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Introduction

For many of us, the clothes we wear have unconsciously become symbols of our expression, of our tastes as individuals. The global textile and fashion industry has grown prosperous, thanks to this zealous, private belief that expresses itself through a variety of clothes. Humanity relies on clothing to not just protect itself from the elements but also to help serve a social function. We have created outfits for every social occasion and to create a sense of identity among members of different social groups. Although possibly not always true, Clothes certainly maketh the man!

Among the natural fibres that help clothe a vast majority of humanity and give them the means to dress up in a variety of colourful, soft, well-fitting garments is the one obtained from a medium-sized shrub from the tropics, which is now also grown in the temperate regions—cotton. Cotton clothes, some made with a blend of other fibres, natural and man-made, are used by people across the globe because of the amazing qualities of this natural fibre. Apart from the commercial use of the cotton plant for its indispensable fibre, the shrub is also valued for its curative properties and for the valuable oil extracted from its seeds.
The cotton plant is an annually growing herb belonging to the genus *Gossypium* of the *Malvaceae* family. This plant is a shrub-like herb that grows anywhere from 2-10 feet tall. It bears broad three to five, or rarely, seven-segmented greenish leaves, which emerge alternately on the stem. The cotton plants bear blooms and fruits almost all around the year. The blooms are cup-shaped with big, flashy petals with hues ranging from white to yellow. The flowers have a purplish or reddish spot close to their base. The fruits of the cotton plant enclose the seeds in capsules, also referred to as ‘bolls.’ The seeds are surrounded by white coloured soft hairs—the cotton fibre. These fibres are of two types— the longer *staples* and the shorter *linters*.

Worldwide, the following varieties, *Gossypium arboreum*, *Gossypium barbadense*, *Gossypium herbaceum* and *Gossypium hirsutum* are grown to obtain commercial cotton fibre.
Cotton to Cloth

The account of the transformation of this natural fibre obtained from the fruit of a tropical shrub into the clothes we wear, would no doubt be a fascinating narrative, since it involves a number of people working in different areas across the Cotton Textile Supply Chain. However, it is not just a captivating tale. The farmers, weavers and garment workers face many problems when carrying out their occupations or at their workplaces, and many suffer from poor health and inadequate nutrition.

The fibres—the part of the plant which is of commercial interest—are removed by a process called ginning. During the initial ginning, the longer fibres, called the staples, are removed. These are twisted together to form yarn for making thread, which is then dyed and woven into high quality textiles. During the second ginning, the shorter fibres, called linters, are removed. These linters are used to weave low quality textiles including the eponymously named ‘lint’.

Many of the clothes we wear today are made on powered looms, in factories. However, there are still a large number of people, especially in the developing parts of the world, who wear clothes woven on manually-run looms. In the Asian region, India is one of the major producers of cotton and cotton textiles. The cloth used in some of the garments worn by people in India, especially the sarees, kurtas and other traditional garments, would have most likely been woven by men and women working diligently on their looms. The cotton for these clothes is obtained either from the tree-cotton Gossypium arboreum, which is native to the Indian sub-continent, or the many commercial cotton species that are grown in India today.

The Indian Textile Cotton Supply Chain

The Indian Cotton industry is one of the largest in the world, employing approximately 60 million people in its cultivation, processing and trade. India is the third largest producer of cotton and has the highest acreage in the world, and is also the second largest producer and exporter of cotton yarn and textiles. The cotton industry contributes four percent to India’s GDP and earns €7.1 billion in export sales.

Though the modernisation of the cotton industry has brought benefits to many people, it has also created a new constituency of the poor, especially among small land holders (farmers), handloom weavers and garment makers.

People working across the Indian cotton textile supply chain face diverse problems. They are not organised and are, as a result, ‘inconsequential’ to wield any significant political power. They are too poor to invest in new technologies that can improve their livelihoods and suffer from poor health and nutrition. This situation, combined with a policy environment that favours largescale producers, a textile industry dominated by monopolies and the denial of the means to organise and assert workers’ rights, holds bleak prospects for those working in the bottom-most levels of India’s cotton industry.
Fibre to Fabric

The Cotton Textile Supply Chain

- Cotton Farmers
- Ginners-Yarn Makers
- Master Weavers
- Power looms
- Weavers
- Agents, Traders, Intermediaries
- Garment Makers
- Major Retail Chains
- Branded Garment Manufacturers
- Consumers
Farming has become increasingly difficult, particularly for small and marginal farmers, who often resort to suicide as a way out of their miseries. The Warangal district of Andhra Pradesh gained notoriety for suicide deaths. Cotton farmers suffer the most. Small and marginal farmers holding about 57 percent of the total arable land constitute a significantly high proportion (84.8 percent) of the farming community. With only 25 percent of their credit needs met by the formal lending institutions, they are mainly dependent on private lenders who lend at exorbitant rates.

The lives of handloom weavers too are badly affected by marginal wages or no wages (no work or jobless), illiteracy, inadequate market linkages, government apathy, inadequate social development support and poverty. Like their counterparts in the farming sector, these weavers too are dependent on loans from private lenders and lack access to credit from institutions, and are therefore, perennially indebted. With rising inflation and their work fetching poor returns, many families are abjectly impoverished.

Around three percent of India’s female workforce work on textile and textile products. It is estimated that around 2.4 million workers work in the clothing sector alone. Mumbai, Delhi and Bangaluru are the major garment export centres. Around 400,000 garment workers work in over 800 garment manufacturing units of Bangalore. Despite these impressive numbers, these workers remain unorganised. They are often threatened by factory closures and dismissals. Many do not have access to minimum wages or other benefits such as a provident fund and employment insurance. Women garment workers suffer the most because of long working hours and the need to take care of their families. They experience all the vulnerabilities faced in general by women as a gender and by workers as a class.

### Oxfam’s Intervention

Since 2002, in response to this situation, Oxfam India worked through its non-governmental organisation (NGO) partners in Andhra Pradesh and Karnataka, to improve working conditions and livelihoods for cotton farmers, weavers and garment makers in South India. The European Commission (EC)-funded project is

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1 In Andhra Pradesh, there are about 3,20,000 handlooms.
an opportunity to continue, consolidate and scale up interventions within the three sectors, specifically in four districts of Andhra Pradesh and Karnataka (Warangal district – with small and marginalised cotton farmers, Prakasam and Nalgonda districts – handloom weavers, Bangalore city – garment workers). The 48-month project, starting from January 2008, has an overall objective of ‘poverty alleviation’ and a specific objective of ‘improved livelihoods for cotton farmers, handloom weavers and garment workers’. The primary target groups are 8,000 poor smallholder cotton farmers and their families, 1,000 families of poor handloom weavers and 10,000 garment workers. The final or indirect beneficiaries are around 1,000,000 cotton farmers, 300,000 handloom weavers and 300,000 factory-based garment makers.

