

## Informal Workers' Aggregation in India: An Evolving Model of Collective Action

### L'agrégation des travailleurs informels en Inde : un modèle d'action collective en pleine évolution

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Résumé de l'article

En Inde, plus de 90 % de la main-d'oeuvre fait partie du secteur informel. Malgré ce pourcentage énorme, les travailleurs informels sont encore aujourd'hui exclus de la législation et des politiques en matière de relations du travail. Ils sont exclus et invisibles notamment parce que les travailleurs informels sont absents du mouvement syndical. Pour surmonter cette invisibilité, les travailleurs informels s'organisent dans des associations qui se distinguent des syndicats traditionnels. Ces organisations développent leurs stratégies et se donnent des statuts juridiques adaptés aux caractéristiques atypiques des activités informelles. Dans le présent article, je documente certaines de ces organisations de travailleurs informels autonomes en Inde. En documentant les caractéristiques et fonctions de ces organisations, je soutiens que celles-ci offrent un modèle d'action collective pour les travailleurs informels. Ces associations sont des organisations de travailleurs informels sui generis qui pourraient devenir le précurseur d'une initiative mondiale de travailleurs informels axée sur la solidarité.



# Informal *Workers' Aggregation* in India : An Evolving Model of Collective Action

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## **INTRODUCTION**

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**I**NDIA'S INCREASING GLOBAL prominence pertains to its remarkable economic development in the last few decades, second only to China (Bhaskar & Gupta, 2007; Basu & Maertens, 2007; Winters & Yusuf, 2007). Scholars note that after opening up its economy India has consistently experienced a high growth of gross domestic product (GDP) (Ahluwalia, 2002; Jha, 2008). Some, however, question this argument about liberalization-induced economic growth, contending that India's economic growth well preceded the opening of its market to global competition (Basu & Maertens, 2007; Nayyar, 2006). Nonetheless, they admit that economic growth might have accelerated in the post-liberalization era (Basu & Maertens, 2007; Nayyar, 2006: 812). In any case, irrespective of whether India's economic growth is solely a result of trade liberalization or not, scholars are unanimous that the country has remarkably failed to convert the economic growth to human development of its population

(Bhaskar & Gupta, 2007; Jha, 2008; Nayyar, 2006). Both enthusiasts and sceptics of the liberalization-induced growth indicate that poverty has either increased, remained stagnant, or on the most positive evaluation, marginally decreased in India in the post-liberalization era (Patnaik, 1997: 174-176; Bhaskar & Gupta, 2007; Jha, 2008; Nayyar, 2006: 818-822).

While on one hand, liberalization of the economy failed to have any visible impact on poverty reduction, liberalization-induced structural adjustments adversely impacted the livelihoods of the significant number of the working population (Harriss-White & Sinha, 2007; Siggel, 2010; Agarwala, 2013: 3; Agarwala, 2008: 382; Basu & Maertens, 2007: 163). In order to compete in the newly opened up economy, businesses and industries increasingly started to move their activities from the formally regulated domain to the informal unregulated sphere (Agarwala, 2013: 2, 40-41; Siggel, 2010; Agarwala, 2008: 389; Basu & Maertens, 2007; Castells & Portes, 1989: 12-15, 26-31). In order to avoid production costs and maximize profits, businesses tended to either sub-contract their production or engage informal workers (Castells & Portes, 1989; Benton, 1989; Agarwala, 2008: 382, 389; Routh, 2011). Such tendency increased a pool of workers who remained excluded from the state's monitoring or regulatory mechanism (Agarwala, 2008: 282; Agarwala, 2013; Routh, 2011: 215-216). This exclusion stands in stark contrast to the constitutional principles, which delineate specific provisions on workers' welfare (Part III, IV, Constitution of India). In spite of Indian constitutional principles safeguarding interests of workers, the condition of informal workers remains precarious (NCEUS, 2007; 2008).

While the constitution of India envisaged that specific legislative safeguards needed to be developed for specific categories of workers (Articles 43, 43A, Constitution of India), legislative policy has remained oblivious to the vulnerable plight of informal workers (NCEUS, 2007: 163-164, 284-287; Hensman, 2010). Such vulnerability and marginalization is a result of the invisibility of informal workers from policy circles (Agarwala, 2013: 21). In India, more than 90% of the workforce is informal (NCEUS, 2008: 44). In spite of this enormous percentage of informal workers, these workers remain invisible from legislative and policy circles. One reason for such exclusion and invisibility seems to emanate from the absence of trade unionism involving informal workers (Bhatt, 2006). According to one account, only about 8% of non-agricultural informal workers are organized as unions (Agarwala, 2008: 383).

