**Article][1]**

ENTREMONS. UPF JOURNAL OF WORLD HISTORY
Universitat Pompeu Fabra | Barcelona
Número 14 (Novembre 2023)
www.entremons.org

# *Colonial Possession and Gendered Labor: An Analysis of Women's Role in the Bombay Cotton Textile Mills in the Late Nineteenth Century*[2]

**Palak Vashist**
Rutgers University, New Jersey
pv193@scarletmail.rutgers.edu

**Received:** 5 May 2023 **Accepted:** 8 May 2023

**Abstract:**

This paper critically examines the conditions of women workers in the textile mills of Bombay during the late nineteenth century. The analysis is conducted through the lens of 'possession' by the colonial state and its policies of labor regulation. The concept of 'possession' is explored at two levels. First, it is argued that women's vulnerability in the colonial narrative served as the foundation for the arbitrary 'protection' policies devised by colonial authorities in the form of factory legislation. Second, it is highlighted that

[1] DOI: 10.31009/entremons.2023.i14.05
[2] This essay has been written in Vashist's fourth-year as a PhD student at the Department of Childhood Studies at Rutgers University (New Jersey). Historian by training, with a Master's Degree in History and an MPhil in Labor History from the University of Delhi. Her doctoral research is based on South Asia and, more specifically, India on child labor in the Textile Mille of Bombay from 1880-1920.

factory legislation established colonial control over women's gendered roles, categorizing them as 'unskilled' labor. The introduction of the Indian Factory Act of 1891 further restricted women's mobility within the factory space and regulated their working patterns, including working hours and days, ultimately leading to a higher unemployment rate among women workers. Furthermore, the Act justified irregular and underpaid wages for women.

This paper highlights that the factory legislation, intended to protect women from their vulnerable position made them more vulnerable resulting in their unemployment. This examination of the gendered nature of the Bombay mills aims to trace the global postcolonial history of wage gaps and gender distinctions at work back to their colonial origins. Overall, this study contributes to our understanding of how colonial policies have had a lasting impact on labor practices and gender relations in postcolonial societies.

**Keywords:**

Factory Legislation, Gender Distinction, Coloniality of Gender, Protection, Possession of Colonial State, Vulnerability, Identity Formation.

**Resumen:**

Este artículo examina las condiciones de las trabajadoras en las fábricas textiles de Bombay durante el siglo XIX. El análisis se lleva a cabo a través de la lente de la 'posesión' por el estado colonial y sus políticas de regulación laboral. El concepto de posesión se explora en dos niveles. En primer lugar, se argumenta que la vulnerabilidad de las mujeres en la narrativa colonial sirvió de base para las políticas arbitrarias de 'protección' ideadas por las autoridades coloniales en forma de legislación industrial. En segundo lugar, se destaca que la legislación industrial estableció el control colonial sobre los roles de género de las mujeres, clasificándolas como mano de obra no cualificada. La introducción de la Ley de fábricas de la India de 1891 restringió aún más la movilidad de las mujeres dentro del espacio de la fábrica y reguló sus patrones de trabajo, incluidas las horas y los días de trabajo, lo que en última instancia condujo a una mayor tasa de desempleo entre las trabajadoras. Además, la ley justifica los salarios irregulares y mal pagados de las mujeres.

El artículo destaca que la legislación de fábrica, cuya finalidad era proteger a las mujeres por su posición vulnerable, las hizo aún más vulnerables, lo que resultó en su desempleo. Este examen de la naturaleza de género de los molinos de Bombay tiene como objetivo rastrear la historia poscolonial global de las brechas salariales y las distinciones de género en el trabajo de nuevo a sus orígenes coloniales. En general, este estudio contribuye a nuestra comprensión de cómo las políticas coloniales han tenido un impacto duradero en las prácticas laborales y en las relaciones de género de las sociedades poscoloniales.

**Palabras claves:**

Legislación industrial, Distinción de género, Colonización del Género, Protección, Posesión del estado colonial, Vulnerabilidad, Formación de la Identidad.

## Introduction

The role of women in India's industrial evolution, particularly within Bombay's late 19th-century textile mills, remains a complex and often overlooked aspect of history. Despite their substantial contributions, women's labor has frequently been overshadowed by narratives of male dominance and colonial patriarchal viewpoints[3]. This paper aims to shed light on these women's intricate experiences, focusing on Bombay's burgeoning textile mills against the backdrop of India's Factory Acts of 1881 and 1891. The study will delve into the nuances of women's labor, examining how the colonial regime exerted control over their identities, bodies, and roles within the industry.

[3] Presently, there exists a substantial body of literature pertaining to the Indian working class. In the early stages, much of this research was centered on broader aspects such as industrial growth, specific developments within industries, labor organization, various forms of protest, and the emergence of trade unions. However, despite this extensive exploration, the narrative of women employed in the textile mills of Bombay has not received significant attention within the labor historiography of South Asia. A notable exception to this trend is Radha Kumar's work on Bombay, which has explored this specific facet.

The textile mills in Bombay serve as a pivotal lens through which we can understand the Indian industrial economy. Beginning in the 1850s, the cotton industry in western India saw the emergence of cotton mills in Bombay, Broach, and Ahmedabad[4]. By 1870, Bombay alone boasted ten cotton mills, with their numbers steadily increasing in the following decades. The 1890s witnessed the establishment of seventy new mills, employing over 50,000 workers. The number of workers doubled by the 1920s, with many migrants from Ratnagiri, Konkan, and Satara regions working in the mills[5]. The majority of the workforce was male, with only a small percentage of children employed, a number that dwindled over time[6]. During its formative stages, a labor shortage necessitated the recruitment of migrant workers predominantly from the Ratnagiri district[7]. Consequently, the initial labor supply dynamics contributed to a notable underrepresentation of women within the textile industry workforce in Bombay. The scarcity of female labor and the general labor shortage collectively limited the participation of women in this burgeoning industry.

Scholarly investigations reveal that in 1884, out of Bombay's total workforce of 39,716 individuals, a mere 8,816 were women[8], constituting approximately one-quarter of the overall workforce. Scholars such as Radha Kumar and Morris D Morris have explored the patterns of women's employment in these mills. By 1895, women comprised approximately 25% of the labor force in Bombay's cotton textile mills, a percentage that remained constant until the outbreak of World War I. In 1919, a 25% increase in the number of women employed was

[4] D. Morris Morris, *The Emergence of an Industrial Labor Force in India: A Study of the Bombay Cotton Mills, 1854–1947* (First ed.) (University of California Press, 1965), 74.
[5] Raj Chandavarkar, *The Origins of Industrial Capitalism in India: Business Strategies and the Working Classes in Bombay, 1900–1940* (Cambridge South Asian Studies, 2003), 51; Morris D. Morris, *The Emergence of an Industrial Labor Force in India: A Study of the Bombay Cotton Mills, 1854–1947* (First ed.) (University of California Press, 1965), 75.
[6] S. D. Mehta, *The Cotton Mills of India, 1854 to 1954* (Textile Association India, 1954); Morris D. Morris, *The Emergence of an Industrial Labor Force in India: A Study of the Bombay Cotton Mills, 1854–1947* (University of California Press, 1965), 217-220.
[7] Mira Savara, *Changing Trends in Women's Employment: a Case Study of the Textile Industry in Bombay*, 1st ed. (Bombay: Himalaya Pub. House, 1986), 23. Also see, Radha Kumar, "Family and factory: women in the Bombay cotton textile industry, 1919-1939," The Indian Economic and Social History Review 20, no.1 ( CA: Sage Publications,1938), She argues that, the majority of the labor force consisted of individuals who had migrated from nearby districts in Maharashtra. They were brought into the workforce by labor contractors, often referred to as jobbers or mukaddams, who utilized familial, caste, and regional connections for recruitment. Up until the 1930s, these jobbers held significant control over the labor force and the structure of work. However, from the 1930s onwards, sporadic efforts were made to limit their authority.
[8] Savara, *Changing Trends*, 22.

recorded, reaching 60% by 1926[9]. However, despite these increases, women remained disproportionately underrepresented and often confined to 'unskilled' positions, revealing a more profound colonial politics of gender distinction. Women were employed in diverse labor capacities, including winders, reelers, cotton sweepers, throstle girls, and waste pickers within the textile mills. However, contrary to the colonial state's perception of young women and girls in the textile industry as mere assistants to men in subsidiary processes, women played integral roles vital for the seamless functioning of the industry. Despite being assigned to 'unskilled' positions, the cessation of women's work could significantly disrupt the overall operations of the mills, which this study aims to trace.

The colonial influence extended beyond labor roles, shaping legislative actions that further defined the contours of women's existence within these mills. This study will scrutinize the framework of 'possession' employed by the colonial state, a concept that differs from the more commonly used terms such as "rescue," "reform," or "colonial paternalism." 'Possession' implies a more profound form of control, emphasizing complete ownership and domination over women's labor, bodies, and identities.

