CHAPTER - I

WOMEN WORKING IN INFORMAL SECTOR:
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1.1: INTRODUCTION
There has been a growing concern about the marginalisation and invisibility of the workers in the informal sector. The informal sector (IS now onwards) has been defined as employment that is not covered in law or in practice by formal arrangements. It remains largely outside government protection or union control. Nonetheless, the IS plays a critical role both in the household and in the national economy. So, over the years, regional, national and international networks have been formed to fight for the improvement of the living and working conditions of workers in the IS. The International Labour Organization (ILO now onwards) reinforced the need to strengthen the IS associations and integrate them into union structures. It also revealed the extension to which women produce and market in this sector thus contributing to the household income. For analysing trends and for evolving policies for women or any group in a given population accurate and reliable statistics are important. Thus, one cannot ignore the productive contribution of women in the development programmes.

Customs and traditions prescribe the jobs in which women get employment. Gender based division of labour is visible whether it is agriculture, construction, weaving or village industries. Jobs which are considered tedious, arduous and low skilled are usually carried out by women while men are found in the more skilled and less onerous tasks. In mainland India, handloom weaving is an excellent example of such a division of labour based on gender. Women carry out the entire range of
tasks involved in preparing yarn for the loom; while men are in charge of the actual weaving. Men also play the role of supervising the weaving process. This situation is more or less replicated in many other industries also. Moreover, women have to combine paid labour with child bearing, child-rearing and domestic chores like collecting food, fuel, water and fodder. Putting together these basic necessities is back-breaking labour for great many women (Ramaswamy 1985:86).

Women use their income to meet the families’ basic needs, education, health care and food, and yet women experience acute subjugation and vulnerability. The major concerns regarding the position, rights and protection of the women workers got a fillip since the second half of the seventies, commencing from the International Women’s Year and the first UN World Conference on Women held in Mexico in 1975. The period from 1975 to 1985 was also declared as the International Decade of Women. Several world conferences on women were held providing a forum for exchange of ideas and experiences among women from all over the world. The conferences helped women recognise that many common challenges and problems confront women across class and culture throughout the world. This brought a change in the outlook of the women workers in particular, and women in general. Concurrently in India, the landmark study, ‘The report of the commission on the status of women in India’ published by the ICSSR in 1972, also brought attention to the desperate plight of women in poverty. Later on, the conditions of women working in IS was reported by National Commission on Self Employed Women and Women in the Informal Sector in a report titled ‘Shram Shakti’ (National Commission on Self Employed Women and Women in the Informal Sector 1988). The report highlighted the dismal working conditions of women, the occupational hazards faced by them,
their long working hours and the precarious wage condition that existed without any welfare programmes or protective legislation.

Among the western feminists, one of the important concerns has been to understand the cause of women's subordination. Feminists studies have provided enough ethnographic data to question the earlier male oriented definition of 'work' or rather the framework used for defining 'work' in official sources (like census). While analysing the studies about IS, to ensure that women workers are recognised as fully competent human beings, with equal rights to secure work, some questions need to be considered. The questions are as follows. (1) What is the perception of women as a worker? (2) What is the nature of their work? (3) Why are women found mostly in jobs of lower status? (4) Why do they earn low wages and have less chances of promotion? (6) Why does work not seem to enhance their status? The answers to such questions are complex and I have attempted to answer them. In Chapter I, I attempt to analyse the women workers in IS from a macro perspective. In this chapter after defining IS, I have analysed the process that lead to its growth, its characteristics, the underestimation of participation of females in the work force, the reasons for low status of women workers and the nature and type of work which women perform. After this analysis of women workers at the macro level, I examine in Chapter II, the handloom sector as a socio-economic organisation and the position of women weavers in it. The reasons for studying the women weavers and the objectives of the study are also presented in this section.

1.2: INFORMAL SECTOR

There are different ways of classifying the economic structure. Various classifications such as organised and unorganised, modern and traditional, capitalist and subsistence sectors have been used for analysing the urban
According to Papola (1981:8) the formal – informal sector dichotomy which was first used by Keith Hart in a study of urban Ghana, is a meaningful and convenient method of analysing the structures of economies. This dichotomy has evolved mainly out of the widespread concern of research workers and policy makers for the small and unprotected producers in the urban economies, who on account of their disadvantaged position are unable to derive the benefits of development.