Through this project, Oxfam and its partners promote organic cotton farming and ensure market access for their produce to small scale cotton producers. It provides credit so that they have the resources to shift from traditional farming techniques to natural production methods. These farmers produce their own organic pesticides and fertilisers. They are taught to use natural pest control techniques that do not use harmful chemicals. They use locally-built traps and take advantage of natural predators such as nesting birds.

These farmers learn new production techniques and sell directly to fair trade and health markets through a trading company, rather than through intermediaries who profit from commissions and mark-ups. The high quality, organic cotton sells at prices up to 25 percent higher than those for traditionally produced varieties. This has resulted in an improvement in health and disposable income, saving families and lifting poor farmers out of poverty. Farmers also grow other crops such as chillies, maize and pulses for their own consumption and to mitigate risks in the cotton market.

The project has also helped the handloom weavers by ensuring their products command better prices in the value chain. They are coached to use new raw materials such as non-toxic dyes which are in demand and additionally, safeguard their health. They create their own designs and target the markets directly through their own trading company. The weaver co-operatives formed by weavers’ groups, support this trading company. As a result, the beneficiaries influence the direction taken by their businesses. They are taught marketing skills and trade under a protected brand name to prevent counterfeiting and intellectual property theft. The weavers are also given easy access to credit so that they do not have to depend on shylocks for their working capital requirements and other needs. In addition, advocacy aimed at policy formulation to support women weavers, and to handle gender equity issues, especially in relation to work and wages, is also an important part of the work.

This project is working to generate a pro-worker policy environment where governments conscientiously implement labour laws and regulations that favour workers, where corporations monitor labour standards more stringently and
Managements change practices in compliance with labour laws and social security regulations. The action taken has empowered women workers to assert their rights. The women workers' organisations address not only labour rights issues, but also gender subordination and women's rights. They have ensured that women can access special provisions in labour laws aimed at the welfare of women workers such as the Maternity Benefits Act. Action under the project has strengthened sustainable community institutions such as the Women Garment Workers' Front (a social organisation of women workers) and the Garment and Textile Workers' Union (a trade union that addresses labour rights).

This document brings to readers a set of case studies that highlight the changes brought by the project in the lives of these poor people working across the Indian cotton textile supply chain. Through this project, Oxfam and its NGO partners have infused new hope. While the task is long and arduous and more needs to be done, we are happy to note the project work has had a multiplier effect in the sense that others have started learning from the beneficiaries and now look up to them to guide them through their issues. Farmers from other districts for example, now learn new skills to move up the value chain. Handloom groups, cooperatives and trading companies demonstrate the capacity of weavers to broaden their skills and access markets directly. The groups use Community Designers and Resource Persons, develop and distribute material on designs, weaves, colours and facilitate local marketing. Promotion of worker's basic rights in Bangaluru's garment factories has led to the implementation of government policies with safe working conditions. This has inspired the women workers to assert their rights.

We hope this set of case studies not only helps readers understand all aspects of the issues involved as they revel in the victories of the protagonists, but it also inspires them to ponder over and appreciate the work done by the faceless millions who toil to ensure we are clothed well and can indulge in our little vanities.
CONVERGENCE
for a Better Tomorrow
‘Small is beautiful’, best illustrates the principle that small and appropriate technologies empower people. But in the case of the small and marginal cotton farmers in Warangal district of Andhra Pradesh, that principle turned out to be more of a curse than a tool of empowerment. The small land holdings were hopelessly unproductive which resulted in misery among the farmers and led to the district gaining notoriety for farmers’ suicide deaths in the past decade, prompting Oxfam to step in along with its partner NGOs to play a role in bettering their livelihood.

Faced with high cost of cultivation coupled with low returns and erratic pesticides supply chain, the small and marginal farmers had no option but to fall into the debt trap cast by local moneylenders, who charged exorbitant interest rates. With poor repayment capacity, many of the farmers resorted to the extreme step of committing suicide. This was the scenario when Oxfam launched the ‘Improved Livelihoods for Cotton Farmers, Handloom Weavers and Garment Workers’ project. The project aimed at reaching 8,000 small and marginal cotton farmers from the district.
Impact of Convergence

One of the challenges identified was introduction of effective horizontal linkages for credit, value addition and market for organic cotton besides advocacy and lobby for policy issues, and this issue was compounded by the fact that the awareness levels among the farmers on market access, pricing and newer and relevant farming techniques were abysmally low. ‘Convergence’ was the mantra adopted by Modern Architects of Rural India (MARI), Oxfam’s partner NGO in the district, to tackle this problem.

With a strong grounding in non-pesticide management and belief in the philosophy of promoting innovative and sustainable farm models, MARI introduced organic cotton farming to the target group of small and marginal farmers. These farmers, most of them managing their activities independently, hardly had any access to credit facility nor did they have the wherewithal to procure farm implements and inputs. Besides, availability of organic manure, storage facility and transportation facilities were not even in their ambit of thinking.

Realising that collectivisation was key to the success of their efforts, MARI initiated moves towards the formation of Mutually Aided Cooperative Societies (MACS), one of which is Navjeevan. The idea was to initiate collective planning and addressing their needs as a group. In the process, the need to build both horizontal and vertical linkages was felt and the result was the convergence of various stakeholders in the sector which helped the farming community to substantial extent.
From Moneylenders to Banks

For the small holding farmer, availing loan from banks was a distant dream, faced as he was with poor returns on investment (RoI) which had a ripple effect on his repayment capacity and very livelihood. The only option left with these hapless farmers were the village loan-sharks, who besides charging high interest rates, would invariably hold them to ransom with the pre-condition that their produce be sold only to them. Consequently, borrowings for non-farming activities increased because of the debt trap they were in, often leading to exploitation and abuse.

Organic farming and collectivisation, however, changed the scenario with the benefits of the practice perceptible at all levels. With the emergence of MACS, a cooperative body with farmers themselves as stakeholders, the quality of produce moved up several notches with better quality assurance management techniques. This in turn resulted in the produce commanding better prices in the market and effective market presence. As a result, banks which shunned small and marginal cotton farmers began showing interest in their needs. Axis Bank and Indian Overseas Bank have opened their doors to Navjeevan and are willing to extend credit facility to the tune of Rs 1 crore while NABARD is willing to invest at least Rs 2 crore.

What is heartening, however, is the fact that Navjeevan has so far not fallen to the temptation of availing bank loans because the society itself is in a position to disburse loans through its self-generated finances from the share capital that it has generated. The society has set a clear action plan and plans to avail the bank loans as and when it decides to enter the ginning and spinning sectors. The creation of a safety net and establishment of revolving funds has given the MACS members confidence and a better negotiation power.