I will explore possession at two distinct levels, beginning with the portrayal of women as inherently 'vulnerable,' incapable, and reliant in colonial records. Noteworthy is the amalgamation of children and women under a single regulatory category in the implementation of the Factory Act[10], justified by their perceived economic and political inferiority in comparison to adult men. This classification of vulnerability facilitated the colonial arbitrary idea of 'protection' and control over women's spatial mobility within the factory, justifying it by blaming the cultural and social norms upheld by women and their families. Colonial records also asserted that women and children lacked the agency[11] to exert political influence over legislative processes.

[9] See Radha Kumar, "Women in the Bombay Cotton Textile Industry, 1919–1940," in *Dignity and Daily Bread*, ed. Swasti Mitter & Sheila Rowbotham (United States: Routledge, 1994), 55.
[10] In the language of the Indian Factory Act 1881,1891,1911, women and children are always put under the same category of vulnerability.
[11] In this context, "agency" denotes the capacity of an individual or a group to take action, make decisions, and exert influence in particular circumstances. During the period under consideration, workers typically had limited influence over legislation, but this constraint became more apparent as labor movements evolved. The reference to gender-differentiated agency implies potential differences in the abilities of male and female workers to

To complicate the colonial notion of 'protection' itself, specifically, the study aims to investigate the workings of such protection in critical moments of tension. These critical junctures include factory accidents, the regulation of working hours, and the overall regulatory framework concerning women workers. Additionally, the study shines a spotlight on the enforcement of the Indian Factory Act of 1891, initially intended to safeguard women by limiting their working hours and employment days. Paradoxically, this legislation ended up contributing to women's unemployment within the factories.

Secondly, the study will delve into the concept of economic differentiation, investigating how colonial state policies resulted in the material and economic possession of women. I will substantiate this argument by analyzing the sexual division of labor within the factory and highlighting instances of women engaging in under-compensated labor and the reduction of bonuses allocated to both women and children.

Through an analysis of the historical background concerning gender divisions within these mills, the research seeks to shed light on the enduring effects that shape present-day gender dynamics and contribute to wage disparities in postcolonial India. Expanding on the research conducted by historian Arun Kumar, recently presented in The Wire[12], this paper aims to delve further into the topic, primarily focusing on the wage disparity and gender-based divisions of labor experienced by women in the textile mills of Bombay.

This study utilizes archival sources to examine specific aspects of the formation of the Indian Factory Acts of 1881 and 1891 and their implementation to regulate the women's workforce in the textile mills of Bombay. I have primarily relied on archival records from the Maharashtra State Archives in Mumbai, the National Archives of India in New Delhi, and the British Library in London to analyze these historical events. These archives provide essential sources such as official records, correspondences related to the Factory Act and its implementation, legislative papers, native newspaper reports, and inspection reports generated by the colonial state during

participate in or reap the rewards of early forms of worker resistance. It's worth noting that women encountered compounded challenges as they were marginalized both as laborers and within a patriarchal societal framework. For further information on female agency and a strike in 1894, see the native newspaper reports of 1881, British Library, London.

[12] Arun Kumar, "The Invisible Women of Colonial India's Textile Industry," *THE WIRE*, https://thewire.in/history/the-invisible-women-of-colonial-indias-textile-industry.

the late nineteenth century. These sources enable the reconstruction of specific historical and social contexts in which women were regulated within the framework of factory laws. Additionally, I have explored secondary sources that offer new perspectives on the historical discourse surrounding women in the industry. Furthermore, newspaper articles, books, and other materials have been valuable sources in shaping the foundation of this research.

Feminist historians have long highlighted the challenges of uncovering women's experiences in archival sources. One critical concern historians raise is the absence of women's voices, which prevents a comprehensive understanding of their historical agency[13] and contributions to social and cultural developments[14]. Gyanendra Pandey offers a similar perspective, emphasizing the significance of exploring aspects not documented in archives. He draws attention to the overlooked aspects of everyday life, mundane practices, unspoken gestures, unremarkable events, and intangible elements often excluded from official records[15]. According to Pandey, much of human history remains unarchived due to the repetitive and commonplace nature of these events. In other words, the archive does not encompass all facets of the past.

As a historian in training, I recognize and accept the existence of gaps in the official historical discourse. I also acknowledge that the available records regarding laboring women in Bombay are fragmented and inconsistent. It is crucial to understand that silence in the archives should not be interpreted as a complete absence but rather as an opportunity to delve deeper and uncover suppressed narratives[16]. Consequently, this work required critical engagement with the archives, which involved navigating the archival gaps and silences.

For enhanced scholarly accessibility, this work has been organized into distinct sections. The introductory segment provides a conceptual overview of the literature on women in the industry

[13] Also see, Eleonora Guarnieri and Helmut Rainer, "Colonialism and Female Empowerment: A Two-Sided Legacy," *Journal of Development Economics* 151 (2021): 102666. The research delves into historical records and studies to provide a nuanced analysis of how colonialism influenced the status and agency of women.
[14] See Janaki Nair, "Reconstructing and Reinterpreting the History of Women in India," *Journal of Women's History* 3, no. 1 (1991), 131–36.Her work focuses on the challenges and complexities involved in studying women's history, particularly in a context where women's experiences and contributions have often been marginalized or overlooked.
[15] Gyanendra Pandey, "Un-Archived Histories: The 'Mad' and the 'Trifling," *Economic and Political Weekly* 47, no. 1 (2012): 40.
[16] Pandey, "Un-Archived Histories,"41.

and beyond. It is to provide the context for the Bombay textile mills. Following this, I explore the paradox of colonial 'protection' through two case studies: The murder of the women factory worker and the factory accident in which women were blamed for the incident. The part also explores how colonial rule categorized women and children as inherently 'vulnerable' workers. This classification of vulnerability facilitated colonial control over women's spatial mobility within the factory, as they were confined to specific areas. The second part of the essay delves into the gender-based division of labor in the textile mills. It highlights how women were confined to specific gender roles and how their work was deemed 'unskilled' despite their contributions. The objective is to comprehend how colonial rule asserted possession over the daily functioning of women by establishing spatial and economic control. Subsequently, the analysis delves into the adverse impact of gender-based division of labor on women's economic status, resulting in low wages and economic inequality. Finally, the paper evaluates the implementation of the Indian Factory Act of 1891 and its implications for women. The Factory Act made the position of women more vulnerable due to high unemployment and colonial state restrictions, thereby challenging the notion of 'protection' employed by colonial rule.

## Conceptual Landscape

In tracing the intricate history of women's labor in the Indian industrial economy, it is essential to situate this exploration within a broader historiographical framework. Samita Sen[17] have categorized colonial legislation pertaining to women in two distinct phases. The initial phase, leading to World War I, primarily centered on legislation concerning the various dimensions of women's labor in the industries. It is precisely where the present research is anchored. I delve deeper into the working conditions, roles, and the overarching treatment of female laborers in the textile industry of Bombay. A closer examination reveals that while the latter phase of legislation shifted its focus towards women's reproductive roles and a burgeoning male breadwinner ideology, this study aims to shed light on the pre-WWI period. This era was pivotal as it accentuated the nature of women's work and their significant, albeit often understated, position within the burgeoning industrial landscape of colonial India.

[17] Samita Sen, "Gendered Exclusion: Domesticity and Dependence in Bengal," *International Review of Social History* 42, no. S5 (1997): 65–86.

In the shadows of colonial discourse, Bombay's textile mills stand as emblematic testimonies to the interplay of possession, representation, and gender. While the wider discourse of colonialism has been extensively explored, the unique dynamics inherent to these mills demand a closer lens, synthesized through the prism of scholarly insights that have charted related territories.

Possession, a term fraught with layers of meaning, stands juxtaposed against the silent narrative of countless women laborers. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's insights, as introduced in "Can the Subaltern Speak?,"[18] allude to the muted voices of women within broader colonial narratives. It is within such a setting that Bombay's textile mills functioned, echoing Spivak's concerns while further complicating the gendered discourse with economic dynamics and labor hierarchies. Chandra Talpade Mohanty's critique of monolithic portrayals of "Third World women"[19] complements this discussion, highlighting the risks of generalizations in understanding the textile workforce.

Bodies, especially women's, became more than just sites of labor within the mills; they were arenas where more significant battles of colonial possession were waged. Anne McClintock's insights from "Imperial Leather"[20] reveal this intricate dance where colonial ambitions of race, gender, and sexuality entwined. Jacqueline Rose[21] enriches this perspective, unveiling the psychosexual facets that characterized such colonial interactions. While these explorations span varied colonial settings, their resonances within the textile mills become palpable, illustrating the multifaceted challenges female laborers grappled with.

