State without Honour
The Devaluation of Women’s Work

SHWETA MARATHE

The many problems of anganwadi workers in India remain unrecognised and unaddressed at the political level. The September 2017 strike by over 2,500 workers in Maharashtra demanding higher pay and improvements in the quality of food provided from anganwadi has highlighted these problems again. Over the last few months, there have been similar strikes with similar demands in different states of India, including Bihar, Karnataka, Delhi, Uttar Pradesh (UP), and Odisha. M S Sreerekha’s State without Honour: Women Workers in India’s Anganwadis is a timely volume on the key players—the anganwadi workers—who run the Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS) Scheme, shedding light on the status of women workers in state-sponsored social welfare schemes in India and raising a voice against their further marginalisation and exploitation.

State without Honour explores the political economy of women’s work in India and its relationship with the Indian state. More and more women, particularly from the lower social strata, are being employed in new social welfare schemes where the form of work is defined as “voluntary social service.” Is this, the author asks, the state’s strategy to keep these workers invisible?

Sreerekha’s book is divided into six chapters. Chapter 1, “Understanding Work,” discusses the politics of work historically, based on an in-depth literature review. It records the definitions, political journeys and history of terms such as “work” and “worker,” and the creation of “women workers.” It also discusses the public–private distinction in the sexual/gender division of work, providing a conceptual and political distinction between production and reproduction, and paid and unpaid work from a feminist perspective. It analyses the debate on motherhood and childcare from a socialist feminist perspective. Further, it discusses how voluntary work is slotted with social work, and how women’s voluntary work in the public space has always had an important role to play in the history of the welfare state. This chapter is imperative for an understanding of the concepts and politics of honorary workers.

Chapter 2 traces women’s work in India over the last five decades, reporting on Government of India committee reports on participation in work. It also discusses the origin of the term “informal,” which was first used by the International Labour Organization to describe the activities of the working poor who laboured hard but were not recognised, recorded, protected or regulated by the public authorities. Chapter 2 provides data in support of social welfare policies for the poor, especially women-specific policies and programmes. This chapter critically reviews the evolving status of women in paid work, and in state welfare policies. It is important in understanding how women’s work and its status has evolved gradually in the context of economic restructuring, globalisation, and the entry of private capital.

Chapter 3 tells the story of the honorary workers, including anganwadi workers and helpers. It also documents the chronological history of ICDS in India, from the Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) programme initiated as part of the Third Five Year Plan in 1952, to the formulation of a national policy for children in 1974 and the launch of ICDS during the Fifth Five Year Plan in 1975. The chapter provides an overview of all four phases of ICDS with different external funding supports, and points to the challenge that may arise with the government’s failure to increase the financial allocation for ICDS and the possible privatisation of the scheme.

Important landmarks in the design and implementation of ICDS that have a direct impact on the work of anganwadi workers are discussed. Anganwadi workers are the only ICDS staff who are not direct government functionaries in the administrative set-up, though the anganwadi worker is almost the all-in-all here, required to multitask. The anganwadi worker and helper receive a meagre wage.

Chapter 4 presents the findings from a study of anganwadi workers in selected areas of the national capital regions—UP, Haryana and Rajasthan. Though there are a few studies on anganwadi and anganwadi workers, a multi-sectoral analysis has been missing, and the present study is significant in its attempt to reveal the relationship of the Indian state with its women workers through its social welfare policies. The study analyses qualitative interviews with 55 anganwadi workers and helpers as well as data from secondary sources such as policy reports, court judgments and union reports. Details of each interview are not provided in this chapter, which instead contains views and concerns raised by the workers. Region-wise findings on the working hours and work profile of the anganwadi workers, work schedules and daily routines, extra responsibilities, honorarium, procurement of the job, housing and so on are presented here. The work done by these women is regarded as volunteer work/social work by the government, but the anganwadi workers clearly do not see their work as voluntary social work. They are equally or more concerned about their own future, and that of their children. Many issues emerging from this study, such as low and irregular honorariums and extra responsibilities in addition to their workload, are reflected in other states too (Patil and Doibale 2013; Kular 2014). The study also revealed issues of caste politics, class politics, gender politics and the impact of privatisation. Caste-class-related issues were noted between anganwadi staff and the community.