The resultant picture is that the farmer is no longer in dearth of finances and has the option to plan for the loan and choose from where they would like to avail the facility. They no longer have to depend on the moneylenders for their daily bread.

Benefits of Networking

The convergence process had not been restricted to only market and finance sectors. The District Rural Development Agency (DRDA) took up de-siltation of 19 tanks in 10 villages under Parvathagiri mandal of the district. The initiative, free of cost, benefited 1001 farmers spread across 1,295 acres of land. The value addition from the de-siltation exercise was that the silt was used to rejuvenate the soil in these areas which also helped in water retention. The process which improved soil fertility with increase in NPK (Nitrogen, Phosphorous and Potassium) content also meant that additional chemical fertilisers would not be required for the next three years.

Another benefit for farmers has been the active participation of the Department of Agriculture at various levels which has resulted in better agricultural management processes as a whole. Since June 2010, the Agriculture Research Station
(ARS) has been conducting a research study on the quality of non-BT cotton organic seed variety called Warangal cotton seed as compared to the Mallika variety of seed used by Navjeevan. Five farmers are participating in this research, using half-an-acre of land each. The farmers have been given stocks of the seed free of cost, and ARS has decided to procure all the cotton produce at the end of the harvest. The farmers involved in the research would have an insight into the challenges and benefits of using these two varieties of seeds.

The Department of Agriculture also played a role in exposing the cotton farmers to newer techniques in both organic as well non-organic farming. ARS has already conducted information and inputs sharing sessions at least four times in the past two years and the farmers have been able to present their produce by participating in farm fairs in different areas.

The Central Research Institute for Dryland Agriculture (CRIDA) has also conducted workshops thrice in the past two years covering areas like water and soil conservation. Besides, the Mandal Agriculture Officer has also evinced keen interest in organic farming and regularly visits the villages, resulting in the initiation of cross-sectoral learning process between farmers and the department. The village groups have been invited to seminars conducted by the department to share their experiences on the benefits of organic farming. As a token gesture towards contributing to the cause of organic farming, the department even distributed vermi-compost worth Rs 2 lakh to farmers of Antharam village in Parvathagiri mandal.

Another important area of convergence was the need for collective procurement of seeds and storage of cotton, which forms the basis for the entire process of organic farming lifecycle. Storage capacity, in particular, plays a vital role since it facilitates optimum utilisation of market dynamics in that the farmer can store his produce and sell it when the demand is high which in turn fetches him a good price.

Realising the importance of positioning itself strategically in the market, Navjeevan approached the District Collector three years ago with a request to set up storage facility. Oxfam supported the community for donating land which is owned by them and is there for the larger cause. The District Collector, who visited the project areas to get first-hand information, then released Rs 3 lakh which helped in establishing a storage facility with capacity of 2,200 bags or 1,100 quintals of cotton at any given time. The land for the storage facility was made available by a group of farmers, another illustration of the benefits of collectivisation.

The storage facility has helped in the following areas:

- Improving income through staggered sale of product
- Meeting quality standards for organic farming storage procedures
- Providing greater safety and security for the produce
- Market visibility for the product
- Easier access to buyer
- Relationship building with various stakeholders

**Plantations Help Biomass Development**

Another important component and integral part of organic farming is the development of biomass, which again required providing linkage. The Department of Forest provides the source for future biomass development by donating plantation like *Neem* trees. In the past three years, around 5000 plantations have been supplied by the forest department, which will help in future biomass development.

The efforts put in by MACS like Navjeevan in establishing vertical and horizontal linkages with government departments and agencies, financial institutions and market forces have brought about perceptible changes in the cotton farm sector. Importantly, it has resulted in an overall improvement in the lives of small and marginal cotton farmers in Warangal district. Also, the convergence strategy has proved effective from the setting up of Oorvi, a farmers’ trading company, which helps in the marketing of the produce as well as in extensive on-field research in collaboration with government department. Besides, efforts are also on to tie up with NABARD to provide working capital.

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<th>Vertical linkages</th>
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<td><strong>Partners work with Organic Cotton Farmers: (NGO)</strong></td>
<td><strong>NGO promoter for capacity building, financial back-up support, mentorship, institutional building NABARD and bank for credit (under discussion)</strong> Dairy, Micro Finance KVK</td>
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<td>Farmer Trading Company (Oorvi), Oxfam GB/India, Govt depts.’ collaboration for wider spread – Agriculture Research, KVK</td>
<td><strong>MACS</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Village groups and individual farmers</strong></td>
<td><strong>NGO promoter for capacity building, financial back-up support, mentorship, institutional building NABARD and bank for credit (under discussion)</strong></td>
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<td>Farmer Trading Company (Oorvi) for ginning and marketing, and open market traders</td>
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<td><strong>Trading Companies (FTC)</strong></td>
<td><strong>NGO promoters and Oxfam GB/India</strong></td>
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<td>4 MACS cotton farmers cooperatives</td>
<td>Exploring with NABARD for working capital Tie up with Axis Bank</td>
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Importantly, it has resulted in an overall improvement in the lives of small and marginal cotton farmers in Warangal district.
QUALITY

Prescription for Success in Organic Farming

When it comes to organic farming practice, it is of paramount importance that the farmers treat the guidelines for Non-Pesticide Management (NPM) as one would handle a doctor’s prescription for health management. Quality is the USP for success in this area of farming and any negligence could lead to disastrous results. The complex quality control procedure is indeed strenuous and time consuming but the end result is that the farmer is assured of reaping the benefits of organic farming.
The organic cotton farmers in Warangal district are fairly well aware of the vital role that quality plays when they enter the market, and have adapted to the guidelines to ensure that their produce commands a good price. Pragathi Seva Samithi (PSS) and Sarvodaya Youth Organisation (SYO), Oxfam’s partner NGOs in the project to improve the livelihood of organic cotton farmers, have tirelessly worked towards sending the message to the organic cotton farmers in the region that if they followed the quality control management techniques, their produce would get the best rate in the market. And it was proved last year when organic farmers who produced high quality organic cotton were rewarded with a rate of Rs 2400 per quintal when the prevailing market rate was Rs 1800 per quintal.

The advantages that organic cotton farmers enjoy are many, which, once they realise more than compensates for some of the rigid factors laid down for ensuring quality. The practice is not only cost-effective but also ensures that soil fertility levels are maintained at desirable levels. Use of fertilisers and pesticides not only come heavy on the farmers’ pockets but also reduce soil fertility levels. The biomass and vermi-compost that are used in organic farming practice are home produced and are virtually free of cost. The biggest advantage that they enjoy over the non-organic farmers is that they get spot payment for their produce, which given their economic status, is a big boon.