The vestiges of colonialism permeate not just physical spaces but also literary realms. Jenny Sharpe[22], Sara Suleri[23], and Inderpal Grewal[24] artfully navigate the symbiotic relationship between literature and lived realities. Their work resonates with the undercurrents in Bombay,

[18] Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *Can the Subaltern Speak?: revised edition*, from the "History" chapter of *Critique of Postcolonial Reason* (Columbia University Press, 2010), 21.
[19] Mohanty CT, *Feminism Without Borders: Decolonizing Theory, Practicing Solidarity* (Duke University Press, 2003).
[20] McClintock, A. *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest* (Routledge, 1995).
[21] Rose J, *Sexuality in the Field of Vision* (New ed., Verso, 2005).
[22] Sharpe J, *Allegories of Empire: the Figure of Woman in the Colonial Text* (University of Minnesota Press, 1993).
[23] Suleri Goodyear S, *The Rhetoric of English India* (University of Chicago Press, 2013).
[24] Grewal I, *Home and Harem: Nation, Gender, Empire, and the Cultures of Travel* (Duke University Press, 1996).

where tales of the mills and their laborers might find literary echoes, bridging fiction with the tangible.

As we delve deeper, the paternalistic overtones of colonial discourse surface. Antoinette Burton[25] and Mrinalini Sinha[26] provide an intricate tapestry of power dynamics, colonial control, and inherent stereotypes. Such paternalism, though broad in its scope, mirrors the nuances of Bombay's textile industry, where gendered expectations often dictated labor roles and societal interactions.

Legislative impositions, especially those emphasizing gender and morality, form the backbone of this inquiry. Philippa Levine's[27] focus on the colonial impulse to dictate gender and sexuality norms and Lucy Carroll's exposition on reforms aimed at 'civilizing' native customs shine a light on the socio-legal terrain of Bombay's mills. These spaces, while being hubs of economic contribution, were simultaneously draped in moralistic and protective overtones. Geraldine Forbes's holistic overview in "Women in Modern India"[28] elegantly wraps up our review, offering a panoramic view of the challenges women face. The overarching theme of empowerment, juxtaposed with the shadows of colonial "possession," remains pertinent to this exploration of Bombay's textile mills.

In essence, the literature, much like a loom, weaves together various threads, creating a cohesive tapestry that contextualizes the historical intricacies of Bombay's textile mills and underscores the broader implications of colonialism and gender dynamics. This synthesis is crucial for unraveling the stories, struggles, and legacies that define Bombay's textile epoch.

Against this scholarly backdrop, my work focuses on the specific context of women laborers in Bombay's textile mills. Resonating with the insights from Spivak, Mohanty, and McClintock, the plight of these women, labeled as 'unskilled' and thus underpaid, emerges as

[25] Burton AM, *Burdens of History: British Feminists, Indian Women, and Imperial Culture, 1865-1915* (University of North Carolina, 1994).
[26] Gupta SM, "Colonial Masculinity: The "Manly Englishman" and the "Effeminate" Bengali in the Late Nineteenth Century," *Journal of World History* 8, no. 2 (1997): 344-346.
[27] Philippa Levine Discusses Why Historians Ignore Women in Studies on Decolonization. https://www.loc.gov/item/2021688280/#:~:text=Philippa%20Levine%2C%20a%20professor%20at,of%20the%20colonial%20authority%20structure.
[28] Forbes, G. *Women in Modern India*. The New Cambridge History of India. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996). DOI:10.1017/CHOL9780521268127

a poignant exemplar of the broader patterns of erasure and subjugation detailed by these scholars. Their socio-economic realities, juxtaposed with the protective yet restrictive gaze of colonial paternalism, reveal a textured landscape of ideological and material possession. My contribution, hence, is an intricate tapestry that intertwines the broader theoretical discussions with the tangible, palpable realities of women in Bombay's textile milieu, crystallizing the abstract concepts of possession and subjugation in the tangible lived experiences of these workers.

## The Paradox of Colonial Protection

> In Bombay, it is customary for female workers in mills to work separately from their male counterparts, often in different buildings. This practice is likely due to social conventions and the desire of men to keep their wives away from unfamiliar men in the workplace. For instance, a man may work outdoors while his wife works in a mill, and he may feel more comfortable knowing that his wife is working among other women. Additionally, female mill workers in Bombay whom the Factory Commission interviewed indicated that their husbands preferred this separation of sexes. Overall, female workers in Bombay generally prefer to work among their peers, and this gender-based segregation reflects prevailing cultural norms and preferences.[29]

The above statement is from an official report by factory inspector H.W. J Bagnell in 1889[30]. The inspector attributes the sexual division of labor in the mills to the cultural and social norms of the labor force. This statement places the responsibility for gendered labor roles on the laborers themselves and portrays women as vulnerable, not only to colonial policies but also within their marital relationships. On the other hand, historians like Radha Kumar challenge this narrative. Kumar's research highlights how the early organization of industrial work in the Bombay textile industry revolved around certain aspects of women's domestic responsibilities. This included women being permitted to arrive at work later than men and leave earlier to tend

[29] H.W.J. Bagnell to Acting Chief Secretary, "Report on the Working of the Indian Factories Act," 8th August 1889, Bombay Collector's Office, vol. 68, General Department, Maharashtra State Archives.
[30] Bagnell, "Report on the Working of the Indian Factories Act," 1889.

to family duties, such as cooking and caring for their infants, often bringing their babies with them to the mills.[31]

Nevertheless, the patriarchal assumptions of the colonial state that women were vulnerable and lacked agency served as a basis to create arbitrary policies of 'protection' that was purportedly offered to the native population by the colonial authorities. As such, the state positioned itself as the custodian of women's welfare and, in return, created a form of possession that extended to their bodies and labor. However, a closer examination of a specific incident involving a woman named Nusseebun reveals the stark realities that women faced within this framework.

Nusseebun, a 14 or 15-year-old married woman, originally from Malegaon, had a troubled marriage with her husband in Fategarh. She returned to her father's house, a weaver, and there she met Khodabux Chadun, also a weaver, who proposed to marry her. However, her father objected, citing her existing marriage. Despite her father's objection, Nusseebun left with Khodabux Chadun and underwent a mock marriage ceremony performed by another weaver (who illegally performed the functions of the priest). Two years later, Nusseebun and Khodabux Chadun moved to Bombay but had an unhappy marriage. She returned to her father once again, complaining of mistreatment and lack of basic needs like food and clothing. This time, she obtained a release from her husband and married Elahi Alladin, another weaver, with whom she lived for 13 months. Despite Khodabux Chadun's attempts to reconcile, Nusseebun chose to stay with Elahi Alladin. On the day of her death, Nusseebun left her house to go to work at the Nursery Spinning and Weaving Mill in Colaba. Near the Crawford market, Khodabux Chadun attacked her, knocking her down and stabbing her repeatedly with a clasp knife. Native policemen arrived at the scene, with one arresting Khodabux Chadun and the other rushing Nusseebun to Gokuldas Tejpal Hospital, where she succumbed to her injuries at

[31] With increasing awareness of health, maternity, and the requirements of working-class households, the 1920s and 1930s witnessed official endeavors to establish a better equilibrium between family life and industrial employment. These initiatives involved the imposition of limitations on women's working hours and the introduction of laws addressing maternity benefits and childcare provisions. Concurrently, there was a gradual reduction in the participation of women in the industry as a whole, as highlighted in Radha Kumar's work. Kumar, R. "Family and factory: women in the Bombay cotton textile industry, 1919-1939," *The Indian Economic and Social History Review* 20, no.1 (CA: Sage Publications, 1938).

7:30 a.m. due to excessive hemorrhaging. Medical examination revealed numerous wounds, including punctured lungs and liver, indicating the brutal nature of the attack[32].

Meade King, the factory inspector, wrote a letter to D. Fitzpatrick, C.S., highlighting this alarming incident that took place at 4:00 a.m. due to the factory's peculiar working hours. He notes, "The woman was running at the early hour of 4:00 a.m. during the dark from Grant Road to Colaba, a distance of nearly 3 miles, to catch the time of the mill where she was employed, which opens for working almost at the dawn of the day; and the perpetrator of that diabolical deed could not have found a better opportunity than the darkness which covers the face of Bombay before sunrise when many poor operatives are obliged to leave their beds and run to catch the time of the mills which are daily opened at that early hour. At such an hour, under the covering of darkness, their lives are beset with dangers such as the woman in question has met with."[33] Nusseebun, like many other impoverished factory workers, was forced to navigate the dangerous pre-dawn darkness to reach her workplace on time. The mills opened at the break of day, and this relentless schedule left little room for the safety and well-being of these laborers.

