939, the labourers were mobilised by the Congress in defence of the National flag to oppose the self-respecters' attempts to burn the national flag in

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102. Fortnightly Report for Madras Presidency, 1st half of February 1939, Madras. T.N.A.
the Ripon building. Women workers are reported to have taken to wearing Gandhi caps and persuading others to wear them, getting embroiled in fights if refused. Kamala, one of our respondents from Coimbatore states that a number of them were inspired by the Mahatma. In 1940, on January 26, a number of mills could not carry on work as the workers stayed away to celebrate Independence day. In Coimbatore, workers struck work when Nehru was arrested in Kashmir in 1946 and later when Manak Gandhi was arrested in 1949. Subramania Bharati's *Viduthalai* (freedom) and *Engal Thai* (Our Mother) as well as various songs of Tirumurthy were most popular among the mill workers. In fact, in Coimbatore during strikes, at gate meetings there was a cultural troupe under Ramadas who, along with some men and women, rendered powerful

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103. *Forthnightly Report for Madras Presidency*, 1st half of April 1939, Madras.T.N.A.


105. P.W.Dept. G.O.90, 10-1-1941, T.N.A.

106. Development Dept. G.O.133, 10-4-1947. Dev.Dep. G.O.274, 20-1-1950. When Manak Gandhi [the acting general secretary of the AITUC] was arrested, the workers of Kaleswarar struck work and was soon joined by workers of Somasundara Mills too.

107. Interview with Kamala, Velayudhan, Kaliannan. All of them were actively associated with the working class movement in Coimbatore, Coimbatore, 1991.
plays and songs to inspire the workers. The cultural movement in Coimbatore was strong and sensitive to the issues of the time. During the plague in Coimbatore, in mill villages, leaders like K. Ramani performed an educative play on sanitation and preventive measures to fight the disease. This helped create awareness and confidence among the plague ridden villagers. During strikes, a very popular song was that of Tirumurthy on the inherent justice of the worker's struggles. They were as just as Draupadi's desire to avenge her humiliation at the hands of the Kauravas, or Rama's anger towards the ten headed Ravana. According to Kamala, who knows a number of these songs, these were all very popular during the time and workers identified with them very closely. Some women were also active in the cultural troupe. (A sister of one of our respondents, Ponnambal was actively associated with the cultural troupe.

The cultural space thus rendered to the women as workers varied in time but was much embedded in tradition. And in this, the colonial state also had a role to play in the field of ideology. In 1908, the

108. Ibid.
factory commission made note of how women had to wait a long time at the mill for their men folk to accompany them home. This was because prevalent practices did not permit women the freedom to move about alone in the evening. Therefore, the commission recommended that there be introduced change in time of work for women so as to accommodate their 'wifely' duties. Thus, women were sought to be made workers only in association with their domestic role. Unions too demanded shorter hours of work for women taking into account their domestic duties. In Madura Mills, the practice was of letting the women leave a little earlier than men. By 1947, the women themselves demanded that they be left half an hour earlier than the normal time 5.30 p.m. The idea of a 'female time' now was translated from one being enforced by a paternal colonial state to a popular demand articulated by the workers themselves. That is, the female time of work was seen to be necessarily different even by women workers themselves and their dual roles got legitimised.


112. Development Department, G.O. 2971, 3-8-1946. On 16-4-1946 the women at the Kamala Mills, Coimbatore, made such a demand and walked out at 5 P.M.

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even officially. Though the state legislation might have been an attempt to help ameliorate women's situation, it in turn helped reinforce conservative values of womanhood; the notion of progress for women existed so far as it co-opted her familial responsibilities.

The reason for conflict in the ring frame department of mills at Madurai between male and female workers originated in the policy of preventing night work for women. Here too it was the colonial state's welfare legislation of protecting women from night work that created a situation of confrontation along gender lines. In Madras, when the government took up the cause of resettlement of the Adi Dravida workers affected in the arson during the strike of 1920, it again imperceptibly brought into focus or rather sharpened the conflict between the communities. In Madurai, the Criminal Tribes Act of 1923, made with a view to curb crime, also highlighted the notoriety of this community in the eyes of the state and the people and therefore encouraged such views. In fact M.C. Rajah and others tried to get amendments made to it. Even as late as 1945 the Act was operative, proving to be a source of repression of this community. It is using this that the police could terrorize the
community and force them to come back to work during strikes in Madurai as was stated by S.R.V. Naidu. In September 1946 it was officially decided not to register any more people under the C.T. Act and debate was on the need to do away with it. This was done in 1947. Note may be made of how the colonial state in its policing role also classified communities as dangerous and created multiple layers of citizenship rights in accordance with its perceptions. It may also be noted that not only tradition, but reinterpreted symbols of power/powerlessness were created and recreated according to the perceptions of the state, particularly of the police, and of the individual managements. Women, too, were affected in this process. Gender ideology and the difference it assigned to men and women were a double bind for women.