**Prevention is Better than Cure**

The quality control process starts right from the seed procurement stage and is followed right up to the packaging of cotton. To begin with, only seeds which are non-BT GM-free are used by the farmers and what follows is a string of preventive measures which are put in place as per the guidelines prescribed for pest management. As part of the pest management exercise, the farmers are encouraged to plant trap crops like marigold and castor along the farm border which prevents pests. They are also advised to grow Jowar and Maize in the neighbouring plots which also helps in organic farming.

It is also essential for organic farmers to understand that in this area of activity, prevention is better than cure, and bio-pesticides like *vitex* are used. If there is an outbreak of crop disease, the farmers use a solution made of chilli and garlic and then a mixture of cow dung and urine is sprayed to check further spread of the disease. Besides, the farmers are also required to spray *Neem* concoction every 15 days. Most organic farmers follow the guidelines religiously, and the few who tend to stray away from the practice are immediately spotted by the trained internal inspectors employed by the NGOs and brought back to track.

**Monitoring Quality Control Procedures**

The entire process of organic farming including pest management techniques are constantly monitored and documented in individual farmers’ diaries by the field staff of NGOs to ensure quality. The diaries cover the entire gamut of organic farming activity including inputs used, chances of contamination and pre-harvesting precautions taken. Contamination can even
and the moisture content are also constantly monitored to ensure good quality.

Packaging is as important in ensuring quality as are the processes deployed at various stages of crop management. Once the grading of cotton is done, they are packed into distinctively-labeled gunny bags and every effort is made to ensure that not more than 40-50 kg of cotton is packed in one
Any attempt to pack more cotton into the gunny bags can also lead to a drop in the quality.

**Role of Internal Inspectors**

The role of internal inspector cannot be underlined in the quality control process. They are essentially farmers who are trained by the NGOs on various aspects of organic cotton farming including the vital quality control measures. This move to employ internal inspectors has paid off since it not only ensures that farmers stick to organic farming and NPM guidelines but has also thrown up employment opportunities to the villagers, particularly women. It has also led to confidence building through constant social exposure and emergence of the latent persuasive qualities in the persons employed in the post at a salary of Rs 2500 per month. Each internal inspector has a jurisdiction of three to four villages and their monitoring parameters include seed selection, NPM techniques, cotton picking and harvesting practice deployed by the farmers.

That as many as six of the 10 internal inspectors employed by SYO are women speaks volumes of the potential this activity has for women’s empowerment. Twenty-year-old Premalatha, an internal inspector employed by SYO, says: “There was initial resistance to organic farming by the farmers, but once I explained the benefits of the practice to them, they began to open up slowly. I always tell them to try out the practice and continue with it only if they are convinced of its benefits. Thanks to the training I received from SYO, I am able to answers the farmers’ queries confidently”.

Premalatha, who herself practices organic farming in her two acres of land, says it certainly has had an impact on the financial strength of the family because of the low input costs and the good rate for the produce in market. She also recognises the importance of maintaining quality and she spreads the message among the organic cotton farmers in her area of jurisdiction.
UNLEASHING
Latent Potential
The women cotton farmers in Warangal district of Andhra Pradesh would have probably never heard of former Secretary General of the United Nations, Kofi Annan, but they certainly seem to have plucked a leaf out of his belief, albeit in a small way, that there is no better tool, more effective for development than the empowerment of women. Many of them seem to have learnt that by honouring oneself and treating oneself with respect, one sets the stage for others to treat them with respect.

Steeped as they were in traditional beliefs which kept them confined to roles lacking power and subjected to abuse, these women were submissive and had no sense of self-worth. The need of the hour was sustained motivation to help them come out of their shell, bring about awareness to boost their confidence levels and equip them with the mental strength to match men in all fields of activity, be it work in the fields or at home. And this is where the intervention initiated by Oxfam through its partner NGOs in the district helped, constantly encouraging them to speak out and move from the back-benches in farmers’ meetings to leadership positions in MACS.

The role of women in the success of this project, aimed at improving livelihoods of cotton farmers by encouraging them to shift from inorganic farming practices to organic farming, cannot be emphasised enough. Their contribution is perceptible in every activity—be it by taking the initiative and accepting organic farming and motivating others to take it up, or involving themselves in marketing and leading MACS from the front.
Emerging from the Shadows

Emerging from their traditional roles which kept them confined to their homes, these women have now emerged as a more enlightened lot, they are aware of their rights which helps in minimising gender-based division of work and ensures equitable pay. The increased participation of women has also resulted in a ripple effect across the social fabric with perceptible reduction in alcoholism among the men and better savings practices at home.

Take the case of SYO, one of Oxfam’s NGO partners in the district. SYO’s strategy of giving women’s empowerment the required attention appears to have paid off. One of the most significant changes that one comes across in the project area, besides women’s participation in agricultural activity, is the drastic attitudinal change among women.

The caste system had strong roots in the district and Dalits were not in mainstream agricultural activities. Not only has this situation changed with other castes gradually accepting them, but even more significant is the election of Dalit women to leadership positions in MACS!

Playing Role Model

Nobody knows this better than 30-year-old Vanitha hailing from Damra village in Atmakur mandal of the district. She and her husband were completely against switching over to organic farming during counselling sessions and at farmers’ meetings organised by the NGO. Her argument – How can organic farming help us increase crop yield substantially and consequently improve our lifestyle when the use of fertilisers and pesticides could not help us?

The project staff got an earful from Vanitha when they came to persuade her to convert to organic farming. Over a period of time, Vanitha turned around, particularly after she realised that harmful chemical pesticides were responsible for the major health problems she and her husband suffered, forcing them to give up farming activity for a while.

Once she was convinced, Vanitha, who like most women in the community, would not attend meetings or even if she did, would not participate, is now a voice to reckon with. As the
first Dalit woman elected the president of the Kakatiya MACS. Vanitha went on to bring about a transformation in the outlook of the women and men of the area. This back-bencher showed leadership and went on to initiate discussions and actions on various issues affecting the community, which everyone appreciated.

**From a Passive Outlook to Participative Mode**

Thanks to her efforts, women now actively participate in various activities and their awareness levels on issues like domestic violence, ills of child labour and the importance of education as a whole have gone up several notches. Vanitha was also instrumental in encouraging thrift among the members by setting up an emergency fund at the MACS by raising a one-time fee of Rs 100 from each farmer. The fund came in handy to help those who needed finance for purchase of agricultural inputs like seeds when they were down and out. Another initiative taken up by the women was the implementation of a Rs 1 lakh insurance for each farmer.

Brimming with confidence, Vanitha is a role model today for other women of her village and from the surrounding areas. The fact that the DRDA chose her to be a representative for promoting NPM and gives her a monthly honorarium of Rs 5000 for her efforts, does not surprise anyone who now knows Vanitha.