The IS emerged from the labour market studies in the nineteen fifties and sixties. In the seventies, the ILO conducted a series of city studies on the urban IS in Asia, Latin America and West Africa (Papola 1981). These studies explored the static characteristics of the IS, such as the size and composition, worker’s status in terms of migration, age composition, wages and earnings; and enterprises in terms of forward-backward linkages, market structure etc. These studies succeeded in popularising the concept of the IS. Recently, in the nineteen nineties, the IS came into limelight for two reasons:

1. The increase in self-employment and informal activities in developed and developing countries.

The international organisation such as the United Nations had emphasised the need to incorporate more of household production activities into the national accounts. The new emphasis on the national accounts had led to a need to review the data collection procedures followed so far in the national surveys. This indicates the need of a clear-cut definition of the IS.
1.3: CONCEPT OF INFORMAL SECTOR

Many attempts had been made to capture the characteristics of the IS, so as to enable the measurement of its attributes. This proved to be very difficult and an international consensus has not yet been reached (Kantor 1997:2512-2514). Some of the definitions of the IS proposed by different studies are discussed here. They can be broadly categorised into three sections - (1) economic definition (2) definition of the state and other international bodies and (3) sociological definition.

1.3.1: Economic Definition Of Informal Sector

The definition of unorganised or IS of Heather and Joshi (1976) gives importance to economic factors. This definition is based on size, nature of market, technology and relation with the state. According to Heather and Joshi the IS means 'a large number of small producers operating on indigenous technology in a highly competitive produce markets. It sells a variety of goods and services mainly to low income group and has no access to and influence over the machinery of the Government and hence no official productions and benefits' (Heather and Joshi 1976: 44-46).

In the nineteen eighties Papola (1981:12-20) in the study of IS in Ahmedabad, identified the characteristics of the IS. They were (1) IS consists of small establishments; (2) It lacks formal structured operation or limited functional division of labour; (3) IS used non-modern technology or indigenous technology; (4) IS enterprises lack access to Government favours like finance, installment of foreign technology, protection from foreign competition; (5) IS operated in a competitive and unprotected product market and (6) Labour market in the IS being unregulated there was excess labour supply which tends to lead to underemployment, with wages of the workers being depressed.
The above characteristics of the IS suggests that it is difficult to identify it as a distinct analytical category. These characteristics are not found in every IS therefore, the empirical identification of the IS is done on the basis of a single criterion. Further the concept does not seem to have an independent meaning; it derives meaning only when contrasted with the formal sector.

1.3.2: Definition Of Informal Sector By The State And Other International Bodies

The definition adopted by the Fifteenth International Conference of Labour Statisticians (ICLS) held in 1993, focus on the production unit or enterprise as the unit of measurement and analysis. The ICLS defined the IS as ‘a group of production units which form part of the household sector as household enterprises or equivalently, unincorporated enterprises owned by households’ (http://www.ilo.org/public/english/employment/skills/informal/who.htm). The ICLS definition did not cover all the sectors of the IS because household sector was only a part of it. The definition excluded those informal workers who did not belong to household enterprises like traders, construction workers, hunters etc. At an operational level, the surveys of IS by the ILO in Latin America for 1990-1995, defined IS as consisting of ‘all own-account workers (but excluding administrative workers, professionals and technicians), and unpaid family workers, and employers and employees working in establishments with less than five or ten persons engaged (employment size of the enterprise varies from region to region)’ (Ibid:2). Inspite of the progress made in the definition of IS units and workers, labour force and IS surveys typically count only one’s primary occupation, thus effectively excluding secondary activities in the IS.
The Government of India had attempted to conceptualise IS through various studies. The National Commission on Labour defined unorganised workers as 'those workers who failed to organise themselves because of illiteracy, ignorance, domination by the employer, casualness of employment and scatteredness of location, etc.' (quoted from Barua 1994:64). It included workers in agriculture, small and household industry and those working in trade. The definition has a sociological implication. The non-existence of the structural organisation in the IS is attributed to social factors like illiteracy, ignorance of the workers.

Further illustrating the point from the Indian situation, the National Accounts Statistics has a clear definition of organised sector. The organised sector units are enterprises registered under the Indian Factory Act, 1948 (Government of India 1994). So any kind of enterprise ‘that are not registered under the Factory Act, 1948’ are considered to be IS. A factory is defined as a workplace where 20 or more workers work without the use of power or 10 or more workers work with the use of power. Thus, workers who are not working in such a workplace do not come under the Factory Act. The recruitment, working conditions, hours of work, leave, payment of wages, dismissals etc. were not formalised in the case of non-factory workers (Papola 1981:11).

According to Shram Shakti report (National Commission on Self-employed Women and Women working in the Informal Sector 1988:2) women workers in the IS was classified according to the nature of their activities-
1) Women doing manual work like agriculture, construction labour and other sectors.
2) Home-based producers including artisans and piece rate workers.
3) Women engaged in processing work in traditional and non-traditional areas.
4) Providers of services like washerwomen, scavengers and domestic helpers.

5) Petty vendors and hawkers who do not hire labour but take the assistance of family members.

