The Indian Loom, Climate Change, and Democracy: Introducing the Malkha Enterprise

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Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East, Volume 39, Number 2, August 2019, pp. 233-240 (Article)

Published by Duke University Press

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Today in the twenty-first century there are more than 4 million handlooms weaving cloth in India. This vast assemblage with its supporting cast allows me to suggest that here lies the possibility of a large-scale, democratic, producer-owned, ecological industry that could pioneer democracy in production in one of the world's largest economies. And so the apparently unconnected words of my title—the Indian loom, climate change, and democracy—sum up my belief that contemporary Indian hand weaving can, in the Anthropocene Age, be a vehicle for both environmental and social health.

I put forward this thesis for consideration as the fruit of my twenty-seven years of working with weaving families in the handloom cotton cloth industry in India, particularly of my current involvement, the Malkha enterprise, which was founded in 2008. Malkha stands for a decentralized, sustainable, field-to-fabric cotton textile chain that is collectively owned by the primary producers (the farmers, ginners, spinners, dyers, and weavers).[1] A goldsmith by training, I do not myself weave, but have worked with weaving families as part of supporting agencies since the late 1990s, and it was during the early days of that involvement that the potential of the Indian loom became apparent to me. I hope that this article, which recounts the genesis of the Malkha vision, will initiate a wider conversation around the issues of handwork, ecology, and sustainable livelihoods.

Handloom Weaving and Sustainable Livelihoods

The event that towered over my childhood in the 1940s and shaped the consciousness of my generation of Indians was the movement for independence from colonial rule. Gandhi made the hand spinning of cotton yarn a political tool in that movement, and both men and women spun yarn by hand and wore handwoven cloth as expressions of defiance of colonialism and assertions of Indian identity. Gandhi's newspaper, *Young India*, which appeared weekly between 1919 and 1931, often carried articles on the destruction of the Indian cotton textile industry in colonial times. Hand weaving of cotton cloth thus acquired a political resonance, a resonance that continues to ebb and flow today.

Meanwhile, the practice of hand weaving holds its own into the twenty-first century: after agriculture, it is the largest employment sector in rural India, producing 8,007 million square meters of cloth in 2016–17, or more than 12.61 percent of the country's textile output, according to the Textile Ministry's annual report of 2017–18.[2] Weaving on the handloom in India is a vast and vibrant activity practiced by hand weavers supported by warp makers, warp sizers, bobbin winders, dyers, and tool makers, producing vast quantities of cloth every year without using fossil fuels and so without adding to global warming. This is what makes the handloom industry of India a tiger of ecological manufacture.

But this tiger is shut up in an iron cage of prejudice that perceives artisan industries as aberrations in an industrializing economy, nonconformists to the imperative of productivity. This perception allows the Indian state to

Vol. 39, No. 2, 2019 · DOI 10.1215/1089201X-7586753 · © 2019 by Duke University Press

neglect to enforce its own law, the Handloom Reservation Act of 1985, by which some fabrics are the exclusive prerogative of the handloom industry.[3] The consequence of ignoring this law is that cheaper, machine-made, fake "handloom" cloth made on unregulated mechanized looms (known in India as powerlooms) is allowed to undercut the real thing in the market. As a result, hand-weaving wages decline, and young weavers go looking for alternatives. Like Pradeep, a young weaver from the Indian state of Odisha:

> I left for Surat [a powerloom center about a thousand miles from Pradeep's home] to work in the powerlooms there, with big dreams of becoming wealthy and an important person in society. I arrived in Surat with barely a thousand rupees in my pocket but I managed to live for days with friends and even borrowed their bicycle to look for work. But even a month later I had no job. I finally found work in a powerloom factory where I had to work from seven in the morning for at least twelve hours for a wage of seventy five rupees per day [about a fifth of the legal minimum wage in India for eight hours of work]. Though I was relieved to get a job my living expenses in Surat were much more than what I earned. The owner of the factory treated us badly and it was common to suffer verbal abuse. We were actually treated like slaves and had to literally beg for our salaries at the end of the month. If any worker raised questions or pointed out the management's faults he was immediately dismissed.
>
> I don't want to talk about the dreadful living conditions in Surat. There were no basic amenities like safe drinking water and toilets. We lived just like animals in a barn and if there was any accident at work the worker would be sent back home and not to a hospital. My dreams of becoming successful faded. It was in the exploitation of Surat that I realized that my traditional handloom was a much more dignified occupation. I came back to my village.
>
> After I returned I noticed that more than a hundred people from our village had returned from Surat to their traditional handlooms. Now I lead a happier and healthier life at home. I hope more weavers get the opportunity to be able to make a dignified living on the basis of their skills and knowledge and I am sure handloom can be a successful occupation for all weavers in the future.[4]