King's letter underscores the inherent vulnerability of women like Nusseebun, who had to travel alone or with female companions in the dimly lit streets during the colonial era. Despite colonial claims of protection, the authorities failed to address the fundamental safety concerns faced by these women. Instead, with its arbitrary working hours and disregard for the realities of their lives, the colonial system inadvertently exposed these women to greater risks. The story also underscores the intersection of patriarchal structures within colonial societies and the colonial agenda. Women like Nusseebun, seeking autonomy and agency in their personal lives, were often subjected to violence and exploitation within a colonial system that failed to adequately address their needs.

Indeed, the Bombay mills offer a microcosm of these broader tendencies of subjective 'protection.' One example is the justification of colonial protection for women through spatial restriction within the factory space. The constraint was applied to women's mobility within the

[32] W.O. Meade-King to Government of Bombay, "Report on the Working of the Indian Factories Act," 24th June 1882, Vol. 3, M1 83, General Department, Maharashtra State Archives.
[33] King , "Report on the Working of the Indian Factories Act," 1882.

factory as colonial officials enforced policies that prevented women from working in specific areas of the factory and near specific types of machinery, such as the 'openers'[34]. While these regulations were ostensibly intended to protect women and girls from harm, a closer examination of colonial records reveals a more complex and nuanced picture[35].

For instance, an accident was recorded by Mr. W.T. Morison (Commissioner) at a cotton press in Dondaicha on February 21, 1909[36], in which four women were burnt to death. In this accident, a fire broke out caused by friction. Women were working near the opener, and the nearest exit door was closed. Therefore, there was no way for the women to run out; all four women died on the spot[37], and some more got injured. But, the colonial records attributed the blame on women's clothing, in this case, a 'saree.' Through this, the colonial state was able to avoid taking responsibility for the unsafe working conditions and the lack of adequate protective measures.

The accident was ascribed to various factors largely overlooked during the investigation. These factors encompassed heightened humidity levels within the cotton room, the absence of fire escape protocols within the factory, the closely spaced machinery, and the prohibition preventing women from opening windows due to the delicate nature of cotton fibers. In fact, as mentioned in the pamphlet "Jam E Jamshed,"[38] even fresh air was a luxury that eluded the workers. According to the Factory Act, windows were installed in all rooms, but if any worker attempted to open a window for some fresh air, the supervisor would reprimand them. This was because the influx of wind through the windows could damage the cotton fibers, leading to their spoilage. Consequently, not only were the windows kept closed, but during cold weather, the rooms were artificially heated using steam conveyed through large pipes akin to

[34] Its primary function is to open and separate various types of fibers, such as cotton, polyester, wool, and blends, in preparation for further processing.
[35] Suggestions and Recommendations by Factory Labour Commission, 11th July 1907, vol. 54, compilation no. 404, pt 1, M 241, General Department, Maharashtra State Archives.
[36] Letter from W.T.Morison (Collector of Bombay) to the Secretary to Government, 12th May 1910, vol. 64, Factory Department, Maharashtra State Archives.
[37] Morison, letter,1910.
[38] 'Jam-e-Jamshed, "Unfortunate Mill-Hands," 17th August 1905', 'Letter from the collector of the land revenue, Custom and opium Bombay, to the Secretary to Government, General Department, no.F.I-b41, dated 25th November 1905, General Department, Maharashtra state Archive, Volume 36, Compilation No.35, M87.

water pipes. Despite these compelling factors, the blame for the accident was unjustly assigned to the women who wore their traditional clothing to the factories.

The incident of such factory accidents highlights how colonial officials blamed women workers for their victimization in the workplace rather than recognizing the structural conditions that made such accidents possible. This further reinforced the idea of women's vulnerability and dependence, contributing to their marginalization in the workplace and their subordination to patriarchal power structures[39]. Such incidents demonstrate how gendered power relations operated in the colonial cotton mills of Bombay, where women were subjected to multiple forms of exploitation.

An instance of exploitation pertained to the strict sexual division of labor within the factory premises. The colonial administration segregated women's roles into distinct categories, restricting their access to machinery. Interestingly, they asserted that women's work lacked skill, justifying lower wages. This intriguing phenomenon will be more comprehensively analyzed in the subsequent section.

**Gendered Division of Labor**

The gender division of roles in the factory further emphasizes the vulnerability of women. Feminist and labor historians like Radha Kumar[40] and Samita Sen have focused their attention on the gender division of labor in Bombay textiles and Bengal Jute industry, which is significant in highlighting women's positionality in India's economic history. Notably, the traditional gender division of labor persisted in the cotton industry of Bombay. Before the establishment of the factories, women were already engaged in textile work for domestic production. In the textile mills, women weavers were uncommon. The initial wave of factories in Bombay mainly focused on spinning, which became a skilled labor area restricted to men.

[39] Also see, Samita Sen, "Gendered Exclusion: Domesticity and Dependence in Bengal," *International Review of Social History* 42, no. S5 (1997): 65–86.Sen examines various factors contributing to this gendered exclusion, including cultural expectations, patriarchal power structures, and the role of colonialism in shaping gender relations in the context of Bengal.

[40] See Radha Kumar, "Women in the Bombay Cotton Textile Industry, 1919–1940," in *Dignity and Daily Bread*, ed. Swasti Mitter & Sheila Rowbotham (United States: Routledge, 1994). Samita Sen, *Women and Labour in Late Colonial India : the Bengal Jute Industry* .Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999.

According to Radha Kumar, more than 90% of women were employed as winders, and the reeling departments mostly comprised women workers.[41]

Historians have always emphasized the industry's gendered nature and discrimination by taking examples of low wages, lack of re-employment opportunities, and millowners' concern for the added maternity costs.[42] A significant portion of the literature focusing on industries that were major employers of women, such as textiles and jute, appears to have categorized female workers as a distinct group from the outset. The idea is that women occupied an ambivalent position within the labor market for the cotton mills. Scholars argued that women wages were low because their proportion was always limited to around a quarter of the total working population, and their commitments were lighter than those of the male operatives employed at the machines[43]. This trend can be traced from scholars like Janet Harvey Kelman[44], A. R. Burnett-Hurst[45], and S. M. Rutnagar[46] in the 1920s to later researchers like S. D. Mehta, Kanji Dwarkadas, and M. D. Morris, all of whom have highlighted the sexual division of labor in Bombay's textile industry. As Kelman argues, "besides the bodies of women employed on reeling, binding, waste picking, and in few cases on ring spinning. Women were found employed in various other jobs in the industry, just never on machinery."[47] Similarly, scholars like Ralph C James have argued about the historical discrimination against women by the Bombay Millowner Association. He focuses on women's lack of re-employment opportunities in the textile industry. He also analyses the mill owners' defense against women's employment as they argued about the added costs of the maternity benefits and the legal restriction confining women first to shift workers[48].

The colonial archives further highlights the sexual division of labor in the cotton industry. For instance, H.W.J. Bagnell, who served as the inspector of factories of Bombay in 1889, provides

[41] Kumar, "Women in the Bombay Cotton Textile Industry, 1919–1940," 1994, 55.
[42] Kumar, R. "Women in the Bombay Cotton Textile Industry, 1919–1940,"1994. The question of maternity benefit Act came in 1929 is examined by Kumar, as is the division of families into earners and dependants.
[43] S.B. Upadhyay, *Existence, Identity and Mobilization: The Cotton Millworkers of Bombay 1890–1919* (Manohar, Delhi, 2004), 108.
[44] Janet Harvey Kelman, *Labour in India* (London, George Allen and Unwin Ltd, 1923).
[45] A.R. Burnett-Hurst, *Labour and Housing in Bombay* (London, P.S. King and Son, Ltd, 1925).
[46] S.M. Rutnagar, *Bombay Industries – The Cotton Mills* (Bombay, The Indian Textile Journal Ltd, 1927).
[47] Janet Harvey Kelman, *Labour in India*, London, George Allen and Unwin Ltd,1923.
[48] A similar note has been made by Samita Sen in case of Bengal women jute workers . See Sen, *Women and Labour in Late Colonial India: the Bengal Jute Industry*.

a detailed account of the different roles women played in the industry, which can be divided into five broad categories: reelers, winders, cotton pickers, sweepers, and throstle girls. His description of women's labor is worth producing in its entirety to understand the sexual division of labor in the textile mills.

Bagnell's description of the 'reelers' reveals that this role was exclusively performed by women, with two women assigned to each reel. One woman would turn the reel by a handle, while the other would tie together the cotton as it broke in one so it could be the same length in each hank of yarn. Bagnell further notes that each mill employed approximately 200 to 300 hands, depending on size[49].

