Chapter 1

Introduction
Chapter I - Introduction

Introduction:

“My name is Anarkali. I am a poor Muslim woman and a single mother. Life has not been very easy for me. My daughter who is now in her 3rd year of college is the only support I have. I knew how to do kantha work. We all Muslim women know this art form from our birth. In fact the finesse of our kantha work decided our fate in marriage and life after. Today, though the Kantha did not help me in my marriage has come to rescue me and my daughter of poverty. I wish I wouldn’t have to pay all the agents in between to sell my goods; I wish I could go to the market and sell my goods! My daughter will I hope!

(Anarkali Biwi, Village Laugram, North 24 Parganas, 2.2.16)

“I am into dhanda for close to 10 years now. A lot has changed in these 10 years. It is not like only the poor and the helpless come to dhanda, others come too. Dhanda gives you quick money and you can change your fate if you are serious about it. Yes there are problems but problems are everywhere and you can’t stop living right?”

(Name not to be disclosed, Budhwar Peth, Pune, 16.3.16)

“What do you do? Ask my neighbor and I proudly say, I make people look beautiful, I make them happy. Some say I do unclean jobs but I don’t care. I get money, I contribute to the family expense, I feel I am doing a great job!”

(Monica Raut, independent beauty worker, Pune, 22.3.16)

This research is about women’s participation in the unorganized sector labour markets in India. India has an extremely diverse and nuanced labour market, where both the highly skilled and those with zero education or any special training can fetch a living. Women often come under the second category. Their labour both at home and at workplace does not get the due recognition in terms of social standing and also monetary terms.

Voices of three working women cited above, situated in three different socio-economic and cultural spaces, representing different categories of work within the unorganized labour markets in India yet identified as ‘one’ as ‘woman’ and as ‘worker’. This in essence is the crux of the entire thesis in hand which attempts to highlight the diverse aspects of women’s lives as workers in the labour markets, their incomes and survival strategies against the
backdrop of liberalization from a gendered perspective. Liberalization from the beginning of 1990’s ushered in an entirely new perspective in the Indian economy in general and the labour markets in particular. The fate of a number of workers – both men and women was affected deeply as a result of a liberalizing and open economy. Not only was there the creation of new work (like the beauty industry), a lot of labour that was part of a personal/domestic work found economic value in the market. And many women found this new work spaces to earn a living, yet it was full of challenges and risks. Gradually women learned to cope with the challenges and evolved their own survival strategies to continue being in the markets since they had no way of turning back to their old lives and occupations.

Labour market is a complex area of study and more so is the unorganized labour market which is dynamic and multidimensional in context. For a country like India which houses close to 1.271 billion people of different caste, class, gender and economic strata, it becomes all the more a difficult subject of research but nonetheless an important one. This research aims to highlight different dimensions of unorganized labour markets in India keeping its focus exclusively on women workers.

The usual question that might come up is why women? And why unorganized sector since both the subjects have been widely researched. Without making any tall claims, with due acknowledgment to the existing research, this research is an attempt to understand the nuances of everyday survival strategies of women in the labour markets within specific socio-economic and geo-political contexts in the face of liberalization. In the context of economic liberalization, an attempt would be made to explore how women negotiate their everyday struggle being part of the informal labour markets, working specifically as sex workers, beauty therapists and Kantha workers.

Existing research on gender and economics does bring out different aspects of women and work but they do so mostly in relation to categories where women mostly work- agriculture, household work, construction, teaching, nursing etc or to look into the impact of policy on women, or to discuss the issues of violence and gender discrimination within informal market economy (Krishnaraj 1990, 1999, Kabeer 2007, Randive 2002). In addition a lot of studies also look into the notion of space and citizenship rights of women in respect to informal economy but there are hardly any studies which bring out how women actually survive in the context of expanding capitalism and liberalism and how the women continue accessing their rights and resources to sustain in the unorganized sector. Moreover an additional area of

1 Various sources- from internet and paper citation. Sensex 2011.
inquiry would be to look into the implications of personal, social and economic factors in the lives of women working in the unorganized labour markets.