Pradeep was fortunate that a not-for-profit agency intervened, and after his return he was able to enjoy the value his skill deserves. A "dignified living" is how Pradeep sees hand weaving.

Now that environmental collapse threatens life on the planet, this cage of prejudice against artisanal cloth making must open and let the tiger out: the handlooms of India must be allowed to reach their potential as a sustainable way of production for the future, not dismissed as relics of the past. Viability should no longer be measured by productivity alone. Ecological as well as social costs—the pollution and greenhouse gas emissions of fossil-fueled industry and the exploitation of powerloom workers like Pradeep—must be factored into the equation. Established conventions must be questioned: Is the mechanization of all manufacture the only route to modernity? Is the industrial model that was established by the industrial revolution the one-size-fits-all way to progress for the whole world? If so, does that make India a late modernizer, playing the catch-up game (and never quite catching up)? Or is it possible for India to chart its own path and take a shortcut into a postindustrial future? Is the mechanization of cotton cloth weaving in India necessary or desirable or even viable, considering that the mechanized industry is today propped up by financial debt? And is the handloom *really* a thing of the past? The handloom allows millions of Indian weavers to use kinetic human energy for production, and with its low-cost infrastructure it contains the emergent possibility of democratic ownership of the means of production—two unassailable arguments for future sustainability.

The Democracy of Vernacular Weaving

The Malkha project aims to promote hand weaving of cotton as an industry for the future and to introduce ownership of the means of production and workplace democracy into the artisanal cotton textile industry in India today. The Malkha lint-to-yarn process eliminates three stages prior to spinning that are extremely damaging to the cotton fiber: baling of lint, bale opening, and blowroom. Malkha yarn thus retains the natural qualities of the cotton fiber: its springiness, absorbency, and color-holding capacity. Yarn is spun in three small-scale spinning centers, dyed in vegetable or other nontoxic dyes, and handwoven into Malkha fabric.

The Malkha vision had its birth pangs in Chinnur, a small town in the state of Telangana in south India, where in the surrounding villages the sound of shuttles on wooden looms can still be heard. I was one of a small group who had been invited to Chinnur by the local weavers in the 1990s, and with this invitation we stumbled on perhaps the last remaining living memories of subsistence weaving, local weaving for local use. People in Chinnur and surrounding villages were then still wearing or using the cloth that had been made twenty-five years earlier by their weaver neighbors. It was per-

haps the only place in the country where a generation of active hand weavers still remembered buying their own yarn and selling their own cloth locally.

But by the time we reached Chinnur, things had changed. Local markets had been invaded by cloth made on distant machines. The Chinnur weavers thought that if they could buy their own yarn they could still beat the competition. We helped them set up a cooperative and get loans from the local bank. We outsiders knew nothing of handloom weaving; the weavers, on the other hand, had no experience of business, but they were confident that they would be able to sell their cloth in their own neighborhoods as they used to. They were wrong. The direct relation between maker and user had been broken forever. For hand weaving to survive, the Chinnur weavers had to look to urban markets. The looms came to life, but the cloth piled up, and the co-op faced ruin. But collective determination held: the looms would go on. We persuaded a natural dye expert to come to Chinnur and teach the weavers vegetable dyeing, and we sold their natural-dyed fabrics in big cities.

Here in Chinnur, the difference between the making of ordinary cloth for ordinary people, which is what the Chinnur weavers used to do, and the making of fine fabrics for the elite became clear to me for the first time. Relations of production in the two were very different. Weavers making ordinary cloth for ordinary people, in what I call vernacular weaving, had bought their own raw materials and sold directly to the users. Making cloth for the elite, on the other hand, required substantial investments in raw materials—finer yarns and metal threads for embellishment—for which weavers became dependent on an intermediary who financed the business, supplied the raw materials, and also controlled market access, with the weaver reduced to the status of wage laborer, in what I think of as the patronage mode.