Similarly, the 'winders' were all female, with four to six women employed in each frame to wind the yarn from the main bobbins onto the rays, which were then placed in a frame from which the cotton was wound onto a roller and taken into the warping department to be warped. After warping, cotton was used in the weaving department for the looms. These women were part of a team that drove winding frames and were only found in mills where weaving and spinning were done. Usually, thirty to sixty winders were employed in each weaving mill[50].

Bagnell's report also notes that 'cotton pickers' were mostly women, with twenty to thirty employed in each mill. Their labor was preferred over that of males, as employing women as cotton pickers was a little cheaper. The work was considered light and unskilled, with women picking up the cotton dropping or waste throughout the mill, which was made in the different projects of manufacture by the various machines. These gatherers carried this waste to mixing rooms where the various kinds of cotton were mixed before they were sent to the bloom room, where the initial process of the middle work began[51].

Furthermore, Bagnell describes the women employed as 'sweepers' and 'cleaners,' with twenty to thirty women employed in each mill to sweep up the cotton flower, which flies about the card rooms. If not swept away forty to fifty times a day, it would stick in the slabbing, intermediate, and rowing frames and cause them to clog. The fluff would also drop on the

[49] H.W.J. Bagnell to Acting Chief Secretary, "Report on the Working of the Indian Factories Act," 8th August 1889, Bombay Collector's Office, vol. 68, General Department, Maharashtra State Archives.
[50] Bagnell, Report on the Working of the Indian Factories Act,1889.
[51] Bagnell, Report on the Working of the Indian Factories Act,1889.

existing cotton before it was spun and could cause unevenness and numerous breakages in the following processes. This work was considered unskilled, but it was required to be done daily and at every hour without interruption[52].

The last category of women and girl workers were called 'bobbin girls' and 'throstle girls.' These girls were aged twelve to sixteen and were employed on the throstle to piece the cotton as it broke. They were also used as bobbins carriers who would take off the free bobbins from the intermediate and roving frames and supply empty bobbins to be filled up again by the action of these frames. They worked from light to dark daily for the same hours as the mills were operating. Their numbers varied widely in each mill and were never numerous compared to the boys employed for similar work[53].

With this sexual division of labor, colonial rule assigned supplementary tasks to women in the mills[54]. At the heart of such discrimination lies the colonial paternalistic idea of placing women into the vulnerable category and making their role in the factory seem insignificant[55]. Historians like Emma Alexander argue how women and children were put together in a colonial context in one category of vulnerability in labor history[56]. Similarly, Aditya Sarkar highlights the politics of inclusion by colonial rule within the ambit of protective labor legislation[57]. Scholars like Stanley Engerman concur with this idea; although written in the context of Britain, he argues that laws were created to regulate the labor of women and children, who

[52] Bagnell, Report on the Working of the Indian Factories Act,1889.
[53] Bagnell, Report on the Working of the Indian Factories Act,1889.
[54] Also see, Eleonora Matteazzi and Stefani Scherer, "Gender Wage Gap and the Involvement of Partners in Household Work," *Work, Employment and Society* 35, no. 3 (2021): 490–508. The work highlights an interesting perspective and examines the relationship between gender disparities in wages and the division of household labor within couples. It is a significant study to understand the responsibility of domestic work on only on women and its impact on her employment.
[55] Also see, Shireen Moosvi, "Women, Poverty and Work in Colonial Rural India: The Dufferin Inquiry, 1887–88," *Studies in People's History* 7, no. 2 (2020): 171–79. The work examines the gendered dimensions of poverty and labor, shedding light on how societal and economic factors influenced women's opportunities for employment, their wages, and their overall economic well-being.
[56] Emma Alexander, "The 'Special Classes' of Labor: Women and Children Doubly Marginalized," in *Labour Matters: Towards Global Histories*, edited by Prabhu Mohapatra and Marcel V D Linden (Delhi: Tulika Books, 2009), 131-151.
[57] Aditya Sarkar, *Trouble at the Mill: Factory Law and the Emergence of Labour Question in Late Nineteenth-Century Bombay* (Oxford University Press, 2017), 18.

were viewed as economically and politically disadvantaged compared to adult men[58]. The colonial rule claimed that the rationale behind implementing these standards was to safeguard individuals who lacked the means to compete in the market economy or the political power to influence legislation.

The gendered division of labor provides a much-complicated history of how women were viewed in the colonial world and how it directly reflects power conflict between the employer and the employee. Understanding women's identity as vulnerable is complicated by the historical discrimination against them in urban centers like the Bombay textile industry. An example is the Indian Factory Act, which put women and children in the same category of vulnerability, requiring working hours and working day protection from colonial rule. The underlying cause of women's susceptibility stems from the gender-based differentiation of labor[59]. This gender division of labor and a popular understanding among the colonial rule about women's work being unskilled had a lasting impact on the wages of women workers, something that I explore in the following section.

**Unveiling Historical Wage Disparities: A Closer Look**

In the cotton mills of Bombay, the wages were typically paid based on piecework, and each mill had a varying scale of prices depending on the quality of the work. The division of labor in the textile mills was such that the work was mainly performed by adult men, except for winding and reeling, typically done by women, and piecing and doffing, which were done by half-time children[60]. As the work was paid on a piecework basis and the working hours were limited to daylight hours before the introduction of electric lighting in the factories, the average

[58] Stanley L. Engerman, "The History and Political Economy of International Labor Standards," in *International Labor Standards*, ed. Kaushik Basu, Henrik Horn, Lisa Román and Judith Shapiro (Oxford, UK: Blackwell Publishing Ltd, 2003), 22.
[59] Also see, OECD, "Starting Close, Growing Apart: Why the Gender Gap in Labour Income Widens over the Working Life," in *OECD Employment Outlook 2018*, 211–61. Paris: OECD Publishing, 2018. The work highlights how the working lives of women differ from men and how these differences impact their labor income throughout their life cycle.
[60] Reply to Secretary to the Government of India concerning letter 1576, 11th December 1896, vol. 37, Home Department, Judicial Branch, Maharashtra State Archives.

worker earned more during the summer than in winter. Within this wage structure, women made even less money.

The intricacies of these disparities are best unraveled when contextualized with works from scholars like Alice Clark. In her seminal work, "Working Life of Women in the Seventeenth Century"[61], she argues that despite women's significant contributions to various economic activities, including agriculture, manufacturing, and trade, their labor was undervalued and often went unpaid. Using Clark's insights as a lens, it's evident that such practices in Bombay were not anomalous but rooted in deeper historical and socio-economic structures that continually marginalized women's labor.

In a similar vein, Anna Lindberg's exploration of female labor in the cashew industry of Kerala, as delineated in her study "Class, Caste, and Gender among Cashew Workers in the South Indian State of Kerala 1930–2000"[62], offers a juxtaposition to the milieu of the female workforce in Bombay's textile mills. The resonating parallels between the two realms – the textile mills of Bombay and the cashew factories of Kerala – lie fundamentally in the female predominance in labor, intertwined with systemic economic vulnerabilities stemming from socio-political matrices. Notably, wage disparities in both contexts were glaring despite women forming the labor force's backbone. Women, pivotal to both industries, were paradoxically marginalized in terms of wage structures, ostensibly a manifestation of broader patriarchal socio-economic constructs. Furthermore, while state policies in both locales impacted labor dynamics, the persistent chasm between policy and practice perpetuated labor exploitation, irrespective of Kerala's socialist-leaning governance and despite well-intentioned policies. The overarching societal perceptions, categorizing women's labor as "secondary" or "supplementary," invariably forged an economically reductive space for women in both contexts, shaping not just the immediate labor narrative but also fundamentally influencing these women's social and economic trajectories. Hence, integrating these elements provides a comprehensive framework to contextualize the gendered nature of the industry within a wider

[61] Clark A, *The Working Life of Women in the Seventeenth Century* (Taylor & Francis Group, 1968).
[62] Anna Lindberg's exploration of female labor in the cashew industry of Kerala, as delineated in her study "Class, Caste, and Gender among Cashew Workers in the South Indian State of Kerala 1930–2000." *Internation Review of Social History*, Vol. 46, No. 2 (August), 155-184.

socio-economic and political fabric, establishing patterns that transgress regional and industrial boundaries.

Colonial state policies affected women's material and economic ownership in the textile mills of Bombay, making an economic distinction between men and women even more evident[63]. The official records present examples of underpaid women's work and reduced bonuses for women. On May 11, 1898, the Bombay Millowner Association held a meeting where a resolution was passed to discontinue daily payments to mill workers and instead provide bonuses to them. This resolution stated that from June 1, the payment of July wages to mill workers would be discontinued, and bonuses would be paid daily by mill owners who wished to do so. The maximum bonus for male laborers was set at five annas, two for full-time boys, and one for half-time children. This bonus scale was to remain in force until the next meeting. The bonus for women was limited to two annas a month[64].