1.3.3: Sociological Definition Of Informal Sector

Sociologists have come to study IS only recently. One attempt to define IS is that of Omvedt. The IS or the unorganised sector was defined by her as ‘the work done for wages in a distinct form, work that may be called “disguised wage work” i.e. home produce in which the worker is given the raw materials and paid piece rates for the finished product and subsistence production i.e. work done for home consumption in order to reproduce the household without involving any cash income’ (Omvedt 1990:1).

This concept of IS cuts across the productive and unproductive work. It means that the workers whose activities do not result into paid work or market output but helps in the subsistence of the family, become legitimised workers.

The IS theories are dominantly used to explain poverty and inequality in Third World cities. It focuses on differences in productivity and earnings associated with large and small scale enterprises. The term ‘informal’ refers to self-employment, one person enterprises, artisanal production and domestic service while the term ‘formal’ is often taken to mean wage and salaried labour (Marshall 1998:316).

The foregoing discussion on the various definitions and characteristics of IS suggests that IS is difficult to identify as a distinct analytical category. The various characteristics attributed to IS are also not necessarily consistent with each other nor are they to be found universally in different empirical situations. However, after analysing the
various definitions from different sources it can be concluded that IS is characterised by the following features: (1) subsistence production (i.e. work predominantly done for home consumption) either in small scale production units or in household enterprises. (2) These units use indigenous resources or low productive techniques in a highly competitive market. (3) In IS the labour relation is characterised by self-employment or casual employment. (4) The job-entry, skill learning and division of labour are all based on informal structure. Inspite of the recent attempts of the NDA government in India in 2004 to introduce insurance scheme, we can still say that the IS is not regulated by the state and it also lacks an organisation of workers (like forming a union).

Inspite of the definition of IS in terms of characteristics of the enterprise (small, unregistered) the ILO Task Force used the concept 'informal employment' and 'informal economy'. Informal employment was defined as employment without secure contracts, workers benefits or social protection (Chen 2002:6). It comprised of self-employment in informal enterprises and wage workers in informal jobs. The new ideology assumed that the informal workers would like the benefits of formality, namely secure work, workers’ benefits, social protection and voice through organisation. Thus, the new concept of informal employment is defined in terms of the characteristics of employment relations or status.

The International Confederation of Free Trade Unions (ICFTU now onwards) stressed the need for an analytical discussion on terms such as 'informal sector' or 'informal economy'. The ICFTU considered there would be problems with the definition of 'informal' because it was not widely accepted in practice and seemed to be constantly changing. It seemed to discuss less about workers’ legal status or recognition and more about a typical or marginal situation regardless of legal status.
Trade unions preferred words such as ‘unprotected’, extended’ or ‘unrecognised’ instead of ‘informal’. These words were useful because they could identify problems and at the same time suggest solutions. According to Justice (2002:17), the idea is that some terms and ways of thinking would cause the problems of workers to be addressed better than others and that some ‘unpacking’ of the ‘informal sector’ concept would be necessary in order to achieve practical results.

Through the years trade unions and international labour organisation introduced framework of IS which shifted conceptual direction of IS from the focus of enterprises or economic activities to the workers and the characteristics of employment relations. Such kind of framework was believed to be significant because it could raise awareness among the workers to organise and build relationships with trade unions.

1.4: UNDERESTIMATION OF PARTICIPATION OF FEMALE WORK FORCE

Having define the IS, I now examine the role of the concepts or definitions in determining the actual position of the women's participation in the labour market, because a change in definition can cause a change in resulting statistics. Therefore, a strong data base, particularly on work participation by gender, is a crucial prerequisite for formulation of policies for women’s emancipation by planners. However, standard labour force statistics in developing countries seem to have a bias, both definitional and conceptual, against women. The missing of women from data or the ‘invisibility’ of women in data is also a reflection of the subordination and undervaluation of women in society. Krishnaraj (1990:2663) states ‘the major hurdles are in the segregation of sexes that often make women inaccessible to data collectors, the lack of voice for
women in the affairs of society, restricted spaces for women in general and a dominant cultural ideology that upholds these values as legitimate'.

In India, women who contributed about 42.8 percent (Census India 1991c:140-142) of the total unpaid domestic labour had been excluded from Census and National Account. Not only this, women who normally did not engage in active work but were drawn into productive activities in peak periods to assist their male producers in the field, remained invisible to the data collectors of labour force participation (Jha et al. 1998:12-22). Sociologists often assume that this reveals a failure or inadequacy of the statistics in question: in fact the exclusions are in most cases intentional, and derive from the fact that labour-market statistics are constructed within an economic theoretical framework rather than a sociological framework (Marshall 1998: 315).