Traditional trade unions have largely failed to integrate informal workers into their membership fold (Agarwala, 2013: 3). However, there are a few exceptions to this trend in certain sectors such as the construction industry and the *bidi* (hand-made cigarettes) industry. Agarwala (2008; 2013) has documented some of the unionization initiative of informal workers in the abovementioned industries. She notes that some federations of trade unions in India have been successful in organizing informal workers in these industries. She indicates that these trade unions of informal workers are, in fact, rewriting the state-labour relations and evolving new unionization strategies

(Agarwala, 2008; 2013: 6). While Agarwala's study offers us important insights into the organization strategies of informal workers, her account remains incomplete.

Agarwala's study is concerned only with industry-specific informal workers. Her chosen industries — construction and *bidi* manufacturing — are characterized by specific workplaces, waged workers, and include both formal as well as informal workers. Furthermore, her study analyzes *trade unionism* amongst informal workers. Accordingly, her study fails to account for those informal workers who regularly shift from one type of work to another; those who work for multiple employers in different jobs; workers without specific workplace; self-employed workers (such as street vendors, waste pickers); and activities undertaken entirely by informal workers. Moreover, since her focus is on unionism in two specific industries, she only studies industry-specific trade unions of informal workers, thereby leaving out a range of other organizing strategies undertaken by a variety of informal workers (Agarwala, 2013: 10-13).

Informal workers are increasingly organizing into associations that are different from traditional trade unions. These organizations devise their strategies and their legal statuses in view of the atypical characteristics of informal activities. Informal workers could be waged workers, self-employed workers, subject to multiple intertwined employment-like relationships, with or without a workplace, isolated, and dispersed. In view of these wide ranges of informal workers, their organizations legally take shape in the forms of trade unions, co-operative societies, charitable trusts, registered societies, and even companies. These organizations also employ a range of strategies that are not typical to that of traditional trade unions. In her study, Agarwala (2013; 2008) points out how trade unions of informal workers engage with the institutions of the state. While negotiation with the state is an important function of organizations of informal workers, their organizations also make use of the market, undertake welfare functions, and effectively engage with the civil society. Informal workers organizations, hence, cannot be seen only through a state-labour lens. Such organizations offer a more complex scenario of how informal workers strategize to ameliorate their conditions.

In this article, I document some of these organizations of informal workers. By documenting the characteristics and functions of these organizations, I contend that these organizations offer a model for collective action by informal workers. The organizational model I discuss could become a precursor to solidarity-based initiative by informal workers globally. I argue that these associations of informal workers are a *sui generis* organization of informal workers. Even though some of these organizations of informal workers are registered as trade unions, characteristically they differ from trade unions in the traditional sense of the term. I term these organizations of informal workers as *workers' aggregations*. The article is divided into five sections. In the next section, I briefly outline the background of the trade union movement in India and the exclusion of informal workers from the movement. In section 2, I describe the formation and functions of some selected organizations of informal workers in India. Drawing on my

discussion of the characteristics of these organizations of informal workers in India, in section 3, I conceptualize a *sui generis* form of organization of informal workers, which I term workers' aggregation. I conclude the article with a brief conclusion.

## 1. TRADE UNIONISM IN INDIA AND INFORMAL WORKERS

In India, workers' resistance against employers, with the outside support of progressive individuals, took shape immediately after the large-scale infrastructural and industrial initiatives undertaken by the British during the 1850s (Hensman, 2011: 94-95). While the first workers' organization was formed by cotton mill workers in 1890 in Bombay, a formal trade union was not established in India until 1918. By 1929, trade unions were prevalent across all industries in the country (ibid, 105-106).