Democracy, on one hand, and hierarchy on the other! We began to look closer into the archival history of Indian textiles in order to locate historical precedents for the democracy-in-production that Malkha was aiming for in contemporary times. But except for a hint here and there, we didn't find it: though the trade in Indian textiles attracts a lot of scholarly interest, there is precious little attention paid to its actual manufacture.

History books lump all the preindustrial textile making of India together, without seeing that there were actually two very different modes of production. The archives say that from the time of Christ and for the next eighteen centuries, this industry "clothed the world" and was the world's largest manufacturing industry for all that time, and that Indian cotton cloth accounted for the largest share of manufactured items in world trade. But the historical record, at least in the English language, seems to have overlooked the important difference between subsistence, or vernacular, cotton cloth making and the patronage mode—the two very different production systems of this tiger of the preindustrial era. Ordinary, thick Indian cotton cloth has been found in Berenike and Fostat in Egypt, carbondated from the fifth to the fourteenth centuries: a trade of more than nine hundred years!

It was the resilience of democratic production relations within the vernacular part of the industry that interested us: what had kept the vernacular industry going for eighteen hundred years through wars, famines, plagues, and natural disasters, adapting to changing political situations, making cloth for nearby customers, and reaching markets as far as Egypt, until it was decimated by colonial powers in the nineteenth century?

Reversing the Industrial Revolution

But while this aspect of preindustrial Indian cloth production systems has been neglected by historians, the history of early mechanization of cotton textile making in England is found in every school history book. Schoolchildren across the world know of Hargreaves and his Spinning Jenny. Somewhere in this biased view of history, the future potential of vernacular Indian cotton textile production is lost. Historians across the political spectrum regard the mechanization of the cotton textile industry as progress and the decline and fall of Indian hand weaving as inevitable, almost like a process of nature. The corollary to that view is that preindustrial technologies were static and stagnant; and that view is the source of today's perception of the handloom in contemporary times as an outmoded tool for cloth making—a prejudice that then becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy, affecting the self-worth of young weavers like Pradeep.

I have two quarrels with this textile history: first, that it has so often and so loudly insisted on the inevitability of the fossil-fueled mechanization pioneered by the Industrial Revolution that it has blocked any possible exploration of alternatives. This narrative, a story that neglects some aspects and glosses over others, is a Eurocentric history. It was taken as uncontested fact until it began to be questioned in the twentieth century, when critical studies showed that the decline of the Indian textile industry was not at all natural or inevitable, that

it was in fact engineered by unscrupulous means and the unrestrained use of force, through a combination of the political and commercial might of the empire to break the back of the millennia-old industry. The colonial rulers took away the cotton from Indian looms for the mills of England, flooded Indian markets with subsidized yarn and cloth, and loaded Indian manufacture with taxes. Here is what Francis Carnac Brown, a British cotton planter in India has to say about the taxes in his report to the Madras Board of Revenue in 1862:

> The story of cotton in India is not half told, how it was systematically depressed from the earliest date that American cotton came into competition with it about the year 1786, how for 40 or 50 years after, one half of the crop was taken in kind as revenue, the other half by the sovereign merchant at a price much below the market price of the day, which was habitually kept down for the purpose, how the cotton farmer's plough and bullocks were taxed, the *Churkha* [spinning wheel] taxed, the bow [for carding] taxed and the loom taxed; how inland custom houses were posted in and around every village, on passing which cotton on its way to the Coast was stopped and like every other produce taxed afresh; how it paid export duty both in a raw state and in every shape of yarn, of thread, cloth or handkerchief, in which it was possible to manufacture it; how the dyer was taxed and the dyed cloth taxed, plain in the loom, taxed a second time in the dye vats, how Indian piece goods were loaded in England with a prohibitory duty and English piece goods were imported into India at an *ad valorem* duty of 2 ½ per cent. It is my firm conviction that the same treatment would long since have converted any of the finest countries in Europe into wilderness. But the Sun has continued to give forth to India its vast vivifying rays, the Heavens to pour down upon the vast surface its tropical rains. These perennial gifts of the Universal Father it has not been possible to tax.[5]