The different surveys conducted to measure the work force participation rates in India, underestimated the females than males. The Human Development Report (HDR now onwards) (National Council of Applied Economic Research 1999a) showed female work participation rates as 18.4 percent. This was relatively lower when compared to 22.7 percent indicated by the Census India (1991c). However, in the case of males, work participation rates of the males found in the HDR survey closely matched with the rates indicated by the Census India (1991c). Regarding female worker status, it was found that the female work participation rates in Northeastern states were 39.5 percent in Census (1991c) while HDR survey stated it as 4.6 percent reflecting an underestimation of a high degree! On the contrary, the Census estimated the female work participation rates in the case of Kerala to be 16.9 percent and the HDR to be 28.5 percent. This analysis brings us to the question, in India why is there an underestimation of female participation in the work force? There are three reasons to explain this problem. They
are - (1) objective of the survey (2) changes in definition of ‘work’ from time to time and (3) methods or approaches used for counting data.

1) **Objective of the study**

Those who view that the objective of the survey was responsible for undercounting the females indicated that the main objective of the Indian surveys of the IS was to generate statistics required to estimate national income. Hence different aspects of employment which need to be included had not been emphasised while counting (Visaria and Jacob 1995).

In India, official sources such as Census of India do not recognise homebase workers as an independent category of workers but include them in the broad category of those working in the household industries. As such, homebase workers where women mostly work are not visible in national statistics.

2) **Change in definition of work**

The decennial population census documents have been the only available official data to assess the pattern of female labour force participation in India; but the concept of ‘work’ has changed from census to census. The result was that a sizeable proportion of women appeared and disappeared from the labour data. For example, the female work force participation rate in 1921 is 33.11 percent, in 1961-28 percent, in 1971-12 percent, in 1981-14 percent and in 1991-61 percent. (Government of India 1997a:113) In 1921, the definition of work force participation was based on ‘gainful occupation’ approach. But in the census of 1961, it was shifted to activity in specified time reference period and thus a person was classified as a worker or non-worker. In 1971 the persons were divided into ‘main worker’ or ‘non-worker’. Those women whose primary role was that of a housewife failed to qualify as workers since
cultural inhibitions prevented the respondent from assigning work status, even though they provided a large part of unpaid family work. These definitions of work adopted in the Indian census are more suitable to advance industrial economies where work for wages (i.e. market oriented work) was typically the norm. This was inappropriate for economies like India and third world countries where there was large non-monetised, non-market production of a subsistence nature and where women tended to be concentrated in this sector. Even when women joined in market-oriented work, such as homebased piece rate workers, they were ‘invisible’. However, some non-market production for own consumption such as cultivation, where men were mostly involved were counted as work; but other types of production for own consumption, such as livestock maintenance, post-harvest processing, gathering of fuel, fodder, water, which was done mostly by women, were excluded as work (Krishnaraj 1990:2664).

3) Methods or approaches used for counting data

Another reason for underestimation of female work force in India in seventies, was related to the methods or the approaches applied while collecting data. There was an assumption that questionnaire applicable for men would automatically suit women. In addition to this, most of the enumerators were males and mainly talked to male members of the household. These household members may not have reported that their wives were productively engaged or worker but were simply as ‘housewife’ as this could claim higher status of the family (De Souza 1980a:4). As a consequence of inadequate database, planners may fail to take into account the economic activities of a substantial number of women working in IS. This can also lead to displacement of women workers from traditional work pattern by large state industrialisation. Thus, in South India, the setting up of a single factory for the
manufacturing of nylon fishing nets threatened to displace ten thousand unrecorded women workers, who prepared fishing nets at home. Owing to inadequate database, planners failed to realise that such 'improvement', which theoretically intended to create employment opportunities, in fact, increase the difficulties of marginal families (De Souza 1980b:49).

Even though the major biases still remain, there was some scope of change in the Census of India over the last 20 years. In 1981, definition of 'work' adopted in the Census of India become more liberal. Any person who worked for six months or more in the reference period of one year was considered as main worker, while the rest were considered as marginal workers (Ghosh 1990:69-70). This was expected to capture women’s seasonal and intermittent labour force activity in the agricultural and other works in IS. In the late eighties, the United Nations’ Development Fund for Women’s (UNIFEM) project sought to improve the enumerator’s awareness and understanding of the issue by incorporating some changes in the training manual for enumerators. This was done by adding explanations and probing questions to the set economic questions. A poster, illustrating the range of women’s economic activities was also prepared to display at every enumeration block (Krishnaraj 1990:2663). Recently, the scope of definition of 'work' was expanded in the Census of India 2001 to include production of milk for domestic consumption. Further, in cultivation activities related to production of tobacco, fruits, all types of flower, roots and tubers, potatoes, chillies and turmeric, pepper, cardamom, all types of vegetables and fodder crops etc. for domestic consumption has been treated as work (Bose 2001:133). These kinds of review in the concepts mark the beginning of change of women’s participation in work force.
One of the conspicuous features of Indian society was the inequality of division of work based on gender. Despite the underestimation of female labour force participation, most of the women workers in India earn their livelihood from IS. It served as a major area for women's employment. In occupations like bidi making, domestic servants, mat weaving, food preserving and housekeeping service work the proportion of female workers were more than males workers (Government of India 2001:57). When the total main workers were classified on the basis of occupational category, 81.3 percent of the female workers worked in IS, while only 63.3 percent of the male workers worked in IS (Census India 1991c:138-139). By 2001, the situation had not changed. Only 17.6 percent of the women workers were employed in the formal sector while the rest of the workers belonged to IS. Within the IS, 75 percent of females in rural area and 68.5 percent of females in urban area were non-agricultural workers (Government of India 2001:64).