Furthermore, the timing of wage payments was directly dependent on the needs of the factory owners. For example, casual workers were employed during the famine, and wages were paid accordingly. However, once the demand was met, the two months' wages were withheld, leaving the workers in debt.

In addition, the colonial rule considered that women's conditions at work were far more favorable than men's. For instance, W.L. Harvey sent a telegram to the government of Bombay in which he reported on the employment of women in the region. Based on his conversations with various individuals, he found that the consensus was that women were not overworked beyond the legal hours and had no complaints because the conditions of work were good. A report by Wandekar and Powar supported this claim. Women were primarily employed in reeling rooms, and the sanitary conditions were good. Piecework was the norm, and the work was considered easy, allowing women to come and go as they pleased[65].

[63] Table 1 in Appendix
[64] "Reply to letter No. 1576, dated 11th December 1896." Letter to the Secretary to the Government of India, Home Department (Judicial), Simla. 16th June 1897. General Department. Maharashtra State Archive, Volume 37, 1896, M293.
[65] W.L Harvey, "To the Secretary to Government, Accompaniments to Government Resolution No.7120," 26th January 1906, vol.37, compilation no. 417, pt 3, M 124, General Department, Maharashtra State Archives.

However, in the same year, a correspondent of the Jáme Jamshed, in its issue of April 5, says, "the cotton ginning factories at Broach, Ankleshvar, Pálej, and several other villages, work done from 3:00 a.m. to midnight. The report notes that most of the factory laborers are women, who thus work for nearly 22 hours, earning wages for a day and a half. When these hands work from 3:00 a.m. to midnight, they earn a day's wages, which are, in the case of women, two annas. Such long hours of work for a day is oppressive, and the authorities ought to be informed of it in the interest of the laborers[66].

The factory owners' and managers' testimonies indicate a wide wage differential among skilled laborers, often exceeding Rs 15 and occasionally significantly higher. However, in contrast, women and children who were interviewed reported receiving wages between Rs 4 and Rs 7 per month despite working for the same duration as men. Notably, this wage scale, which was below the threshold of Rs 10-15 per month, was uniformly applied to unskilled labor in factories, regardless of the workers' gender or age[67].

Moreover, scholars like Radha Kumar note capitalists' and reformers' attitudes towards the working-class family, who all tended to reinforce the notion that women's wages were supplementary to the family income earned by male labor[68]. The arguments about women's wage labor being supplementary asserted that women's primary role was to reproduce labor power. Because of this, women were put in this position to gradually withdraw from wage labor[69]. On the contrary, Radha Kumar argues that almost 40% of women were widows, and another 30% supported their husbands and children. Therefore, their wage did not supplement their family wage; it was the prime source of income. Even though women were paid less than men, they did not demand equal pay due to the sexual division of labor[70]. Kumar compares this case with spinners and weavers as their work differed, and they could not demand the same wage; the same was true with men and women[71].

[66] Jáme Jamshed, 5th April 1890, vol. 111, General Department, Maharashtra State Archives.
[67] Aditya Sarkar, *Trouble at the Mill: Factory Law and the Emergence of Labour Question in Late Nineteenth-Century Bombay* (Oxford University Press, 2017), 18.
[68] Radha Kumar, "Family and factory: women in the Bombay cotton textile industry, 1919-1939," *The Indian Economic and Social History Review* 20, no.1 (CA: Sage Publications, 1938), 85-91.
[69] Kumar, "Family and factory", 90.
[70] Kumar, "Family and factory", 82.
[71] Kumar, "Family and factory", 89.

Gender wage discrimination was prevalent even among child laborers. Girls undertaking comparable tasks to male children in Bombay's textile mills received lower wages and encountered more stringent restrictions in their work. Young girls were involved in domestic chores and accompanied their mothers to the factory. Despite performing similar duties as 'doffers' (a job involving the removal of full bobbins), girls were employed at a younger age than boys due to safety concerns, as it was deemed unsafe to leave them unattended at home while women worked.

Moreover, the textile mills of Bombay relied on the demand for cotton, which resulted in most of the labor being kept as a substitute known as Badli labor[72]. This employment pattern greatly influenced the wages in the textile mills of Bombay. A 1926 labor office survey noted that women were particularly affected by unfixed hours and days of work, resulting in low attendance in the winding and reeling department. According to the report, only twenty percent of reelers and twenty-three percent of winders worked full-time[73].

Indeed, rationalizing low wages for women and child labor was deeply entrenched during the colonial era. In this context, implementing the Factory Act and the regulatory framework governing the workforce facilitated the perpetuation of this practice. Specifically, by mandating a reduction in working hours, the Act curtailed the capacity of female workers to earn higher wages, thereby perpetuating their historically lower pay. Consequently, the implementation of the Factory Act inadvertently reinforced the prevailing power dynamics and entrenched the systemic exploitation of marginalized groups, particularly women and children.

Therefore, the ensuing section scrutinizes the emergence and implementation of the Indian Factory Act, with a particular emphasis on its provisions and ramifications for female workers. The primary objective is to gain insight into how the notion of 'protection' inadvertently led to a twofold adverse impact. Firstly, despite women occupying low-skilled positions, limiting their working hours unfavorable affected mill productivity. Secondly, due to the Act's perturbation of mill operations, the number of female workers declined, resulting in elevated female unemployment, exacerbating the already tenuous situation of women's vulnerability.

[72] Radha Kumar, "Women in the Bombay Cotton Textile Industry, 1919–1940," in *Dignity and Daily Bread*, ed. Swasti Mitter & Sheila Rowbotham (United States: Routledge, 1994), 55-56.
[73] Kumar , "Women in the Bombay", 55-56.

## The Impact of the Indian Factory Act on Women Labor in Bombay

> No woman shall be actually employed more than 11 hours in any factory in any one day. Every occupier of a factory in which children are employed shall, before the beginning of each month, fix according to the caste or classes to which such women and children belong or otherwise not less than four days in such month to be observed as holidays by each woman or child employed in the factory.- The Indian Factory Act 1891[74].

Similar to England, the initial focus of factory legislation in India was the protection of child labor. The Factory Act XV of 1881 established the primary regulations for child labor. Subsequently, the scope of these provisions was extended to include women working in textile mills. After 1881, concerns about the conditions of women working in factories gained attention in India. The popular opinion then was that women were overworking in these mills. For instance, in its issue of June 5, the Din Bandhu, a native newspaper, writes reports on women overworking hours. "The new Indian Factory Act of 1891 required that female hands should only work for 11 hours a day with a recess of one and a half hours. Many instances, however, can be cited in which women work for more than 15 hours, and we have serious doubts whether these in all cases get their well-earned rest of an hour and a half daily"[75].

Similar concerns were raised before this, and to address such concerns, the Bombay government established a Commission in 1884 to investigate the situation thoroughly. In 1890, the Indian government concluded that it was necessary to appoint a commission to examine various controversial aspects of factory labor in the affected areas. Based on the findings of this commission and the resolutions adopted at the International Labor Conference in Berlin in 1884, recommendations were made to limit the working hours of women to 11 hours per day, with intervals of rest totaling one and a half hours, and to prohibit women from working at night. Additionally, weekly holidays were suggested for women. Although the Indian government did not entirely adopt the resolutions of the Berlin conference, the 1891 Factory

[74] Act to Regulate Labour in Factories, Appendix Act XI 1891, vol. 43-44, General Department, Maharashtra State Archives.
[75] The Din Bandhu, Report on the Native Papers 1881, IOR/L/R/136:1881,British Library, London.

Act ultimately imposed limits on the working hours of women. However, women were still permitted to work at night in factories that employed an appropriate system of shifts[76].

However, the protection introduced by the Factory Act had an adverse effect on the women's employment ratio. To exemplify this argument, we can examine the consequences of implementing four compulsory holidays for women in mills. H.W. Bagnell explains how these holidays would affect the overall operations of the factory.

For the reelers, who were responsible for winding yarn onto bobbins, a four-day holiday would cause an accumulation of bobbins that would require hiring extra workers to catch up with demand. Similarly, for winders responsible for preparing yarn for weaving, a holiday would disrupt the supply chain and potentially cause looms to stop working. For cotton pickers, who harvested cotton from the fields, a holiday would result in an accumulation of waste and potentially replace female workers with male coolies[77].

The report argues that while women's work in the mills may not have been considered 'skilled,' it was nevertheless crucial to the functioning of the factory. The report highlights the interdependence of different job roles in the factory and how disruptions in one area could significantly affect the production process. The report further suggests that women's work in the mills was undervalued and underappreciated despite its essential nature.

Many vernacular newspapers of the time recorded the effects of the new Factory Act and limited working hours on female mill operatives. These news reports were officially translated, and a yearly report was made, compiling weekly reports. One such newspaper, The Mahrátta, in its issue of March 13, writes: "It is time to understand that so many hands have been already thrown out of work, and so many more are threatened with the same fate. The restriction on the women's labor to 11 hours would result in so many poor women being mercilessly thrown on their resources, which in many cases are next to nothing"[78].