Liberalization brought a massive change in the economic structure of the country and women in particular have been impacted most. The reasons again are numerous- social, cultural, political and economical. Hence, to study the changing trends of the unorganized labour markets, it was thought to be a fascinating exercise to explore the interfaces of different diverse and other categories of work done primarily by women which has been less explored. For instance, **sex work, beauty industry and Kantha workers** are categories of labour that are much less researched as women’s labour in existing literature. Along with this, this research is also going to highlight the income disparity of women workers even within these three categories. The study also explores the different kinds of labour, the labour dynamics in a particular sector focusing on the dignity of labour and the different positionality of women within the workspace. How work spaces shape the identity of women and teaches women the skills of negotiation and hence the survival strategies within the informal labour markets. The aim would be to investigate the several techniques of the survival strategies that women adopt in their everyday life to sustain in the unorganized labour markets.

In addition, here are some of the other reasons why this research is essential. One of the first reasons is the abundance of research, documentation, debates and discussions around male centric research on issues of labour in the unorganized labour markets and not so much on women. Wherever issues of women have been discussed, they have been discussed as secondary or insignificant workers in the labour markets although various studies and statistical records show that women have been an integral part of the unorganized labour market economy globally. In 2005 the Confederation of Indian Industries (CII) commissioned a study titled “Understanding the Levels of Women’s Empowerment in the Work Place” which revealed that close to 93% of workforce is in the unorganized sector in India. While the National Sample Survey 2005 stated that one-third of the informal sector workforce (about 120 million) comprises of women (NSS, 2005). Collectively, they account for 96% of the female workforce in the unorganized sector in the country and contribute to about 20% of India’s GDP. If these numbers are to be considered then the second important question that arises is, if women have such a strong presence in the unorganized labour markets, why is it that their contribution is not recognized? Why aren’t they recognized as the primary earning member of the family and similarly one of the primary contributors of country’s economy? Why are they so poor and vulnerable? Why are they so voiceless and
regular victims of violence, both at home and at work place? The dominating paradigm of patriarchy is one of the reasons that have to be considered in this discourse.

These and many such important questions are aimed to be addressed in the course of this research. Furthermore the informal economy has expanded manifold and rapidly under liberalization (Nayar 2001) and in this context it would be meaningful to study the ‘casualization’ (Breman 1996) and ‘informalization’ (Gooptu 2001, Gooptu and Harriss-White 2000, Harriss-White 2003) of the Indian economy with special emphasis on women workers. The third important reason for taking up this area of research is the utmost desire being a woman to engage on issues of women and interpret their life closely in the unorganized labour markets in India. The aim is to develop a scholarship adopting feminist perspective and interpret issues of labour and women’s participation in the labour markets.

**Kantha workers, Sex workers and Beauty workers as subjects of study:**

The massive trade liberalization that hit the Indian shores in the 1990’s impacted the work force of the country differently as per one’s gender, skills and location of work. In other way, economic liberalization was an uneven process of utilizing the labour force often underpaid and unrecognized. For the present study, *Kantha* workers, sex workers and beauty workers were chosen to understand the complexities of the unorganized sector which is predominantly occupied by women and how they survive everyday life. These three groups of workers are situated at different hierarchy of labour, putting sex work in the lowest rung of the society, *Kantha* workers somewhere in between and beauty workers perhaps at the top rung. Women who work in these markets experience sharply different labour markets. Their entry into these labour markets differs and so also their income range as well as their vulnerabilities and the societal recognition of their work.

The reasons to take up these three particular categories of women’s labour – other than the fact that they are less explored also is the fact that the location of these workers is diverse. This thesis makes an attempt to look at women workers who originate both from the rural and urban backgrounds and work in the rural and the urban locations. *Kantha* workers for instance are based in the rural areas (with little migration), and their creation finds destinations both in the urban and even international markets. Sex workers hail both from the rural and urban backgrounds and they migrate in search of work to both rural and semi-urban and urban areas and are part of the invisible markets for paid sex. Beauty workers also come from both rural and urban settings and find work in both the rural and urban settings. However, the common thread among all these workers is that they all come primarily from poor socio-economic backgrounds with little education and other means and
possibilities of finding alternate jobs in the labour markets. All these three categories of women’s work is primarily done to support their families and however hard they work, their work is often not recognized as ‘labour’. Sex work is not recognized as ‘regular’ work, beauty work too suffers from a certain stigma and Kantha work, since it is done in the vicinity of their homes, gets very little recognition.

The other reason to choose these categories of women’s work is because the research would be more engaging and meaningful from a ‘methodological’ perspective. To explore these workers, there was a need to adapt multiple methodologies. For instance, the regular ‘sample and questionnaire’ methodology would be inadequate to bring out the depths of women’s experiences. Therefore, a participatory methodology was used which emphasizes on life histories, participant observation, focused group discussion and informal interaction with staying within the actual residence of women workers was extensively used for this research.