My second objection to this narrative is that it ignores the devastating effect of the industrial revolution on the working population of India, the millions of hands that had clothed the world for the preceding millennia (making it the largest manufacturing industry in the world, remember). In fact, even today, apologists for colonialism claim that "colonial India experienced positive economic growth." It is only because *subsistence* production does not figure in the historical narrative that such claims can be made. Peeling the layers off the story and going deeper into the subsistence part, one gets a truer and grimmer picture.

In this part, that had supplied clothing for the working population of India, cotton yarn—before the intrusion of machine spinning—had been spun by millions of hands from cotton bought from local farmers. Exchange had been either at the spinner's doorstep or at the weekly local market, which had a crucial role to play in the production chain. With the invention of spinning machinery in the early nineteenth century, all this changed. Yarn began to be supplied to Indian markets from English factories at highly subsidized rates, and the millions of Indian spinners lost their only way of earning a living. It was deindustrialization on a major scale.

A letter written in 1828 to the editor of a Bengali newspaper paints a graphic picture of the distress this caused:

> To the Editor, The *Samachar*.
> I am a spinner. After having suffered a great deal, I am writing this letter. Please publish this in your paper. I have heard that, if it is published, it will reach those who may lighten my distress and fulfil my desire.…
>
> When my age was 22 I became a widow with three daughters. My husband left nothing at the time of his death wherewith to maintain my old father-and-mother-in-law and three daughters. I sold my jewellery for his funeral ceremony. At last as we were on the verge of starvation God showed me a way by which we could save ourselves. I began to spin on drop spindle and charkha. In the morning I used to do the usual work of cleaning the household and then sit at the charkha till noon, and after cooking and feeding the old parents and daughters I would have my fill and sit spinning fine yarn on the wheel. Thus I used to spin about a tola. The weavers used to visit our houses and buy the yarn at 3 tolas per rupee. Whatever amount I wanted as advance from the weavers, I could get for the asking. This saved us from cares about food and cloth. In a few years' time I got together Rs 28. With this I married one daughter. And in the same way all three daughters.
>
> When my father-in-law died I spent Rs. 44 on his funeral. This money was lent me by the weavers which I repaid in a year and a half. And all this through the grace of the charkha.
>
> Now for 3 years we two women, mother-in-law and I, are in want of food. The weavers do not call at the house for buying yarn. Not only this, if the yarn is sent to the market, it is not sold even at one-fourth the old prices. I do not know how it happened. I asked many about it. They say that *bilati* [foreign] yarn is being largely imported. The weavers buy that yarn and weave. I had a sense of pride that *bilati* yarn could not be equal to my yarn, but when I got *bilati* yarn I saw that it was better than my yarn. I heard that its price is Rs. 3 or Rs 4. per seer [about one-eighth]. I beat my brow and said, 'Oh God,

> there are sisters more distressed even than I. I had thought that all men of *Bilat* were rich, but now I see that there are women there who are poorer than I'. I fully realize the poverty which induced those poor women to spin. They have sent the product of so much toil out here because they could not sell it there. It would have been something if they were sold here at good prices. But it has brought our ruin only. Men cannot use the cloth out of this yarn even for two months; it rots away. I therefore entreat the spinners over there that, if they will consider this representation, they will be able to judge whether it is fair to send yarn here or not.[6]

Besides taking spinning out of the hands of local spinners by selling heavily subsidized English machine-made yarn in Indian markets, machine spinning had other consequences: on the kinds of cloth that were woven, on cotton farmers, and, of course, on production relations in the field-to-fabric chain.