The initiative to empower women in the project areas has had several positive fallouts. Besides better social exposure and awareness of their rights, women also learnt the tricks of the trade. They are now aware of various market aspects like market trends, supply and demand and best rates for both procurement of inputs and sale of cotton.

**The Power of Persuasion**

Another perceptible impact is the power of persuasion among women. Gradually, many more are being appointed as internal inspectors by the partner NGOs with specific duties to ensure that the practice of organic farming is maintained and sustained. Twenty-year-old Premalatha, an internal inspector with SYO is one such person who has been able to persuade several farmers to convert to organic farming. After explaining to them the benefits, she simply reasons – “There is no harm in trying it out. At the end of it, if you are not convinced, go back to whatever form of agricultural practice you are comfortable with”. More often than not, this has worked in her favour.

These empowered internal inspectors have a keen eye to detect any deviations from the organic farming practice, and have their own ways of ensuring that it does not occur. The NGOs on their part have given them the training required to carry out their duties.

At the end of it all, it is clear that the initiative to empower women has paid dividends, but this is just the beginning. What is required is the emergence of several Vanithas and Premalathas to carry on with the mission and make it a complete success so that others are encouraged to replicate in their areas.
Debt, they say, is like any other trap, easy enough to get into, but hard enough to get out of. Nobody understands this better than the handloom weavers’ community of Nalgonda district in Andhra Pradesh. Virtual slaves in the hands of the local moneylenders, this poverty-ridden community coupled with a very low literacy rate, had virtually no idea of the concept of market and institutional linkages and the benefits they can derive from it. While the cost of living shot up year after year, their abysmally low wages hardly ever rose, leading to heavy dependence on moneylenders who bound them with conditions that prevented them from venturing out independently.

Given this backdrop of misery and drudgery, the need of the hour was intervention in several areas to bring them out of their dismal living conditions. And one of the components, a crucial one at that, was convergence which would not only expose the weavers to market trends, pricing structure and credit accessibility but also empower them with the awareness of the potential of collectivisation, placing them in a better position to demand wages commensurate with their skill and labour.
The task before Chetana Society, Oxfam’s NGO partner in the district implementing the project aimed at poverty alleviation and improved livelihood skills among weavers, was challenging. Chetana’s areas of concern included changing the mindset of weavers in switching from silk to cotton, bringing the weavers out of the clutches of the master Weavers or moneylenders, empowerment of women, who were relegated to the background both in terms of participation and contribution, and collectivisation which would put them all in a better position to seek their dues.

It is well known that the lack of access to credit is one of the most serious constraints preventing people’s escape from a life in poverty. This was also evident here from the practice adopted by master weavers who would extend credit to weavers at high interest rates to buy raw material for them with the condition that the finished product be sold back to the master weavers at the rates they fixed beforehand!

**Exposure Builds Confidence**

Having helped establish two MACS Ratlam and Chitiki, covering 483 families in 20 villages, Chetana Society went about the task of imparting training in leadership building and skill enhancement. Simultaneously, the members were also exposed to practices of book-keeping and savings. Another important exercise that Chetana Society undertook towards establishing market linkage was the setting up of Chenetha Colour Weavers Pvt. Ltd. (CCW), a Handloom Trading Company. Earlier, the weaver was disconnected from the market, had no knowledge of the cost of raw materials or of the selling price of the finished products like sarees and bedsheets. The weavers were also not exposed to market demands and design trends, which are equally important aspects, as the other factors affecting their livelihoods.

One of the first exercises that the NGO undertook was to involve the MACS members in book-keeping and costing, which was a totally new area for the weavers. This exposure gave them a perspective of market demands, pricing, design trends and an understanding of the wage structure vis-a-vis the market value. Production Costing Committees were formed covering the entire gamut of processes involved in weaving. Besides, the weavers were empowered to quote their own wages based on the knowledge they had gained from market exposure and pricing.

In the process, the wages of weavers went up from Rs 500 per saree produced a year ago to Rs 620 for the same, registering a hike of over 20 percent. The wage hike, prompted by the work of the MACS, was the highest in this sector when compared to other societies. It also motivated the weavers who would have never dreamt of such changes earlier. This kind of empowerment came about after exposure to other cooperative societies and their wage structure.
Out of the Clutches of Master Weavers

The NGO, in line with its mandate to bring the weavers out of the clutches of the moneylenders and master weavers, extended micro-credit which the weavers used to pay off their debts. In a way, the CCW replaced the exploitative master weavers through financial support and encouraged the weavers to be innovative and create design based on market trends. The raw material was supplied to the weavers and the end product was picked up from their doorstep, thus avoiding hidden costs like transportation.

CCW, based on simple business and commercial practices, has made the weavers the important stakeholders in the enterprise MACS. This sense of ownership has brought about perceptible change in the weavers’ attitude which resulted in higher levels of participation besides a spirit of competition. The company has established linkages with Handlooms and Textiles Department for exhibitions and with high-end commercial establishments like Fab India to market their produce under the brand name ‘Karghaa‘. In fact, CCW has entered into a deal with Fab India for supply of products worth Rs 8.5 lakh.
“We purchase the best yarn available in the market and branded colours. Our strategy is to ensure that our products are top-of-the-shelf and command the best possible price in the market. We are involved in brand development with the objective to remain upmarket, which in turn will benefit the weavers,” says Amar Sivaji Pendyala, the Chief Executive Officer of CCW.

Besides buying yarn from the local market, the NGO has also established links with the National Handloom Development Corporation (NHDC) for supply of hank yarn.

Another important step taken towards convergence is the payment of wages through cheques. Besides transparency in dealings, this has exposed the weavers to banking practices and with this exposure has come awareness of other banking facilities, such as availability of credit, savings and so on.

Despite the odds faced by the NGOs when achieving the project objectives, they have been quite successful. This is evident from the fact that CCW was shortlisted by NABARD from 10 other organisations for a pilot project on social enterprise, which involves extension of loan-cum-grant.

In the ultimate analysis, the weavers of Nalgonda district under Chetana Society may not have spotted the pot of gold at the end of the rainbow, but their attitude and perception has certainly undergone a change. With convergence in place and linkages being gradually established with more establishments from the private and public sectors, there is hope for them for a better tomorrow. Independence and success can only be achieved if they are exposed to various aspects of their own trade and practices and are made confident to face the future. To that extent, Chetana Society and CCW have together ensured that the weavers are well set for a secure future.
A MINDSET Shift

Like their counterparts in the cotton farmers sector, women in the handloom sector too were used to playing the secondary role and were confined to only pre-loom activities. The men played the more dominant role and the women were not aware about various factors affecting their livelihoods such as pricing, market trends, raw material costs and marketing. Their exposure to the outside world was minimal and consequently their self-esteem and confidence levels were abysmally low.