The Center for Monitoring Indian Economy (1993) categorises the female labour force on the basis of the labour relations. It was found that among the female workers 38 percent work as casual workers, 53 percent as self-employed and 8 percent as wage employed. As the IS included both self-employed and casual workers, the data therefore revealed that a majority of the female labour force worked in IS. Only about 8 percent of the female workers in comparison to 18 percent of their male counterparts had regular wage or salaried work (Center for Monitoring Indian Economy 1993). This poses a question: what makes the women workers occupy a low position in the job stratification? This can be examined from three dimensions. They are (1) culture (2) characteristics of IS and (3) structural changes in the economy.
Firstly, the cultural aspect relates to the position of women in Indian society and it determines the economic status of the women workers. The belief that men were the sole economic provider in a patriarchal family and women were secondary earner or homemaker, prohibited and prohibits the women to seek higher wage jobs. As for those women who were the sole earners of the households or where the males’ income was inadequate, they were compelled to take any employment available and hence willing to work for whatever job they were offered. Thus, the attitude and belief about the capacity of the women played a significant role in job segregation. In addition to this, there was a connection between cultural differences and female participation in farm activities. For example, women were highly involved in paddy cultivation in Kerala and Tamil Nadu but were rarely seen in the wheat cultivation in Punjab and Haryana. Many paddy regions were generally free from the cultural imposition of female spatial seclusion (purdah) and thus revealed a greater degree of female participation. By contrast, many of the wheat growing areas, with their rigid caste taboos and restrictive female mobility, show a lower rate of female labour force participation (Bagchi 1981:6). However this could not be generalised because in case of Rajasthani women they observed purdah yet traditionally tended their lands and worked in the fields.

Secondly, the characteristics of IS in India, like unregulated operation, easy job entry and informal system of skill learning attracted women who were in large proportion illiterate and lagged behind in acquiring new skills. They were the most disadvantaged workers because apart from lack of education and lack of skill, they were burdened with responsibilities of housework and taking care of children. In addition they were restricted from certain type of work by cultural taboos. In most Indian cities, for the urban poor, hawking provides a major avenue of
earning a livelihood as it requires minor financial inputs and low skills. A study of hawkers in Mumbai showed the one-fourth of them, irrespective of gender, were illiterate (Bhowmik 2000:21).

Thirdly, the structural change in the economy resulted in informalisation of workers. Since the informal workers were not regulated by law and did not come under the government minimum wage act, the big industrial houses transferred the manufacture of production to small scale industries. They benefited out of this and this ultimately leads to increase of IS. Another view that existed was that formal sector could not absorb the increasing supply of labour in India. This helped in increase of IS. The formal sector thus played a dual role in increasing the IS. In one way it increased the IS by informalisation while on the other hand, because of its limited capacity it could not absorb all the labourers and hence women workers sought employment in IS.

The change from homebased production to capital intensive manufacturing also tends to displace women workers. In the early decade of the textile industry women constituted about 20 percent to 25 percent of the labour force; their number increased from 8816 in 1884 to 28,717 in 1920. However, as the textile labour force grew larger, employment opportunities for women declined and by 1975, women workers constituted only about 2 percent of the textile labour force (Everett and Savara 1994:68).

Within the IS women workers are unequally distributed. However, no systematic efforts have been made to estimate how women in India are distributed across the various informal occupations. As per 2001 census figures, the women workers were thus classified as: 32.5 percent as cultivators, 39.4 percent as agricultural labourers and 6.3 percent as household industry workers (Government of India 2001:41). In Manipur, as per the 1991 census figures, it was found that the largest groups of
women workers were engaged in cultivation (66.2%) followed by household industry (12%), agricultural labour (8%) and trade (3%) (Census India 1991a). In a survey of IS in Ahmedabad by Self-Employed Women's Association it was found that women home based workers constituted 93 percent, followed by street vendors 5% (Bhatt 1989a). In Calcutta, the largest groups were the domestic workers, dhobis and household production workers in tailoring, food processing and making of paper bags (Banerjee 1985).