State without Honour: Women Workers in India’s Anganwadis by M S Sreerekha, Oxford University Press, 2016, pp 348, Rs 950.
anganwadi workers and helpers, and supervisors and child development project officers (CDPOs). Though the study has analysed the interviews of anganwadi staff, the addition of a few interviews of CDPOs, supervisors and district-level officials would have provided further insights on postings, delayed honorariums, and contract for food supply.

Resistance and struggles around honorary workers’ rights and an analysis of the activities of anganwadi worker unions are described in Chapter 5. As a concept, the very existence of the honorary worker is an example of how a political and legal system directly contributes to the exploitation and marginalisation of its own citizens as workers, forcing them to struggle for their rights. This chapter provides a brief review of the positions and steps taken by various anganwadi workers, and constitutional acts related to anganwadi workers’ rights, providing a thorough overview of the struggles of these workers and their unions.

The final chapter, titled “Not for ‘Honour’: Just for Rights,” provides a critical understanding of the concept of honorary workers, arguing for their rights. The author brings out the contradictions of a woman worker spending 40 or more years serving the ICDS but still being considered a voluntary worker, regardless of the fact that she is expected to strictly follow the rules and procedures of government. Instead of addressing these contradictions, the trend is to add more “voluntary” women workers such as accredited social health activists (ASHAs) and mid-day meal workers. The book calls for further in-depth research on the processes of devaluation of women’s work, the gendered division of labour, patriarchy and the political economy.

This book is not just an important addition to the literature on ICDS and anganwadi workers, but one that provides fresh insights from a feminist perspective on the marginalisation of honorary women workers in a capitalist economy. It brings together an extensive literature review and in-depth analysis on women’s work and state policies on women and family with case studies of anganwadi workers. While further case studies from the field, and interviews with CDPOs, supervisors and district-level officials would have provided further insights on the functioning of ICDS, this thought-provoking book will be very useful for scholars and activists seeking a deeper understanding of the political economy of women workers in social schemes in India.

Shweta Marathe (shweta51084@gmail.com) is a health system researcher working with SATHI, Pune.

REFERENCES

Water: Growing Understanding, Emerging Perspectives
Edited by
Mihir Shah and P S Vijayshankar

For decades after independence, Indian planning ignored the need for sustainability and equity in water resource development and management. There was just one way forward, that of harnessing the bounty in our rivers and below the ground. It was only in the 1990s that serious questions began to be raised on our understanding and approach to rivers.

This collection of essays, all previously published in the Economic and Political Weekly between 1990 and 2014, reflects the multi-dimensional, multi-disciplinary character of water and spans hydrogeology, sociology, economics, political science, geography, history, meteorology, statistics, public policy, energy and ecology.

The essays are arranged thematically and chronologically: Water Resource Development and Management, Historical Perspectives, Social and Political Dimensions, Economic Concerns, and Water Policy.

With detailing of the huge diversity of concerns and points of departure, Water: Growing Understanding, Emerging Perspectives will be invaluable to students and scholars of sociology, economics, political science, geography, ecology and public policy.

Authors: Baba Amte • Suhas Paranjape • K J Joy • Jayesh Talati • Tushaar Shah • R Maria Saleth • Dinesh K Marothia • Marcus Moench • Navroz K Dubash • Rahul Ranade • P S Vijayshankar • Himanshu Kulkarni • Sundarajan Krishnan • David Gilmartin • Margreet Zwartveen • Rohan D’Souza • David Hardiman • Niranjan Pandey • Lyla Mehta • Anindita Sarkar • Deepa Joshi • Bikshram Gujja • Vinod Goud • Shruti Vispute • Ramaswamy R Iyer • A Vaidyanathan • K Sivabramaniam • E Somarathan • R Ravindranath • Isha Ray • Suruchi Gadgil • Siddhartha Gadgil • Avinash Kishore • Shilp Verma • Aditi Mukherji • Partha Sarathi Banerjee • Mihir Shah

Orient Blackswan Pvt Ltd
www.orientblackswan.com

Mumbai • Chennai • New Delhi • Kolkata • Bengaluru • Bhubaneswar • Ernakulam • Guwahati • Jaipur • Lucknow • Patna • Chandigarh • Hyderabad
Contact: info@orientblackswan.com