Once Chetana Society, Oxfam’s partner NGO in the handloom weavers’ project, identified the problems causing or affecting the issue of gender equity, they set about raising awareness levels through constant counselling and village level campaigns. Though there was initial resistance to the move, the weavers’ community warmed up to the idea and women slowly emerged out of the shadows. It was certainly not an easy task, for the men believed that the role for which the women were being prepared by the NGO, was strictly in their domain.
Strategy to Bring Women Out of the Shadows

Chetana’s strategy was to hone the women’s skills on various fronts like innovation and creativity besides imparting training on effective use of leadership skills. That the women emerged from the pre-loom activities to leadership positions in the MACS speaks volumes of the success of the project in bringing about gender equity. But it’s not a rosy picture yet since a lot more women in the community need to step out from the shadows.

The women, who are making their presence felt in MACS meetings and decision-making process through active participation, are now in a position to speak about market trends, demand and supply in the market, the need for design innovation and even costing—areas entirely under the purview of the men folk. The women are equally involved in the various stages of the handloom process, marketing of finished products and design innovation, thanks mainly to the exposure visits arranged by Chetana. They have come to occupy the president’s post in the two MACS, no mean achievement at that. The icing on the cake is that many men are beginning to accept them as equal partners. The increase in awareness levels has also helped the women play a more effective role at the home front too.
Making their Presence Felt

Though there are several success stories of women graduating out of their marginalised role, the best perhaps is that of Mangamma, hailing from Narayanpur in Nalgonda district. A shy home-maker with low self-esteem who was happy to help her weaver husband with pre-loom work, she is now a picture of confidence, speaking without any hesitation or pause, forceful enough to make others hear what she has to say. Mangamma is the president of Chitiki MACS, and she is no rubber stamp authority.

Blessed with an encouraging husband, Mangamma was one of the first targets of Chetana and she responded with enthusiasm. “Earlier, I used to be scared of meeting people, leave alone addressing gatherings of weavers. But after Chetana built up my confidence and made me believe in my leadership abilities, I have no problems now speaking out at meetings. My awareness level on various aspects of weaving including marketing and processes have also gone up several notches and this has also helped me face people with confidence”, says the MACS leader.

Mangamma is quite forceful at MACS meetings and makes the members understand her point of view. “If I am right in my views, they will naturally accept it”, she says in a matter-of-fact tone. She also believes that the men are slowly accepting the fact that women’s participation in various spheres of activity is just as important as their own. “It is nice to see more and more women
taking an active part in all activities. Such levels of participation will ensure equal representation in society”, she says.

Mangamma’s biggest achievement that brings a satisfied smile on her face is the kind of education she is providing to her children. Her daughter Shalini is doing her Masters in Social Work from the prestigious Tata Institute of Social Sciences (TISS) in Mumbai while her son, Madhur, is in the first year of B Tech at IIIT, Basar.

Another case of empowerment is that of G Chandrakala, a 32-year-old single woman from Mandolagudem village in the district. Though the self-help group (SHG) in the village was established with the help of Chetana, they are still not part of their operations in terms of production and marketing. The counselling by Chetana officials helped Chandrakala believe that she can be economically independent and be self-sufficient if she put in the effort. Once in the clutches of the master weavers, she availed a Rs 10,000 loan from the SHG and used it judiciously to buy raw material for weaving. She is now in a position to educate her two children and also save some money from the income she generates.

Like Mangamma, Chandrakala too says that the training and exposure extended by Chetana helped her come out of her cheerless life. “I am no longer in doubt about my capabilities, nor am I indebted to the agents since I have my own produce. The training also helped me to face the outside world and my communication skills have only added to my confidence level”, says Chandrakala, adding that she is waiting for the day when she gets orders for production from CCW.

There are many Mangammas and Chandrakalas in the weaving community of Nalgonda district, but a lot more needs to be done to ensure that other women in the community are not left behind.
For any profession or business to survive, leave alone thrive, market access is of paramount importance. Nobody knows this better than the handloom weavers of Chouttupal area in Nalgonda district, who have been in the grip of master weavers for decades. The exploitation of the weavers by master weavers through supply of raw material against loans extended to the former and binding them to sell the end product back to them, was one of the critical areas identified by Chetana Society, Oxfam’s partner NGO, to alleviate the sufferings of handloom weavers.

Earlier, the weavers were in the clutches of the master weavers because their very existence was dependent on the credit extended by the latter to buy raw material. Besides, the master weavers discouraged the weavers from being innovative in designs and would insist on creating products of their choice. This denial of innovation coupled with lack of knowledge on market trends pushed the weavers into a corner, making them virtual slaves in the hands of master weavers. With abysmally low wages, several frustrated weavers committed suicide while others took up other livelihood options such as security guards and industrial labour.

**Towards Establishing Market Linkages**

The mandate for CCW, the Handloom Trading Company set up by Chetana Society, was to establish market linkages for MACS established by the NGO to bring 483 families from 20 villages under its cluster. The establishment of CCW to overcome the deep-rooted problem of lack of market access to weavers held out a promising future, with the company establishing a two-way system of not only introducing the beneficiaries to markets for purchase of raw material but also exposing them to markets for selling their produce. The weavers realised that CCW was able to procure reliable sales contracts from retail majors like Fab India and in the process, avoiding payment of commissions to intermediaries.

Added to the exploitation by the master weavers was the rising cost of production. With yarn prices consistently going up in the past couple of years, the weavers were virtually at the end of the road, and many found themselves without any work. To tackle the high cost of production, low wages and a changing market, Chetana...
Society adopted a multi-pronged strategy to pull the weaving community out of their misery. The first step was to bring together the 48 SHGs under two MACS and extend micro-credit to the weavers to clear their loans with the master weavers. The weavers were then exposed to basic business aspects like book-keeping and savings, which gave them a better perspective of the business. The weavers were encouraged to do their own costing, which exposed them to production and marketing costs besides the wage structure.

Once this was established, the NGO initiated training in skill building, enhancing leadership qualities and establishing gender equity among the beneficiaries.

The final step was to expose the weavers to marketing practices through visits to exhibitions organised by various bodies and government corporations and to other MACS elsewhere in the state. This not only helped the weavers in understanding the market trends but also made them socially more aware.

It was also necessary to encourage the weavers to switch to cotton weaving since the market demand for silk had dwindled following the high cost of silk yarn. The conversion from silk weaving to cotton, by no means an easy task, was however, achieved by Chetana Society through persistent counselling of the reluctant weavers once they realised that the demand and supply trend in the market had tilted towards cotton products.

**CCW – Boon for the Weavers**

The role of CCW in improving the lifestyle of the weavers cannot be emphasised enough. The company established direct contact with the NHDC for procurement of good quality yarn at a reasonable price. To meet the demand, the company also bought yarn and dyes from the local market.