1.6: NATURE OF WORKING CONDITIONS

In order to understand the gender relationship within the IS, a gender perspective on the nature of the working conditions of women workers is useful. Gender studies in India indicated that caste, religion, family structure and kinship affected the position of women workers. According to Srinivas (1998:143) the idea of working for wages was an indication of low status. Thus, it was men and women of the landless caste or lowest level of rural hierarchy that worked for wages. So, caste status varied inversely with participation in manual labour. In India, socio-cultural factors also play a significant role in the work status of women. The female work participation rate was lowest among Muslims at about 10 percent followed by Hindu 17 percent, Scheduled Castes 23 percent, Christians 25 percent and Scheduled Tribes 28 percent (National Council of Applied Economic Research 1999a:85). In Ahmedabad, Unni (1998b) found that while male work participation rate did not vary much across the groups, female work participation rate was highest among the backward castes and lowest among the upper caste Hindu.

Besides caste and religion, the socially created (gender) differences between women and men results in norms and assumptions made about
women and men’s roles in the work force. In 1993-94, 86 percent of women workers were in agriculture as compared to 74 percent of men (Government of India 1997a:99). The nature of work for women in agriculture included sowing, transplantation and weeding. Harvesting involved a more complicated division of labour between the genders. The concept of pollution and purity forbids against touching the plough among the women of Santhal, Oraon, and Kharia tribes. They can and often do carry the plough (on their heads though not on their shoulders) to the field. But they must not touch a yoked plough (Alam 1997:4) In Manipur, the Meitei women were also not allowed to touch the ‘plough’. As only males were allowed to use the ‘plough’ they had a higher position than women during cultivation. Besides this, only few women owned or controlled land and this handicapped them in warding off poverty for themselves and their families. In case where male and female shared an egalitarian relationship, the position of female was better. For instance, among the tribes in Assam, during the marriage, the bride price was paid as a compensation for the loss of a productive worker, as a girl worked in the paddy fields. As a productive worker, she enjoyed a status at home (Debi 1994:3).

In some parts of Rajasthan when women involved in economic activity got married then bride price was paid, but now this has changed. The withdrawal of women from economic activity seemed to be directly related to the economic status of the family. So a family which could forego female economic participation had to demonstrate its economic capacity by paying dowry, thereby ensuring a higher social status. Thus, gender, caste and class overlap in the context of women (Chanana 1996:30). Mencher (1996:59) in the study of the female cultivators of Chingleput district in Tamil Nadu referred to the overlap between caste and class in division of labour. She stressed that those lower caste women
with small land holdings worked in their fields while the higher caste women did not do manual work in fields. On the contrary, in large land owning households higher caste women played a major supervisory role in field operations. The type of work women performed also depended on the social class to which they belonged. Among the landless, women worked both in the field (helping with sowing, trampling the field as it is being levelled, transplanting, weeding, harvesting, and so on) and in the house of the employer (helping to get seeds ready for sowing, and after the harvest, in threshing, winnowing, dehusking, polishing the paddy and transporting it to mills). But when the landholding was increased, women withdrew from the farm activities. This, Mencher (Ibid:60) explained, was not necessarily due to status value but because women undertook new agriculture related tasks like cooking food for labourers, soaking seeds before they were sowed etc. These kinds of tasks were frequently ignored by data gatherers and hence made women invisible as agriculturists.

Despite the myth of women's inferiority, women themselves performed unskilled, low grade jobs compared to their male counterparts. The research in brick kiln and quarry mines in Bihar and West-Bengal identified that women workers performed unskilled jobs like sorting of stones, stone chips, breaking of stones and landing stones in tracks of rails, etc. They got 'piece rate wage' depending on the work done regardless of time. They also faced many problems ranging from procedure of recruitment, wages and its payment and atrocities (Saran and Sandhwar 1990:168,192). A similar case was found in the study of Marine food units in Visakhapatnam. It found that women labourers were employed as 'graders' or performed works related to peeling. Their skill was considered low in the hierarchy. So 'grader women' who performed a critical task to enhance the value of the product received wages that
were below compressor/machine operators (performed by males) whose contribution to the value of the product was negligible (Padma 1995:55-57). Lal Das (1985:232-44) stated that ‘employers remained convinced that women produced lower output per unit of labour and so their salary remained meager compared to that of men’.

According to Riti ‘the numerous kinds of discrimination and problems that urban working women faced in terms of recruitment, employment and provision of facilities were the consequence of women’s subordinated status and social responsibilities’ (Riti 1987:45-47). Another study conducted in Ahmedabad by SEWA (1988:31-34) highlighted the plight of women engaged in grinding spices. The case studies had shown the uncertain nature of their works and wages, health hazards and adverse impact of grinding machines. The ill fate of IS was also found among the street vendors who contributed towards a valuable urban economy. They functioned as distributors of goods and services but they were viewed as criminals, illegal encroachers and nuisance (Patel 1988; A.Singh 1999). The census survey of the hawkers in Mumbai found that the incidence of unlicensed hawkers was greater among females than males and the most vulnerable groups were the illiterate females or the newly arrived hawkers (Tata Institute of Social Studies 1998). In the case study of Baroda, illiterate female street workers worked more hours than literate female street workers (Kantawala and Padarla 1992:166-172).