Interestingly, the study of official records suggests that the blame for holidays was put on women, claiming that Indian women employed in the mills as reelers, winders, and cotton

[76] D.A, Barker, "Factory Legislation in India," *The Economic Journal* 21, no. 84 (1911), 645.
[77] H.W.J. Bagnell to Acting Chief Secretary, "Report on the Working of the Indian Factories Act," 8th August 1889, Bombay Collector's Office, vol. 68, General Department, Maharashtra State Archives.
[78] The Mahrátta,13th March 1892

pickers had just as many holidays as their English counterparts, with the added advantage of being able to take them whenever they wanted[79]. This was in contrast to the English mill girls who had fixed holidays and had to take them on specific days. An example of this is in the factory report from the inspector of factories in Bombay, H.W.J. Bagnell, who highlighted the irregular attendance of women in the factories due to their cultural and religious practices[80]. Bagnell notes that according to the Hindu religion, women were considered ceremonially unclean during their monthly cycles and avoided contact with their family and community. This resulted in women being absent from the factories for three days every month[81]. In addition, women and children were also frequently absent for domestic or caste-related concerns. The report focused on the cultural and societal factors that affected women's attendance and employment in the mills and the gender-based discrimination they faced in the workplace.

Historians have also highlighted the moments of tension surrounding the working of the Indian Factory Act for women. The boom of the 1920s in terms of women's employment was followed by the years of depression for the Bombay cotton textile mills, and by 1939, almost 13,000 women lost their jobs[82]. Historians have cited for decades the reasons for the decline in women's employment, which include the prohibition of night work acts, the mechanization of the industry, which resulted in less work for the reelers as the spinning machines got mechanized, and the passing of the Maternity Benefit Act (1929). Chandavarkar argues that from the 1920s, the legislation drastically reduced the number and proportion of women employed in the mills[83]. His analysis was later supported by S.B. Upadhyay, who argues that the decline in the proportion of women employed in the textile industries began after the

[79] Bagnell, "Report on the Working of the Indian Factories Act," 1889.
[80] Bagnell, "Report on the Working of the Indian Factories Act," 1889.
[81] Bagnell, "Report on the Working of the Indian Factories Act," 1889.
[82] Radha Kumar, "Women in the Bombay Cotton Textile Industry, 1919–1940," in *Dignity and Daily Bread*, ed. Swasti Mitter & Sheila Rowbotham (United States: Routledge, 1994), 57.
[83] Raj Narayan Chandavarkar, *The Origins of Industrial Capitalism in India: Business Strategies and the Working Classes in Bombay, 1900–1940* (Cambridge South Asian Studies, 2003).

1920s[84]. Ralph. C. James documents the decline in the female employment ratio in Bombay textiles statistically[85].

As a result, by 1955, the total number of workers had increased by about half, even though women had declined by about one-third[86]. James considers hiring discrimination as one of the key factors resulting in the decline. He highlights the role of management in blocking the entry of new women and individual mill owners' hesitation toward women's employment. James has statistically documented the decline in the female employment ratio in Bombay textiles over time. He argues that hiring discrimination was vital in this decline, and individual mill owners hesitated to hire women. Similarly, scholars like Radha Kumar concur with James's argument regarding the steady decline of women in the cotton textile industry in 1939[87]. She also lists similar reasons for the decline, including the maternity benefit, the prohibition of nightwork Acts, and the mechanization of the industry in Bombay.

As such, it can be concluded that the implementation of the Factory Act claimed to provide colonial protection to women workers who were deemed vulnerable and in need of safeguarding. However, the consequence was worsening the already precarious situation of female workers by rendering them unemployed. It is imperative to acknowledge that this does not suggest that women were not subjected to overworking in factories, nor that the regulation of their working hours was unwarranted. Instead, what is noteworthy is the lack of agency afforded women in making decisions for themselves and the power dynamic inherent in colonial rule, which resulted in the regulation harming the condition of female workers.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, analyzing the gendered dynamics of the Bombay cotton mills in the colonial period reveals how the colonial state possessed and controlled women's labor. An attempt has

[84] S.B. Upadhyay, *Existence, Identity and Mobilization: The Cotton Millworkers of Bombay 1890–1919* (Manohar, Delhi, 2004), 97-111.
[85] Ralph C. James, "Discrimination Against Women in Bombay Textiles," *Industrial & Labor Relations Review* 15, no. 2 (1962): 209-210.
[86] James, "Discrimination Against Women," 1962, 210.
[87] Radha Kumar, "Family and factory: women in the Bombay cotton textile industry, 1919-1939," *The Indian Economic and Social History Review* 20, no.1 (CA: Sage Publications, 1938), 85-91.

been made to explore this concept of gender division of labor through the lens of possession. Possession encompasses diverse tangible and intangible forms, and throughout history, marginalized women have often been seen as especially susceptible to forms of possession related to control, ownership, or domination.

Possession has received less focus in feminist discourse. Understanding and complicating the concept of possession can enhance existing understandings of reform and control and its complexities. The policies implemented by the colonial state, such as the Factory Act, further entrenched patriarchal norms and gender-based inequalities, affecting women's lives. It is crucial to recognize and acknowledge these historical power dynamics to understand the enduring impact of gender on labor and society.

The gendered power dynamic in the factory also extended to the wages and opportunities for advancement. Women and child workers received lower wages than men and were rarely promoted to positions of authority. This is evident in the Bombay Millowners' Association's report, which stated that "women and children, with their low level of education, were not suited to higher managerial positions in the industry"[88]. Thus, the colonial state could determine the value of women's labor and their capacity for advancement, further perpetuating patriarchal norms and gender-based inequalities.

The concept being explored is the historical placement of women and children in the "vulnerable" category of workers. Throughout history, women and children have often been subjected to precarious working conditions and considered more susceptible to exploitation. This categorization reflects societal attitudes and practices that have marginalized and disadvantaged these groups in the labor force. By examining this phenomenon, we can gain insights into the persistent challenges faced by women and children in various industries and shed light on the need for equitable treatment in the workplace.

Therefore, examining gender as a historical category is crucial in understanding the experiences of women working in the cotton mills of Bombay during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. By examining the gendered division of labor, we can uncover how women were

[88] Annual Report of Bombay Millowners' Association, 1875, General Department, Maharashtra State Archives, 5.

discriminated against regarding work patterns, pay, and their identities being closely tied to the family unit. Moreover, the decline of women in the workforce due to factors such as maternity benefits and mechanization highlights how the male-dominated industrial sector was resistant to women's participation in the labor force. By taking a gendered approach to studying colonial labor, we gain a more comprehensive understanding of how gender norms and power dynamics shaped workers' experiences in this historical period and had a postcolonial impact on working patterns[89].

Regrettably, even in postcolonial India, gender disparities persist in income levels, with the wage gap between men and women widening as individuals progress in their careers. Factors such as occupational segregation, societal expectations regarding work and family responsibilities, and biases in hiring and promotion practices contribute to this growing disparity. This pattern aligns with the historical context of Bombay textile mills, shedding light on the wage gap and emphasizing the prevalent power dynamics influenced by colonial patriarchy.

Addressing the root causes of the gender wage gap and preventing its escalation throughout individuals' working lives necessitates policy interventions and systemic changes. However, policymakers should learn from the limitations of the Indian Factory Act, which resulted in the rapid unemployment of women. Efforts should focus on challenging gender stereotypes and implementing policies that ensure equal work opportunities and pay. This work underscores the imperative of tackling structural barriers and advancing gender equality to achieve fairer and more equitable outcomes in the labor market.

**Bibliography**

Act to Regulate Labour in Factories, Appendix Act XI 1891, vol. 43-44, General Department, Maharashtra State Archives.

[89] Also see, Madhavi Jha, "'Men Diggers and Women Carriers': Gendered Work on Famine Public Works in Colonial North India," *International Review of Social History* 65, no. 1 (2020): 71–98.She explores the gendered nature of labor on public works during the colonial period in North India and how gender impacted the distribution of labor and wages.

Alexander, Emma. "The 'Special Classes' of Labor: Women and Children Doubly Marginalized," in *Labour Matters: Towards Global Histories*, edited by Prabhu Mohapatra and Marcel V D Linden (Delhi: Tulika Books, 2009), 131-151.

Annual Report of Bombay Millowners' Association, 1875, General Department, Maharashtra State Archives, 5.

Bagnell, H.W.J. to Acting Chief Secretary, "Report on the Working of the Indian Factories Act," 8th August 1889, Bombay Collector's Office, vol. 68, General Department, Maharashtra State Archives.