Established in 1920, the communist-ideology dominated All India Trade Union Congress (AITUC) was the first national federation of trade unions in India, which then split several times due to political divergences in the post-independence era (Ali, 2011: 33-34; Bhowmik, 2009: 51-53; Bhattacharjee & Azcarate, 2006: 64-65). In 1947, the ruling party, i.e., the Congress-I, introduced its own trade union, the Indian National Trade Union Congress (INTUC), in order to receive working class support for government policies. This initiative established a double link between the government and the unions (one through the party and the other through the government executive). Because of this double link, trade unions became more dependent on the government and the last mainly sided with employers in their dispute with workers (Bhowmik, 2009: 52).

Because of the trade unions' dependence on the government and political parties, the industrial relations scenario in India has been a state-centric phenomenon (Papola, 1968; Sen Gupta & Sett, 2000). The government (s) retains the power to interfere and shape industrial relations. Except in some states, trade unions in India are not legally recognized as bargaining agents. Such non-recognition of trade unions allows the government (s) to privilege one trade union over another, thereby diminishing the scope of effective collective bargaining (Sen Gupta & Sett, 2000). Moreover, the government has legally safeguarded monopoly over the industrial dispute resolution mechanism, which hardly allows any scope for collective bargaining and agreement. Collective bargaining is, therefore, severely restricted in India because of the legislative framework and government interference in industrial relations (Papola, 1968; Sen Gupta & Sett, 2000). The upside of the system is that the trade unions have direct access to political parties and sometimes the government, which ensures their visibility if not influence.

Bhattacharjee argues that after independence the complex Indian industrial relations and trade unionism scenario has evolved through four phases (Bhattacharjee, 2001: 244). He notes that the first phase during 1950 to mid-1960s was characterized by government-led industrialization and public sector trade unionism having close connection with the government, which is reflected in the labour laws of the country (ibid: 248-250). According to Bhattacharjee, 1960s to 1979 was the second phase in which industrial stagnation led to lower industrial production and raised unemploy-

ment (ibid: 250-251). During this period insecurity at work led to workers' disillusionment with the INTUC, the ruling party trade union (ibid: 251). This disillusionment resulted in proliferation of radical and independent trade unions and inter-union rivalries (ibid). At this time, unions placed more emphasis on floor-level decentralized bargaining (ibid: 252).

The third phase, from 1980 to 1991, was characterized by the popularity of independent unions over political party-affiliated unions (ibid: 254-255). During this phase, in order to make use of the flexible labour force, firms increasingly outsourced their labour-intensive operations to the informal sector (ibid: 255-256). Labour flexibility further expanded during the fourth phase post-1991, when India opened up its economy (ibid: 257-259).

The power and effectiveness of trade unionism in India — that penetrated only a small percentage of formal workers — substantially declined after the 1991 period (Kuruvilla & Erickson, 2002; Rao, 2007; Haan & Sen, 2007: 75-78). In 1991 the Government of India promoted the large-scale opening of the Indian economy. Trade unions were perceived as inhibiting factors towards the liberalization of the economy (Kuruvilla & Erickson, 2002). Both the central as well as the state governments made reforms that would substantially reduce the already deplorable trade unions' bargaining power along with many measures intended to help employers operate in a flexible labour market (Rao, 2007; Kuruvilla, Das, Kwon & Kwon, 2002: 444; Bhangoo, 2006). Even though there is no conclusive evidence that trade union density in India has declined in the post neo-liberalization period, some assert that it has indeed declined (Sundar, 2008: 161-162; Agarwala, 2013).

Government promotion of flexibilization resulted in the increase of informal workers *vis-à-vis* the formal ones, which in turn, catalyzed the deterioration of the trade union movement (Ghosh, 2008; Hensman, 2011: 104-105)<sup>1</sup>. The trade union movement remained concentrated mainly in the formal sector — especially in the public sector, and could not penetrate the informal sector. The flexibilization increased the already wide array of informal workers up to an enormous level: 92.38 % of workers in India are informal workers, as compared to 7.46 % formal workers (latest data 2004-2005) (NCEUS, 2008: 44).