The Objectives:

1. To understand the nuances of everyday survival strategies of women in the labour markets within specific socio-economic and geo-political contexts in the face of liberalization.

2. To select a few sample areas of work/employment which are predominantly with women’s participation and also which are less explored by the existing literature.

3. To develop an insight to look into the implications of personal, social and economic factors in the lives of women working in the unorganized labour markets.

4. To highlight the income disparity among women with respect to different kinds of labour, exploring the different work hierarchy of women within the workspace.

5. To understand how work space shapes the identity of women and teaches them the skills of negotiation and hence the survival strategies within the informal labour markets.

6. To formulate a body of research adopting feminist perspective and interpret issues of labour and women’s participation in the unorganized labour markets in India.
Methodology of Research:

Broadly the present research is based on feminist research methodology, specifically on feminist economist research methodology highlighting women’s agency and analyzing the research findings with a gendered lens. The thesis is not limited to any one kind of research methodology but adopts different methodologies all aiming towards enumerating the everyday life of women in the unorganized labour markets, their income and survival strategies within the labour markets and how the women negotiate with the varied intermediaries inside and outside their work spaces. Each of the three core chapter of this thesis has discussed its own research methodologies as relevant to the study. The major techniques used for the research were participant observations, in-depth interviews, focused group discussions and life histories.

Limitation of Research Work:

The present study focuses on three specific areas of work/employment within the unorganized labour markets in India. The women’s participation in the labour markets is extremely diverse and contains a very long list of occupations that women take up in India. The present study does bring out the nuances of survival in the unorganized labour markets but only limited to the three areas of study. However, the findings from these three areas could be extended to other similar occupations.

Chapter Scheme:

The present research work is divided into six chapters. The study of the unorganized labour markets is a vast area of research and the present thesis is specifically investigating three different kinds of work within the unorganized labour markets in India, namely the beauty workers, the Sex workers and the Kantha workers of Bengal to bring out the contribution of women workforce in these work cultures and how they negotiate and survive in their everyday life.

The First chapter is the introductory chapter which lay out a broad overview of the research in hand. The chapter explains why the researcher has chosen three very specific and yet interconnected area of work within the unorganized labour markets in India to discuss the women’s role and agency. The chapter goes on to highlight the major objectives of the research and the methodology adopted for the research in hand. Every chapter over the course of research has developed its own research methodologies which are discussed in great detail in each chapter separately and hence the thesis did not include a separate chapter on methodology. Similarly, each work sector taken for investigation entails its own
literature review. Therefore literature review is presented specific to each industry and that industry related chapter. And yet, one chapter is exclusively devoted to discuss the existing literature on the unorganized labour markets in India.

The Second chapter is titled “Introduction and review of the unorganized Labour Markets in India” elucidates the existing literatures on unorganized labour markets and women’s participation in these markets particularly post 1990’s- the beginning of the economic liberalization in India. Labour market is dynamic and multidimensional in context. The review chapter discusses the participation of the women workforce in the unorganized labour sector in India and how in the context of economic liberalization, women negotiate their everyday struggle being part of the informal labour markets. In addition to the existing research on gender and economics which focuses on different aspects of women and work, the present review of literature chapter also explores the implications of personal, social and economic factors in the lives of women working in the unorganized labour markets. This chapter is further divided into various sub sections as follows:

1. The Socio Economic Background of Early Economic Idea in India
2. Conceptualizing the Unorganized labour markets
3. Unorganized Labour Markets in the Indian Context- a Review
4. Women in the Unorganized labour markets in India Post Liberalization
5. Issues of women working in the Unorganized labour markets
6. Concluding Remarks

The Third chapter is titled “Exploring the interconnections of labour, the making of ‘bodies’ and markets: Women as beauty workers” attempts to discuss the existing discourse on beauty and beauty industry, this chapter is based on the narratives obtained during fieldwork (December 2015-March 2016) among the beauty parlor workers in Pune city. The chapter examines the various kinds of labour involved in the beauty parlors, how women function, negotiate and survive as ‘beauty workers’ within specific parlors. These narratives strikingly relate beauty to economics, identity, market, and desire. In addition the narratives suggest a deep level of invisibilisation and non recognition of important parts of ‘beauty work’ as ‘work’. The chapter is divided into the following sub- section:

1. Beauty Parlors- Work for one is Pleasure for other
2. Outlining the existing discourse around beauty and beauty industry
3. Feminist engagements with Beauty Industry: Outlining the Impasse
4. Untying the Beauty Debate: Outlining issues of fear, power and empowerment
Chapter 1

6. Methods and methodology- Researching the beauty parlor
7. The economics of beauty- Identity and Labour within the parlor
8. Beauty therapy as work and labour
9. Earning and survival in relation to beauty parlors
10. Concluding Remarks

The Fourth chapter is titled “Sex Workers and the unorganized labour markets: An exploratory investigation” attempts to highlight the perspectives of women in prostitution in India as well as specifically of sex workers in Pune city. With the help of field work the chapter discusses in detail several issues related to work, incomes earned, the challenges of being in prostitution, the various negotiation strategies that she adopts while being in the market and why sex work should be recognized as work. In India, sex work per say is neither legal nor illegal but certain activities related to prostitution are punishable under law. The aim here is not to diagnose the legal issues but how women are surviving as sex workers in the midst of deep seated stigma and marginalization and why they should deserve to be identified as a worker within the unorganized labour markets in India. The chapter is divided into the following sub- sections:

1. Introduction
2. What’s in a name: Prostitution, Sex work, Dhanda and Dhandewali
3. Theorizing prostitution: The many isms of prostitution
4. Prostitution in the wake of liberalization in India: creation, expansion and consumption of spaces
5. Research Methodology: The journey of exploring the everyday life of Sex workers
6. What exactly happened in the Field: The way in and the way out of the research?
7. Sex work is work: Labour markets and the money matters
8. Work, Business, Employment, Dhanda: Erotic Labour and Markets
9. Summarizing the data
10. Concluding Remarks and suggestions

The Fifth chapter is titled “The Economics of Needle and Thread: Exploring the everyday lives of women Kantha workers of West Bengal” is a narrative of a very specific kind of work- kantha work, which women in rural Bengal have been traditionally involved in. Kantha has a rich history of its origin, development and expansion. Kantha as an art form has varied history. The art has mostly been discussed in terms of just an ‘art and design’, different ‘techniques’ involved and the ‘value’ of the finished products. There are almost no
studies looking into the socio economic aspects of the labour force involved in this crafts-who are mostly women and discuss Kantha within the broader framework of unorganized labour markets in India. This study investigates specific geo-economic locations of rural Bengal to narrate the everyday life of women working as Kantha workers, their interface with the labour markets and everyday negotiation and survival strategies they adopt to sustain themselves. This is a chapter which in the course of its discussion will bring forth both the ‘feminisation of labour’ and the ‘gender stereotypes’ of women labour force. The chapter is divided into the following sub- sections:

1. Introduction- history of Kantha in West Bengal
2. Why kantha and the rationale of selecting Kantha stitch workers
3. Details of the geographical location of the study and the research methodology
4. Kantha women’s position and interface with the unorganized labour markets
5. Narratives of women to highlight the struggles and negotiation strategies of women.

The last and the Sixth chapter is the concluding chapter for the entire thesis which brings out the connection between the Unorganized labour markets in India in general; the transformations that the sector has undergone over a period of time, specifically after the liberalization and how the three specific work sectors discussed in this thesis fit into the larger structure of the unorganized sector in India. The concluding chapter also highlights the importance of acknowledging women’s work as productive core work and not identify women as only marginal/second tier work force so that they are well recognized in the total workforce of the country and their presence acknowledged in the national and the International record of work force. Though there are several limitations to the research, yet it is hoped that the ‘thick description’ of the present research would contribute to the existing body of knowledge in a meaningful way and create new avenues for future research.

Some Preliminary Findings about Women’s Incomes in Specific Sectors:

- In the beauty sector the monthly incomes range from Rs.2000/- to Rs 20,000/-. The modal value of income is around Rs.5000/-. The factors that determine the income levels is length of work done, training, skills, types of work done, the educational levels and the position of the workers in the structure of work hierarchy.

- In sex work across India, the range of incomes is Rs.3000/- per month to Rs.45000/- with the modal value being Rs.10, 000/-. Again the factors that determine income are age, location of work, health, marital status and negotiation strategies.
• In Kantha work the incomes are low and the women workers are dependent on the number of pieces of work done. Salwar suits would fetch them Rs.50/- to Rs. 100/- which may take two weeks to complete while a saari which fetches them from Rs.350/- to Rs.750/- which may take three to seven months depending upon the intricacies of the work.

References:


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