Bandhu, D. Report on the Native Papers 1881, IOR/L/R/136:1881, British Library, London.

Barker, David A. "Factory Legislation in India," *The Economic Journal* 21, no. 84 (1911).

Burnett-Hurst, Alexander Robert. *Labour and Housing in Bombay* (London, P.S. King and Son, Ltd, 1925).

Burton, Antoinette M. *Burdens of History: British Feminists, Indian Women, and Imperial Culture, 1865-1915* (University of North Carolina, 1994).

Chandavarkar, Raj Narayan. *The Origins of Industrial Capitalism in India: Business Strategies and the Working Classes in Bombay, 1900–1940* (Cambridge South Asian Studies, 2003).

Clark, Alice. *The Working Life of Women in the Seventeenth Century* (Taylor & Francis Group, 1968).

Engerman, Stanley L. "The History and Political Economy of International Labor Standards," in *International Labor Standards*, ed. Kaushik Basu, Henrik Horn, Lisa Román and Judith Shapiro (Oxford, UK: Blackwell Publishing Ltd, 2003).

Forbes, Geraldine. *Women in Modern India*. The New Cambridge History of India. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996). DOI:10.1017/CHOL9780521268127

Goodyear, Suleri. *The Rhetoric of English India* (University of Chicago Press, 2013).

Grewal, Inderpal. *Home and Harem: Nation, Gender, Empire, and the Cultures of Travel* (Duke University Press, 1996).

Guarnieri, Eleonora & Rainer, Helmut. "Colonialism and Female Empowerment: A Two-Sided Legacy," *Journal of Development Economics* 151 (2021): 102666.

Harvey, W.L. "To the Secretary to Government, Accompaniments to Government Resolution No.7120," 26th January 1906, vol.37, compilation no. 417, pt 3, M 124, General Department, Maharashtra State Archives.

Jackson, A.M.T. "Working of the Indian Factory Act for the Year 1892 Report," Bombay Custom House, June 21, 1893, Maharashtra State Archives, General Department, 1893, Volume 55, M346.

James, Ralph C. "Discrimination Against Women in Bombay Textiles," *Industrial & Labor Relations Review* 15, no. 2 (1962): 210-220.

Jamshed, J. "Unfortunate Mill-Hands," 17th August 1905', 'Letter from the collector of the land revenue, Custom and opium Bombay, to the Secretary to Government, General Department, no.F.I-b41, dated 25th November 1905, General Department, Maharashtra state Archive, Volume 36, Compilation No.35, M87.

Jamshed, J. 5th April 1890, vol. 111, General Department, Maharashtra State Archives.

Jha, Madhavi "'Men Diggers and Women Carriers': Gendered Work on Famine Public Works in Colonial North India," *International Review of Social History* 65, no. 1 (2020): 71–98.

Kelman, Janet Harvey. *Labour in India* (London, George Allen and Unwin Ltd, 1923).

Kumar, Arun. "The Invisible Women of Colonial India's Textile Industry," *THE WIRE*, https://thewire.in/history/the-invisible-women-of-colonial-indias-textile-industry.

Kumar, Radha. "Women in the Bombay Cotton Textile Industry, 1919–1940," in *Dignity and Daily Bread*, ed. Swasti Mitter & Sheila Rowbotham (United States: Routledge, 1994).

Kumar, Radha. "Family and factory: women in the Bombay cotton textile industry, 1919-1939," *The Indian Economic and Social History Review* 20, no.1 (CA: Sage Publications,1938).

Levine, Philippa. "Why Historians Ignore Women in Studies on Decolonization", Library of the Congress. Available at: https://www.loc.gov/item/2021688280/#:~:text=Philippa%20Levine%2C%20a%20professor%20at,of%20the%20colonial%20authority%20structure.

Lindberg, Anna. "Class, Caste, and Gender among Cashew Workers in the South Indian State of Kerala 1930–2000.", *International Review of Social History*, Vol. 46, No. 2 (August), pp. 155-184.

Matteazzi, Eleonora & Scherer, Stefani. "Gender Wage Gap and the Involvement of Partners in Household Work," *Work, Employment and Society* 35, no. 3 (2021): 490–508.

McClintock, Anne. *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest* (Routledge, 1995).

Meade-King, W.O. to Government of Bombay, "Report on the Working of the Indian Factories Act," 24th June 1882, Vol. 3, M1 83, General Department, Maharashtra State Archives.

Mehta, S.D. *The Cotton Mills of India, 1854 to 1954* (Textile Association India, 1954).

Mohanty, Chandra Talpade. *Feminism Without Borders: Decolonizing Theory, Practicing Solidarity* (Duke University Press, 2003).

Moosvi, Shireen. "Women, Poverty and Work in Colonial Rural India: The Dufferin Inquiry, 1887–88," *Studies in People's History* 7, no. 2 (2020): 171–179.

Morison, W.T. to the Secretary to Government, 12th May 1910, vol. 64, Factory Department, Maharashtra State Archives.

Morris Morris, David. *The Emergence of an Industrial Labor Force in India: A Study of the Bombay Cotton Mills, 1854–1947* (First ed.) (University of California Press, 1965).

Nair, Janaki. "Reconstructing and Reinterpreting the History of Women in India," *Journal of Women's History* 3, no. 1 (1991), 131–136.

OECD, "Starting Close, Growing Apart: Why the Gender Gap in Labour Income Widens over the Working Life," in *OECD Employment Outlook 2018*, 211–61. Paris: OECD Publishing, 2018.

Pandey, Gyanendra. "Un-Archived Histories: The 'Mad' and the 'Trifling," *Economic and Political Weekly* 47, no. 1 (2012): 37-41.

Reply to Secretary to the Government of India concerning letter 1576, 11th December 1896, vol. 37, Home Department, Judicial Branch, Maharashtra State Archives.

Reply to letter No. 1576, dated 11th December 1896." Letter to the Secretary to the Government of India, Home Department (Judicial), Simla. 16th June 1897. General Department. Maharashtra State Archive, Volume 37, 1896, M293.

Rose, Jacqueline. *Sexuality in the Field of Vision* (New ed., Verso, 2005).

Rutnagar, Sorabji M. *Bombay Industries – The Cotton Mills* (Bombay, The Indian Textile Journal Ltd, 1927).

Sarkar, Aditya. *Trouble at the Mill: Factory Law and the Emergence of Labour Question in Late Nineteenth-Century Bombay* (Oxford University Press, 2017).

Savara, Mira. Changing Trends in Women's Employment: a Case Study of the Textile Industry in Bombay, 1st ed (Bombay: Himalaya Pub. House, 1986).

Sen, Samita. "Gendered Exclusion: Domesticity and Dependence in Bengal," *International Review of Social History* 42, no. S5 (1997): 65–86.

Sen, Samita. *Women and Labour in Late Colonial India: the Bengal Jute Industry*.(Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

Sharpe Jenny, *Allegories of Empire: the Figure of Woman in the Colonial Text* (University of Minnesota Press, 1993).

Sinha, Mrinalini. "Colonial Masculinity: The "Manly Englishman" and the "Effeminate" Bengali in the Late Nineteenth Century," *Journal of World History* 8, no. 2 (1997): 344-346.

Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. *Can the Subaltern Speak?: revised edition*, from the "History" chapter of *Critique of Postcolonial Reason* (Columbia University Press, 2010), 66-111.

Suggestions and Recommendations by Factory Labour Commission, 11th July 1907, vol. 54, compilation no. 404, pt 1, M 241, General Department, Maharashtra State Archives.

Suleri Goodyear, Sara. *The Rhetoric of English India* (University of Chicago Press, 2013).

Upadhyay, Shashi Bhushan. *Existence, Identity and Mobilization: The Cotton Millworkers of Bombay 1890–1919* (Manohar, Delhi, 2004).

## Appendix

***Table 1.1*** **Table displaying the wages of various classes of workers in Bombay mills for the year 1892**[90].

| ***Class*** | | ***Wages(Rs)*** |
|---|---|---|
| **Jobbers** | ***Men*** | 15 to 80 (According to the department) |
| **Scutching Room hand** | | 9 |
| **Carding Room hand** | | 7 to 10 |
| **Frame toner** | | 10 to 13 |
| **Ring Frame Hand** | | 9 to 12 |
| **Spinner** | | 20 |
| **Other mule hand** | | 7 to 10 |
| **Weaver** | ***Women*** | 16 |
| **Helper** | | 9 |
| **Reeler** | | 7 to 8 |
| **Winder** | | 8 |
| **Doffer** | ***Children*** | 6 |
| **Piecer** | | 7 |

[90] A.M.T. Jackson, "Working of the Indian Factory Act for the Year 1892 Report," Bombay Custom House, June 21, 1893, Maharashtra State Archives, General Department, 1893, Volume 55, M346.