The above studies reveal the various working conditions of women's employment in IS mostly in 1990s. In all these occupations there was little variation in the position of the women workers in relation to male workers. Women occupied the bottom position of the ladder in terms of employment, status, earnings and nature of working conditions. Let me now refer to the various approaches that explain the lower status of women workers.
1.7: MARXIST FEMINISM

According to Marxist feminism, labour was viewed as fundamental to all economic activity, so analysis of the organisation of labour was crucial. According to this approach, the origin of women's oppression came through the development of class society, private property and profit. In this model class oppression predated sex oppression. With the existence of surplus products, women who were once the chief creator of wealth were relegated to a secondary position (Reed 1980:9). The Marxist feminist approach viewed that social relation especially those related to sexual inequality were crucially shaped by the economic bases of society rather than by ideas and attitude (Beasley 1999:61).

1.8: LIBERAL FEMINISM

The Liberal feminist approach postulated a different perspective from Marxist and Radical Feminism. This was grounded on the classical liberal philosophy developed by Locke, Rousseau and Bentham and Mill (for Equal Rights: Individualism; Liberty and Justice) and asserted that women were not fundamentally different to men and yet were denied opportunities on the basis of their sex. Sex, therefore constituted an unwarranted disadvantage, a barrier to competition and the recognition of merit (Beasley 1999:53; Andermahr et al. 2000:149).

1.9: CULTURALIST APPROACH

The Culturalist perspective explained that the lower status for women workers was due to the cultural definition attached to the skills. Women’s skills were considered as ‘traditional’ skill emanating from housework. The entire complex of social beliefs and norms that defined appropriate work for women was that they should perform monotonous and time
consuming tasks which required patience, perseverance and dexterity. While on the other hand, men were believed to be impatient and hence expected to perform tasks that required less concentration and less flexibility (Kalpagam 1994:143-144).

Another criteria was that the pattern of social division of labour according to caste also segregated the women workers; for example, in Bombay, the BMC (Bombay Municipal Corporation) recruited people who belonged to castes like Mahars, Kanthiwaris and Harijans in sweeping activities. But they recruited less number of female sweepers than male sweepers where the job of sweeping became formalised (Everett and Savara 1994:79-80).

1.10: RADICAL FEMINISM
Unlike Marxist and Liberal feminism, Radical feminism conceived sexual oppression as the oldest and the most profound form of inequality. They considered women’s oppression as a social order in which women were dominated by men. The radical feminist viewed other forms of power, e.g. unequal power relations within capitalism as derived from patriarchy (social system of male domination, the rule of men). Sexual oppression thus predated class oppression (Beasley 1999:54).

1.11: ECONOMIC APPROACH
The overall economic development had increasingly excluded women from productive employment, pushed them into marginal occupation and hence increased casualisation of women employment (G.Singh et al.1994:262-265). The marginalist theorists called this phenomenon as ‘feminisation’ of jobs. According to Reed (1980:21) the aggregation of capitalism and patriarchal organisation of the society resulted in
marginalisation of female workers. Kalpagam studied (1994) the electric fan industry in West Bengal, textile and garment, food and beedi industry in Allahabad and found that the development of capitalism and machinery pushed female labourers from skilled to unskilled tasks. They were engaged in such tasks where only crude tools were used and no supplementary motive power was provided.

The feminist studies had shown that new technological changes had adversely affected the employment of women. In the absence of training opportunities, the women, already handicapped by illiteracy and lack of mobility, could not acquire the new skills demanded by modern industrial setup. This created a wider gap between earning power of men and women (Basobi 1997:9; Sharda 1998:25). The job segmentation according to social position like caste, marital status and gender could also be a mechanism used by the employers to provide low wages. The study of the marine food units by Padma (1995:55) found that the industry had a distinct preference for recruiting single women for the main reason of giving low wages. Another study on the brick kiln, quarries and mines in Bihar and West Bengal documented that the contractors recruited mainly scheduled caste and scheduled tribes from remote areas so that they would work the whole season on low wages. Further, the women workers were also reported to have been kept nude and under strict vigilance during their off hours so that they would not run away at night (Saran and Sandhwar 1990:170).

The above discussion suggested that the women workers in IS, compared to their male counterparts, occupied low status in working condition and wages. The exploited position of the women workers was a result of factors like individual ignorance, lack of skill, illiteracy and poor economic situation. The social background of the workers like caste, culture and social values that prevailed in the society also made the
women workers vulnerable. In this situation the question of better work condition for better status of women in India was only a utopia. Women in the IS were the worst victims of this vicious cycle as their entry into job market was only under compulsion of arranging two square meals for the family.