Even after this substantial increase of informal workers in India, trade unions generally have failed to integrate informal workers into their membership fold (Chen et al, 2007: 8; Haan & Sen, 2007: 75-78, 80; Sundar, 2008: 160-162). While traditional trade unions in India initially helped unskilled workers and their families, their attitude towards informal workers as equal members has been largely unwelcoming (Haan & Sen, 2007: 65-66; Bhowmik, 2007: 124; Agarwala, 2013: 3). This attitude indicates why they failed to recognize that organizing informal workers requires strat-

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1. Ghosh shows that government laws and policies are responsible for the decline in employment and consequently trade union movement in the organized sector; organized sector employment has come down from 282.85 lakh (1 Lakh = 1000,00) in 1997 to 264.43 lakh in 2004 — over the last decade 8.34 lakh workers have lost their jobs in the organized sector.

egies that are different than those needed for organizing formal workers (Chen et al, 2007: 8; Haan & Sen, 2007: 80). It is only recently that some of the traditional trade unions are waking up to the challenge of organizing informal workers (Chen et al, 2007: 8; Sundar, 2008: 161, 170-172).

Agarwala documents some such trade unionism initiative of certain categories of informal workers in India (Agarwala, 2008; 2013). Agarwala notes that trade unions of informal workers adopt strategies for organizing and negotiating that are different from traditional trade unionism. She examines trade unions of informal workers in the context of two industries in India — construction and *bidi* manufacturing. Both of these industries are characterized by complex work relationships. While both industries employ a number of formal workers, they also engage a significant number of informal workers at the same time. Many of the informal workers working in these industries are employed by an employer; some as contract workers (through a contractor); and some — particularly in *bidi* manufacturing — are self-employed. While it is sometimes easy to identify a clear employment relationship involving informal workers, at other times the relationship is blurred. Agarwala notes that traditional trade union federations, mainly those of communist political orientation, have been successful in organizing these informal workers (2008: 383, 387; 2013: 60). However, while unionizing informal workers these organizations adopt a different strategy than the one adopted for formal workers (Agarwala, 2008: 388, 396-398).

In her study, Agarwala shows that informal workers' trade unions lay claims directly on to the state rather than an employer, even when they have an employer (2013: 45; 2008: 378, 393-396). She further argues that informal workers base this claim on their citizenship rather than their employment relationship or their worker status (Agarwala, 2008: 378, 392-394). Agarwala also describes that while informal workers in the construction and the *bidi* industries are organized in their respective workplaces, their workplaces may be as varied as their construction sites and their respective homes. She contends that trade unionism of informal workers in India, which exists only amongst approximately 8% of non-agricultural informal workers, is reshaping the state-labour relationship in the sense that instead of asking the state to compel employers to promote interests of workers, they make direct claims on to the state, thereby excluding employers from the bargaining purview.

What Agarwala terms as an emerging state-labour relationship involving informal workers in India, others see as part of a social-movement unionism signifying a broadening of trade union agendas (Agarwala, 2013: 204-205; Hensman, 2011: 89). As part of this social-movement unionism, labour renews its relation with the state in holding the state accountable to them and compels the state to enact legislation for them (Hensman, 2011: 90). But subtle differences exist in how Agarwala conceptualizes trade unionism of informal workers and social movement unionism. In Agarwala's concept, the workers' claim is based on their citizenship, while social movement unionism sometimes aspires to integrate employers in the negotiation process as well. By integrating employers into the negotiation process, social movement unionism also



includes the traditional employer-employee negotiation as part of the movement. Thus, while the social movement unionism retains the employer-employee perspective even when negotiating with the state, the informal workers' trade unionism, as Agarwala documents it, rules out such a perspective.

While Agarwala's study is important in conceptualizing models and strategies of informal workers' trade unionism, her study is limited to the experiences in two sectors, albeit very important ones. The two sectors that Agarwala studies are also privileged in that both have (sector-) specific welfare legislation, which is not the case for the range of other informal activities. Her sector-specific study is not concerned with one of the fundamental features characterizing informal workers, i.e., such workers change their works and affiliations on a regular basis as indicated by Ela Bhatt<sup>2</sup>. Such a shift from one kind of work to another also means that the work-based status of informal workers also keeps on changing. Accordingly, an informal worker could be a waged worker one day, a self-employed worker on another, one engaged in multiple employment-like relationships on yet another day, and sometimes engaged in trade relationships difficult to determine. Informal workers might also be part of more of these work-related statuses on any given day. For these different categories of informal workers, trade unionism is not only a distant idea it is also an impossible proposition if unionizing strategies are focused on workplace (s) and employees. Agarwala signals this difficulty by pointing out that only a small minority of informal workers is engaged in unionism in India. Because of the absence of trade unionism amongst informal workers in India, and despite constituting the significant majority of the workforce in the country, informal workers remain invisible from the policy lens.