Indian cloth had been famed for its diversity. Until mill spinning came into the picture, the farmer grew the cotton that was best suited to the local microclimate and the local soil, and from that cotton spinners spun the yarn that the weavers wanted for the particular cloth that they wove. Most production cycles, from the cotton to the cloth, were local, but there were exceptions: some fine cloth was woven from yarns spun a great distance away—for example, yarn spun in Berar is said to have been "bought for its weight in silver" in Chanderi, four hundred miles to the north, as John Forbes Watson notes in his 1866 *Textile Manufactures and Costumes of the People of India* (which, by the way, was a handbook to help English manufacturers copy Indian textiles to be sold in Indian markets).[7] The different soils of the subcontinent grew an array of different cottons that weavers wove into a variety of textiles. Hobson-Jobson, the Anglo-Indian dictionary of 1886, lists a hundred different kinds of Indian cloth: Albelli, alrochs, cossai, baftas, bejutas, corahs, doreas, dosooties, chhint, ginghams, jamdanis, morees, mulmuls, mushroos, nainsooks, nillaees, palempores, punjams, susi, and so on.[8]

With the mechanization of spinning, this diversity was no longer possible: the spinning machinery was the same everywhere, and it demanded one uniform kind of cotton and produced one uniform kind of yarn. Once machine spinning replaced hand spinning, the weaver was forced to weave only the kind of yarn that the machine produced, and the farmer was forced to grow only the kind of cotton the machines could use. And so the criteria to judge the quality of cotton changed: from now on, the "best" cotton was considered to be the kind suited to machine spinning, not the kind that made the best cloth. For example, the cotton variety that was used to weave the famed Dhaka muslins, the finest cloth the world had ever seen, was now considered inferior because its staples were relatively short and soft, too short and too soft for the machine.

And finally, mechanization broke the social bonds between farmer, spinner, and weaver. Spinning machinery worked on an industrial scale that did not match the small scale of hand weaving or cotton farming: the large size of the spinning mill gave it an overwhelming hegemonic power over both. It was a fundamental change that introduced hierarchy into a formerly democratic production chain. That democracy and those lateral relationships are what Malkha hopes to reestablish. Our goal, in other words, is to reverse the social dynamics of the Industrial Revolution.

Preserving Diversity: Local Yarn Production

Our discovery in the archives of democratic production in the subsistence mode was mirrored by the real-life experience of the weaving families of Chinnur. The memories of the Chinnur elders made an unbroken link between past and present, between the archive and the practice of a subsistence industry. As we watched the cloth taking shape on the looms of Chinnur, the matriarchs of the weaver community told us stories of how things used to be. It was their stories that brought to life for us the history of subsistence weaving in India and showed us a path to a possible future. The old people told us that English yarn had replaced local spinning a hundred years earlier, snapping the bonds between local spinning and weaving. Then the yarn from England stopped coming during the Second World War, when the sea route to India became unsafe for English shipping. With that, the virtuous cycle of local production in Chinnur for local use was finally broken.

Eureka! The way yarn was made was the link that connected farmer to weaver, the stage that could make or break the democratic circle of cotton-to-cloth today. Here was the clue that we were looking for, the signpost to a complete producer-owned cotton textile production chain for the future. The spinning technology invented in England during the Industrial Revolution had served the interests of the investor-owners of the technology, and the interests of cotton farmers, machine operators, and weavers of the yarn had to be sacrificed to it (remember the protests of the Luddites). At the cost of these farmers and artisans, spinning had to be made profitable for machine owners. That was the

rationale for the spinning technology, and that is the technology that continues to be used today ("modernization" just makes the machines run faster, to increase productivity, again serving the interests of the owners of the machines). If, on the other hand, a democratic cotton textile production chain is what we want, the nature of yarn spinning has to change. This is the point of departure for the Malkha project.

In Chinnur, we went from theory to practice, from the library to the looms and dye vats, driven by the compulsion of keeping the wheels of production turning but at the same time wanting to dig deeper into the archive, to know why things were the way they were. Each story that we heard filled a gap in the jigsaw puzzle of textile history. In a village near Chinnur, we met Durgam Pocham, an elder of the Dher community, known in the Chinnur area as *netagani*, nonweavers. Although the Dher now worked as farm laborers, Pocham remembered their cloth-making days when they ginned and carded the cotton themselves and wove the cloth too. He showed us his old carding bow, made of cow gut and a local wood. And out of friendship, he brought down his old yarn-making tools and loom from the rafters of his house and wove a length of cloth for us.