1.12: IMPACT OF WOMEN WORKERS AT HOUSEHOLD LEVEL

From the above discussion, we come to know that working women endure a number of hardships. However, vulnerability to economic and social hardships does not represent the whole of the lives of women. Their attitudes and actions in the households also demonstrate their power or abilities; an ability to handle their responsibilities, an ability to work to overcome the obstacles that confront them and an ability to envision a better future.

Once the women are initiated into taking productive tasks, men rely heavily on them to undertake complementary and supporting tasks. This relieves them from heavier and difficult activities (Jha et al. 1998:112-115).

Recently, feminists have called attention to the phenomenon of ‘female-headed’ households and examined the role of women workers. In two villages of East Godawari in Andhra Pradesh, Lingam (1994) observed that women of lower caste (Mala and Madiga caste), who also occupied the lowest rank in the economic hierarchy, considered wage work not as a means of power but as a means of survival of their households. Women workers in the brick kiln contributed about 54 to 61 percent of the total family income while the women in the quarry and mines provided about 30 to 35 percent in the total family income (Saran
and Sandhwar 1990). The study of women workers from five occupations i.e. fisherfolk, khandwali, sweepers, domestic servants and subcontract workers in Bombay by Everett and Savara (1994:163) found that old and widowed women played larger roles in household decision making. They got more assistance in household work from other household members than younger women, unmarried and married women. Further in an in-depth analysis of three extremely poor urban families in Madras, Kalpagam (1985) found that women and men shared equally in earning a living and the men did participate in housework. Women had some control over spending and a fair share of food and undertook the ultimate responsibilities of household maintenance.

When women become economically independent, their role in the household depended upon age, family life cycle and status and this affected their level of empowerment in the household. When they got involved in economic activity, the household chores were to some certain extent shared with other family members. Women workers also participated in the decision making of the family. Another aspect of women workers was that they faced problems like adjustment with husband and other family members. Working in the IS also degraded their social status (Saran and Sandhwar 1990:168-169).

These studies highlight the point that to increase the status of women, it is not only that they should become economically independent but the attitude towards women at household and societal level should change. If the women workers are not perceived as ‘workers’ but as ‘housewives’, ‘daughters’, ‘daughters-in-law’ etc., who traditionally perform all the gender traditional roles like reproduction, child rearing, kitchen work for the family, then women will not only be degraded in their status but also suffer from double exploitation.
The above mentioned studies reflect the situation of women in the early 1990's when liberalisation and globalisation of economy was taking place. This Structural Adjustment Programme (SAP) which focused on privatisation, globalisation, modernisation and improvement in productive efficiency and growth rate had adverse effect on the women's employment in India (G. Singh et al. 1994). The liberalised regime would also increase competition in the factory as well as in the product market. In this process, each firm would try to cut the costs. The immediate response would be curtailment in the level of employment. This process of restructuring was likely to result in closure of many industries resulting in substantial increase of unemployment in both the organised and unorganised sectors. This would affect both directly and indirectly in women's employment (Ibid.1994:266). Another problem for women workers was that the upgradation of technologies in industries would increase demand for skilled labour. Since women had low skills as compared to men, it was likely that men would gain in terms of employment in the labour restructuring process. This would result in increased exclusion of women from production process.

According to Deshpande (1994:252) the vulnerability of poor women workers was likely to increase in future because of the informal production and distribution relationships which emerge from the structural adjustment policies. Employees in core production units would not employ their workers directly rather a chain of intermediaries consisting of contractors, sub-contractors, traders etc. deal with individual workers separately. This personalise relationships might weaken the workers spirit of organisation. Further, the globalisation of Indian economy would mean cheaper imported goods substitute for indigenously manufactured goods. This might lead to marginalisation of the workers or the exclusion of workers from productive employment. So, the status of
women and its contribution to social and economic development largely depended upon the availability of employment opportunities for them.

On the other hand, there are also supporters of the liberalisation policies who feel that letting the economy open to global market will lead to better opportunities for all. The study by Jhabvala (2003) did not take an ideological stand on liberalisation, but tried to understand how liberalisation of economy affects poor women. She also suggested policies which would take advantage of the changes that are occurring. Further, considering the basic labour competitive advantage that the South Asian countries have in comparison to developed economies, women would benefit from the trade liberalisation, both, as workers and as entrepreneurs, provided, if states take affirmative action on developing infrastructure, enterprise and marketing development skills (Jha 2003:395-396). However, the globalisation and trade liberation have yet to benefit the poor, especially women. Inspite of serious efforts of the state to improve the status of women in India, it continues to be unsatisfactory. The situation now, in the early 21st century has not improved rather perhaps deteriorated. How this scenario is applicable to the handloom sector, is examined in the next chapter.