The 2007 National Commission for Enterprises in the Unorganised Sector (NCEUS) Report notes that informal workers in India remain largely invisible from policy circles (NCEUS, 2007: 37, 50, 75-76, 79-80, 165, 196, 356). Bhatt notes that a part of this invisibility could be attributed to the absence of any trade unionism involving informal workers (Bhatt, 2006). However, this absence of unionism does not mean that the informal workers are completely *unorganized*. In fact, many informal workers in India have organized themselves into a range of associations. Agarwala documents how industry-specific informal workers are organizing through the traditional trade union path. Admittedly however, such union initiatives are only marginal amongst informal workers in India. In the absence of any significant initiative to integrate informal workers by the biggest party-linked trade unions, newer ways of organizing

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2. A small farmer works on her own farm. In tough times, she also works on other farms as a laborer. When the agriculture season is over, she goes to the forest to collect gum and other forest produce. Year round, she produces embroidered items either at a piece rate for a contractor or for sale to a trader who comes to her village to buy goods. Now, how should her trade be categorized? Does she belong to the agricultural sector, the factory sector, or the home-based work sector? Should she be categorized as a farmer or a farm worker? Is she self-employed or is she a piece-rate worker? Because her situation cannot be defined and contained neatly in a box, she has no work status and her right to representation in a union is unrealized. She is denied access to financial services or training to upgrade her skills. The tyranny of having to belong to a well-defined "category" has condemned her to having no "identity." — Ela R. Bhatt (2006: 17)



using innovative organizational strategies amongst informal workers in India are taking shape (Webster, 2011 : 101-102, 109-114 ; Agarwala, 2013 : 203). Many informal workers in India have organized themselves into trade unions, co-operative societies, and charitable trusts in order to promote their interests.

A discussion of these varieties of organizing mechanisms is absent from Agarwala's frame of reference (Agarwala, 2013 : 10-13). While following her larger agenda of identifying the organizing initiative of informal workers and indicating newer strategies of such organizations, I will discuss organization initiatives of informal workers that are neither industry-based nor supported by traditional trade union federations. Moreover, in analyzing informal workers' unionization strategies, Agarwala is mainly concerned with the unions' relation with the state. In my discussion, apart from indicating the strategies of state negotiation, I identify other strategies where these organizations successfully use the market, undertake welfare provisioning, and engage in civil society activism. I also discuss the formation and structural characteristics of these organizations of informal workers in India. I have chosen the following organizations of informal workers because these organizations are not connected to traditional trade unions (i.e., federations of trade unions), and they are representative of newer models of organizations that employ a range of strategies apart from bargaining with the state or the employer. Finally, unlike Agarwala's emphasis on informal workers in employment relationship (Agarwala, 2013 : 56), my primary focus is on self-employed informal workers. The following is a brief description of some of these organization initiatives.

## 2. ORGANIZATION OF INFORMAL WORKERS

The Self Employed Women's Association (SEWA) is one of the biggest trade unions in India and is a well-known organization of informal workers (SEWA ; Kapoor, 2007 : 555). Registered in 1972, SEWA is an organization of self-employed poor women workers (SEWA ; Kapoor, 2007 : 560). SEWA aims to promote full employment for its members "whereby workers obtain work security, income security, food security and social security (at least health care, child care and shelter)" (SEWA ; Hill, 2010 : 46-47). In 2009, SEWA had 1,256,944 members across India, and 631,345 members in the state of Gujarat.

During the early 1970s, SEWA began by organizing poor women workers in Ahmedabad (in Gujarat) who were erstwhile disorganized and ignored by the mainstream trade unions, and thereby excluded from the labour movement (Bhatt, 2006 : 8-10). These women workers were not employed in an industry-based production unit ; they were engaged in a range of self-employed activities such as waste-recycling, domestic work, home-based work, and street vending. Since they were not part of an industrial frame of reference, these women workers were seen merely as "enterprising housewives" (but not workers) by the mainstream trade unions and therefore, other than offering some training, the trade unions were not interested in them as potential members (Bhatt, 2006 : 9). While other trade unions saw them as *wives*, SEWA understood them to be hardworking self-employed *workers*.