Durgam Pocham's story was a living link to Harry Rivett-Carnac's *Report on the Operations of the Cotton Department for the Year 1867*.[9] Included in this report is a list of stalls in a weekly market in a cotton-growing area in what Rivett-Carnac calls "the otherwise insignificant village of Jamoorghotta." The first notable point in the report is the sheer scale and diversity of the local market. There were 1,424 stalls, selling everything from grain and leather and vegetables to axes and ploughshares. There were on average eight thousand buyers who visited this little weekly market. There were two hundred fifty head of cattle. There were goldsmiths, silversmiths, and perfumers. Raw cotton and yarn were there, but the largest number of stalls—a whopping 521—sold cloth, and of those, outnumbering the fine-cloth sellers by far, were 350 stalls of Dhers, "selling cloth of their own manufacture." And this, Rivett-Carnac says, "is but one of the many places to which the peasantry flock for the cloth made by the Dhers." So, according to this account at least, Jamoorghotta was one of many weekly markets that served a network of small-scale, decentralized, dispersed, and varied production stretching across the Indian subcontinent in the second half of the nineteenth century.

Between the lines of the report one glimpses the hidden story of the large scale of subsistence, or vernacular, Indian production and trade in the cloth that was woven by Durgam Pocham's "nonweaving" Dher community. The markets in village India were enabling spaces that served social as well as economic needs; they provided occasions for weavers, spinners, farmers, and buyers to meet on equal terms. They are, in a nutshell, democratic spaces. The nature of markets has changed radically since then. The small, friendly, and dispersed local spaces have now been replaced by a single entity: The Market, a dominant entity that demands large quantities of uniform and standardized products, a demand that is unsuited to small-scale production. It is particularly a mismatch with Indian hand weaving, which by nature is a small-scale local activity, but it is one that still provides a livelihood to several millions.

The machine's demand for a uniform cotton variety has dire consequences for cotton farmers in India. Cotton is still grown by smallholder farmers on holdings of two to five acres, who in 2016 produced 35 million bales of 170 kilograms each (or 13.9 billion pounds of cotton lint), making India the largest cotton grower in the world. But instead of the multitude of local heritage varieties that are suited to the local soil and climatic conditions, farmers must now grow only the American variety of cotton, *Gossypium hirsutum*—the only variety that is suitable for machine spinning, since it is the one that can stand up to the heat and stress generated by the spinning machinery. This long-staple variety is expensive to grow, and the expense is entirely the responsibility of the farmer. But the Indian climate is notoriously fickle, and often there is either too much or too little rain, and that risk too is the farmer's, who sometimes is unable to bear it: the largest wave of farmer suicides in history, according to P. Sainath, a chronicler of rural India, has been happening in Indian fields, and many of those who have taken their own lives were growers of cotton.[10]

The situation is such that both small-scale hand weaving and smallholder cotton farming are dependent on large spinning mills that run on large commercial scales. But the Indian state ignores the asymmetry of that relation and, to quote the White Knight in Alice in Wonderland, "madly tries to squeeze a right hand foot into a left hand shoe" by leaving small farmers and hand weavers to deal with the dominating scale of both markets on one hand and spinning mills on the other.

The Malkha Enterprise

Malkha hopes to address these issues that were bequeathed to the Indian cotton textile industry in colonial times. Malkha charts a different path for cot-

ton yarn spinning—toward a smaller scale, closer to the scale of cotton growing and hand weaving. The three spinning units that Malkha runs today have a hundred times fewer spindles than commercial mills (four hundred as compared to forty thousand), and they produce a hundred times less yarn (forty kilos) per eight-hour shift, enough for forty hand weavers. Malkha runs the machines for eight hours a day, six days a week, with days off for festivals and holidays, with sick leave and fifteen days of paid holiday and a bonus every year for the operators, with the eventual aim of handing over the operation to a cooperative of producers. In contrast, in the commercial mills the machines are run to make a profit for the owners, so they never stop: they're run in three shifts, twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week.

Malkha would like to tame that frightening animal, the Market, and return to the producers some of the autonomy they once enjoyed. In precolonial and even colonial times, weavers were notoriously independent-minded, and entire populations of weavers were known to pick up their looms and vanish overnight from their villages if rulers imposed unjust taxes or took away their privileges.