CCW also established linkages with retailers like Fab India and APCO for the purchase of finished products from the weavers, routing it through MACS. Presently, the company has orders from Fab India to the tune of Rs 8.5 lakh.
In the Words of a Beneficiary

The impact of the project intervention in the lives of the beneficiaries is best reflected in the words of Bala Narasimha, a 55-year-old weaver from Pochampally. Mr. Narasimha, who switched over from silk to cotton weaving two years ago, has this to say: “I was told at meetings organised by Chetana Society that we should produce what sells in the market. And with low demand for silk products due to high market prices of the yarn, I realised that cotton weaving was the only hope. Further, the fact that CCW would be giving us production orders consistently was also a motivating factor. I am now paid Rs 620 per saree, which is a lot higher than what we used to make earlier. Besides, the company also supplies us the raw material and picks up the finished product from my doorstep”.

Narasimha, who also doubles up as a peer trainer for other weavers, has also managed to partially mechanise the weaving process with the help of funds made available by Chetana Society. “Earlier, we were held to ransom by the agents who would dictate terms to us. We worked hard but hardly got any returns for our effort. All this has changed now, thanks to the motivation, training and financial help extended by Chetana Society and CCW. I am also aware of market trends and the prevailing prices in the market”, says Narasimha.

Chetana Society and CCW’s initiatives have brought about a sea change in the attitude of the weavers, who now earn about Rs 4500 on an average against Rs 2000 they earned earlier. The increased awareness levels and a fair reading of the market trends makes these weavers more optimistic about the future.
CHANGING WITH THE TIMES
Weaving New Dreams
Weavers’ Resistance to Change

If the lack of access to credit is one of the most serious constraints to escaping poverty in the handloom weavers’ community in Nalgonda district, the rigid posture adopted by the weavers to market needs and demands was as much a stumbling block. Steeped as they were in traditional methods of weaving, the weavers were unwilling to see the changes in the market, particularly the fall in demand for silk and the increasing demand for cottons. For them, the high margin that silk fetches was reason enough to stick on to the product irrespective of the low volumes and consequent low returns. The main task before Chetana Society, Oxfam’s NGO partner in the poverty alleviation programme, was to wean the weavers away from silk and start using cotton. Cotton fetched low returns as compared to silk, but the low costs of raw materials and the high volumes it generated placed the community at an advantage.

There was also need for the weavers to shift from age old designs to more innovative ones in tune with the market needs. This again was a problem area since the weavers were always under the command of the master weavers, who besides pushing them into poverty through unsustainable loans, also controlled the weaving designs. The weaver’s job was confined to a robotic exercise, completely depriving them from utilising their innovative skills. To add to this, a lack of exposure to social and market needs left the weavers dependent on the master weavers and in a perpetual state of misery.
43 women and 22 men were taken on the trip for a first-hand experience of the Angara experiment, which is believed to be a true success story on setting up a single window society.

The attitude of the Nalgonda weavers changed dramatically after the visit to Angara and they were willing to switch over from silk to cotton weaving. Realisation dawned on them that with ever increasing silk yarn cost coupled with low market demand, the way out of poverty was in weaving cotton. They were also more receptive to design innovations in their weaving. And with CCW, the Handloom Trading Corporation set up by Chetana Society, keeping them busy with steady and reliable production orders, the smiles were back on the weavers’ faces. The entire exercise of exposing them to various aspects of not only weaving but also marketing and costing gave the weavers a new perspective.

That CCW developed its own brand ‘Karghaa’ and marketed the produce to upmarket retailer giants like Fab India motivated the weavers a lot. The company’s strategy to position itself as a supplier of cotton fabrics for the top-of-the-shelf users paid off with production orders steadily pouring in.

Benefits of Switching

The fallout of the attitudinal change in the weavers was that it had a ripple effect in the community with others too willing to change their approach. Besides, it also helped in confidence building and bringing out the latent leadership qualities in many weavers.

Exposure Does the Trick

Besides injecting funds to get the weavers out of the clutches of the agents, one of the first steps initiated by Chetana Society to bring them out of their slavish existence was to expose them to prevailing market practices and the functioning of other societies. With collectivisation in place through establishment of MACS, the task was made much easier. One particular exposure trip that proved to be an eye-opener for the weavers was the visit to Angara village in West Godavari district. In all,
of the weavers as they were more aware of the changes that were taking place in different spheres.

But the change in attitude did not come about easily nor was it an overnight transformation. Just how difficult the entire exercise was can be gauged from the experience of Lakshman, a 32-year-old weaver from Pochampally area. Once a die-hard promoter of silk, Lakshman, a 10th class dropout would not even lend an ear to project counsellors who tried to educate him on the need to shift from silk to cotton as per the market needs. He took to weaving when he was just 15-year-old and since then had only used silk. He was so rigid in his views that even when he did not get enough orders from the master weaver for production of silk fabric, he could not think of shifting to cotton. Lakshman was willing to be unemployed, which he was for some time, rather than take to cotton weaving. It took two long years of persuasion before he finally saw the rationale behind the move to switch to cotton.

The weaver does not regret his decision to switch to cotton as he is quite busy with the production orders placed by CCW. “I was very adamant about weaving only silk fabric but I have now realised that cotton is the product in demand. Though I took a long time to switch over, I am very happy with the decision as I am now able to not only make both ends meet but also save a little money”, he said.

The transition from silk to cotton, though a difficult task, has certainly made life easier for the weavers, who are now willing to accept change.
CHALLENGES
of an Unorganised Sector

Bringing together a massive but completely unorganised workforce is by no means an easy task. The situation in the garments industry with its pathetic working conditions, particularly for women who form bulk of the workforce, warranted that the workers are organised for collective bargaining and for implementation of just basic workers’ rights such as minimum wages and dignity at the workplace. Establishment of Women Workers’ Social Organisations like Munnade at the grassroot level and the Garment and Textile Workers Union (GATWU) at a higher level through the initiatives launched by Oxfam’s NGO partner, Civil Initiatives for Development and Peace (CIVIDEP), went a long way in finding solutions to the problems faced by these workers.
Involving Brands to Influence Managements

However, for a more effective handling of the situation and to generate a pro-worker’s policy environment, it is essential to establish linkages not only with various government agencies involved in the implementation of labour laws but also with major brand houses that outsource work to the garment units, to ensure fair trade practices. To achieve overall improvement in the working conditions of workers in the garment industry, it is essential to increase awareness levels of the prevailing situation among the trade partners. They, in turn, can influence managements of garment firms to comply with the labour laws of the land.