Today the market is powerful enough to dictate terms, cheapness is all, and pollution and the exploitation of labor underpin the low prices that the market demands. This is the market in which Malkha has to compete, a market that does not reward ecologically responsible manufacture and does not value democracy.

Diversity can be a disadvantage in this market: the variations that are a part of small-batch production, of hand weaving, hand-block printing, and natural dyeing are seen as defects, and many consumers prefer the monotony of mass-produced goods. But a new generation of socially and environmentally conscious consumers exists both inside and outside India, and they are making different choices.

The human costs of industrialization are high, even when the goal of capital-intensive growth is attainable. The situation in India today is that conventional capital-intensive industries employ only 7 percent of the country's working population, and within that population the rights of labor are steadily being eroded by increasingly unfair labor practices. And the World Bank warns that 69 percent of even those few jobs are threatened by automation. Inequality in India is stratospheric; India is like "islands of California in a sea of sub-Saharan Africa," as Jean Dreze and Amartya Sen put it: the richest 1 percent of Indians own nearly 60 percent of the country's wealth, up from 50 percent two years ago, and the gap is rising.[11] Meanwhile malnutrition, particularly in the countryside, is worsening as jobs dry up, real wages fall, and food prices rise.

Industrialization is not an inevitable trajectory. India's historical strengths of hand weaving and natural dyeing, not to mention the diversity of its indigenous cotton varieties, can be powerful tools to build an alternative, large-scale, ecological textile production system that employs large numbers without ghettoization and that can be steered into becoming a democratic production system in the hands of its producers. This is Malkha's dream.

We who run Malkha are a small group of people committed to the ideal of democracy in production. We want the spinners and weavers of Malkha eventually to own and manage the spinning machines and handlooms that they operate. Until that can happen, we manage the three small-scale mills that spin the Malkha yarn. We manage the handlooms that weave Malkha fabric. We manage the inventory and marketing by operating a retail shop and an online store as well as by organizing trunk shows in major cities of India.

We have big dreams, but the daily reality for Malkha consists of a hard slog at banal tasks—and believe me, it is a struggle. We have doubts and fears. There is no roadmap to follow. We take wrong turns and make misjudgments that take enormous amounts of resources and energy to correct. And all the time we must keep the spinning machines and looms running and our heads above water in the market. We have a long way to go; and we are still far from reaching our goal. But we persist, reaching for the stars, with our feet in the mud.

Uzramma, a goldsmith by training, is a handloom activist who founded the nongovernmental organizations Dastkar Andhra and Malkha in India. Her approach is to conduct historical research in the colonial archives to search for alternative pathways to India's future.

Notes

1. The Malkha enterprise is managed by the Malkha Marketing Trust, a not-for-profit entity that consists of a team of technical engineers and field-workers engaging directly with weaving families, encouraging them to form their own cooperatives. See "About Malkha," malkha.in/pages/about-us (accessed December 31, 2018).

2. Ministry of Textiles, "Annual Report," 2017–18.

3. The Handlooms (Reservation of Articles for Production) Act of 1985 reserves the exclusive right of the handloom industry of India to produce certain commonly used Indian textiles, such as bordered fabrics.

4. Pradeep Kumar Das, interview with Gunjan Jain of Vriksh (textile design studio), March 19, 2016.

5. "Proceedings of the Madras Board of Revenue," no. 407, April 9, 1862, quoted in Ratnam, *Agricultural Development in Madras State Prior to 1900*, 272.

6. Quoted in Gandhi, *Economics of Khadi*, 362 (from "The Representation of a Spinner," in Gandhi's newspaper *Young India* [May 21, 1931]).

7. Watson, *Textile Manufactures and the Costumes of the People of India*, 42n.

8. Yule and Burnell, *Hobson-Jobson*.

9. Rivett-Carnac, *Report on the Operations of the Cotton Department*.

10. Sainath, "Largest Wave of Suicides in History." Sainath gives the figure of farmer suicides between 1997 and 2007 as 182,936.

11. von Tunzelmann, review of *An Uncertain Glory*.

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