This establishment of linkages with various government agencies and brands brought about major changes in the attitude of managements, who are now more receptive and recognise the rights of workers and even go beyond by actively participating in welfare activities.
...And its Impact

For example, GATWU with the help of CIVIDEP successfully took up the issue of non-implementation of labour standards in the garment factories in Bangaluru with the brands associated with these manufacturing units. The move paid off with the brands extending support to ensure compliance of labour standards by the managements. A case in point is the appointment of Custodian Committee with high level dignitaries, drawn from both national and international arena, which resulted in ensuring compliance of factory standards like issuing appointment letters, no forced overtime and subsidised or free meals during working hours.

CIVIDEP has also been working with the brands to promote voluntary social audits of workplaces. It is also working on the Trade Union – Civil Society Labour Standards Code. It is also working for a pan-Asian minimum living wage.

Subsequently, there has been a sharp increase in welfare facilities for the garment workers. Harassment of women workers, which was a commonplace occurrence earlier, has drastically dropped. There is more dignity for women at the workplace now and they are no longer subjected to harassment by the senior males.
Moreover, the union and CIVIDEP have been collaborating with government agencies like the Labour Commission, Women’s Commission, other human and women’s rights organisations and in addition, media and other trade unions, which led to increased projection of the plight of garment workers at various fora.

Another area of welfare activity was the establishment of crèche facilities for garment workers. This was made possible with the participation of Samvada, the Karnataka State Council for Child Welfare and Cividep together after their probe revealed the necessity for such a facility. Some of the known brands also made a contribution towards establishment of crèche facilities by providing inputs on standards that need to be followed in child care services.

Another milestone in establishing linkages was the involvement of Metaculture, a group which helps resolve conflicts through dialogue rather than seeking legal action. It deploys a multi-stakeholder strategy, which facilitates parties to arrive at a solution to their issues without resorting to time consuming legal redress. Its impact has been manifold: on the initiation of Munnade, crèches have been set up in two garment factories where garments of these brands are produced and libraries have been established for workers’ children. Another area of success where Metaculture was a facilitator, was the establishment of a garment sector roundtable comprising trade unions like HMS, HMKD, CIVIDEP, Asia Floor Wages Campaign and brands like GAP, H and M and Mother Care.
GARMENT WORKERS
Collective Leadership Inspires Confidence
Workers from any sphere of production need to be organised in order to survive and to ensure their rights are not trampled over. The garment industry in Bengaluru, which employs five lakh workers, 80 percent of them women, is one such classic example of management exploitation and workplace harassment, particularly of women workers. These workers are extremely vulnerable and have to deal with pathetic working conditions, threat of job losses and loss of dignity.

The situation turns even more poignant when one takes into account the important role these workers play in sustaining livelihoods of people such as push-cart vendors and street sellers in the lower end of the economic strata. If the trickle-down effect of income from sectors such as Information Technology or the pharmaceutical industry flows towards high-end spending at theatres and malls, the earnings of these garment workers and their compatriots from other industrial sectors sustain small street corner businesses such as vegetable vendors and corner shops. These women also ensure that a part of their income goes towards education of children and the health of the family.

The fact that even in this age these workers continue to remain unorganised, are threatened by factory closures and dismissals, with no rights to minimum wages or other benefits such as a provident fund and employment insurance, speaks volumes of the working conditions in the garment factories of Bengaluru. Women garment workers are the worst hit, facing all vulnerabilities that women as a gender and workers as a class, need to deal with. They suffer most from the dual burden of working long hours and caring for their families.

Besides abysmally low wages, the industry is characterised by employment insecurity, which is reflected in the high employment turnover—almost 100 percent—mainly due to inhuman working conditions and workplace harassment. Most of these women are first generation industrial workers and consequently are not even aware whom to approach, when faced with such problems. Occupational hazards, such as contracting tuberculosis, are also quite high.

To add to their miseries, the women of Bengaluru were reluctant to organise themselves, unlike the men. That the idea of forming a union was anathema to them is evident from the fact that only about 4500 workers, from a workforce of five lakh, are actually members of any trade union. This was mainly because of the aggressive approach of the trade unions, which often resulted in loss of jobs earlier.

The labour-intensive garment sector with its export potential is a major foreign exchange earner and it accounts for 14 percent of the country’s industrial production. The sector also accounts for four percent of the country’s gross domestic product (GDP) and its export business has garnered 17 percent of the earnings. Ironically, however, this otherwise thriving sector employs 35 million workers all over the country, most of them falling under the socially and economically deprived category. For a sector which boasts of such impressive statistics, the condition of workers, both at work and at home, is a rather different and telling tale.
Organisation – Need of the Hour

With such paradoxical situations prevailing in the sector, CIVIDEP, Oxfam’s partner NGO working to improve the lot of garment workers, began by organising them into smaller groups called ‘Munnade’ (literally meaning ‘moving forward’). These groups of 10 to 15 women workers established the Women Worker’s Social Organisations (WWSOs) which served as the pre-union association of garment worker groups.

Prior to setting up the WWSOs, CIVIDEP had carried out a survey among three lakh women workers on problems faced by them at their workplaces and it was stunned by its results—there were simply no complaints! This was clearly an eye-opener for them that women were not just hard-pressed to face problems at the work front as well as at home, but also were in no position to exercise their rights anywhere.

Emerging as a Strong Force

However, times are changing. At least some women have made a new beginning. The WWSOs have grown 3000-plus strong. They are actively involved in resolving issues relating to workers, which do not require legal intervention and can be addressed with community support. Besides, Munnade also runs community libraries for the benefit of workers’ children.

Since they are social organisations, these WWSOs have also been instrumental in changing the mindset of women workers, particularly their approach towards unionisation. Constant counselling has paid off and the workers now realise the importance of organising themselves. This shift has come about after the workers saw how being organised helped in redressing workplace issues such as harassment, deprivation of employees’ rights like provident fund, ESI, minimum wages and overtime payment when they were taken up by GATWU.

Another area of achievement has been the insistence by big brands on the issue of labour standards in garment factories and ensuring social audits are carried out to guard rights and privileges. For the brands, this was risk management to avoid defamation and consequent losses due to penalties. The social audit also works as a publicity campaign on compliance by the units with local labour laws and the standards set by the International Labour Organization and United Nations Standards for Human Rights. Thus, in a way, the big brands have contributed to the alleviation of garment workers under the watchful eyes of civil society bodies and NGOs.

With the encouragement from the trade unions, there is now a perceptible shift towards fair labour practices. These changes, long overdue, are now slowly becoming a reality in the sector.
This document aims to capture the journey of transformation of the people involved in the Cotton Textile Supply Chain project. It highlights the stories of empowered individuals who not only bring about change in their own lives, but also inspire their communities. It is also a call to action with the understanding that given requisite support mechanisms, the livelihoods of innumerable small and marginal producers are viable.