The initial and principal impetus for the formation of this trade union of informal self-employed women workers came from a middle-class professional, Ela R. Bhatt, who did not share the socio-economic-cultural background of the self-employed workers — admittedly an outsider, at least during the initial days of the formation of the trade union (Bhatt, 2006: 3-5, 8-9). During the initial days of the formation of the union, other influential trade union leaders, in their individual capacities, also supported Bhatt in her endeavour (ibid, 9-10). Bhatt then established contacts and forged partnerships with some of the (future) insiders of the trade union, that is, the self-employed workers (ibid, 10-12, 50). Initially, she also received active assistance from the trade union of formal workers, the Textile Labour Association (TLA) (ibid, 50, 67)<sup>3</sup>. She also integrated banks in her organization initiative, which was the backdrop of setting up the SEWA Bank for the self-employed workers (ibid, 12, 99).

Elite highly-educated professional individuals and the connections and resources offered by them have always been vital for the experience of SEWA (ibid, 12-13, 16, 126, 214)<sup>4</sup>. Networking with government officials, journalists, researchers, and academics were instrumental in advancing the agendas of SEWA during the foundation days of the union (ibid). Within three years of the formation of SEWA, the union began networking internationally. Bhatt along with a Wall Street banker Michaela Walsh and a Ghanaian businesswoman Esther Ocloo established a network called the Women's World Banking in order to facilitate credit access for women (ibid, 13). Walsh was particularly instrumental in establishing the network (ibid).

The SEWA networks permeated political, ideological, and geographical borders (ibid, 15-16, 98, 212-213). The union successfully lobbied with important political leaders including ministers in order to promote the interests of their members (ibid, 66). It has also established close links with the government, including implementing government programs such as the one on workers' education (ibid, 71, 98). The union could also accompany labour officers of the government during the inspection process, thereby, *de facto* enforcing labour laws in their areas of influence (ibid, 76). International organizations such as the International Labour Organization (ILO) too contributed towards SEWA's agenda (ibid, 74-75). SEWA also integrated non-government organizations in furtherance of their initiatives and forged nationwide and international alliances of NGOs and trade unions of informal workers (ibid, 98-213). However, at the core, SEWA is an organization of informal self-employed women workers where decision-making is the prerogative of these workers (ibid, 70).

A two-tier representation model governs the union (SEWA). The governance of the union is carried on by a mix of professional cadres and worker-members (Blaxall,

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3. The TLA was the parent trade union from which SEWA was born, but SEWA later severed its links from the TLA.

4. SEWA always had (and still has) highly educated committed members in its rolls. SEWA's professional members and outsider friends hold degrees from universities such as Harvard, Yale, Oxford, and Johns Hopkins. These educated professionals would often speak on behalf of the self-employed worker members of the union, when these workers were unable to speak for themselves.

2004). SEWA differs from the traditional concept of a trade union (Hill, 2010: 75). It offers specialist skills such as legal advocacy, financial and vocational training, organization and policy orientation to its members (SEWA; Bhatt, 2006: Hill, 2010: 75-76). Despite being a trade union, SEWA functions through the constitution of trade and service cooperatives (Bhatt, 2006: 16-17, 53-54, 99-122; Dave et al, 2009). SEWA has constituted around ninety trade, and service cooperatives in India (Dave et al, *ibid*). The *Swashrayi Mahila Sewa Sahakari Bank* (SEWA Bank) is the largest cooperative of the SEWA members with 93,000 savings accounts, and is run by the members themselves (Bhatt, 2006: 99-122). The SEWA Bank was established as a reaction to the attitude of the mainstream banking sector towards the workers (*ibid*, 99-106, 119-120). Even though the government encouraged banking with the poor workers, banks would refuse to transact with the illiterate informal workers (*ibid*, 41). The SEWA Bank improvised with photo identity cards as a substitute for signature by the workers in order to integrate illiterate informal workers within its fold (*ibid*, 102-103).

SEWA's health care initiative is a combination of health education and curative care, which is also run by the members (SEWA, "Sewa Services"). Its childcare initiatives are run by local cooperatives and organizations. SEWA initiated its integrated insurance scheme in 1992 with the help of the national insurance companies (SEWA, "Sewa Services"; Ginnekenn, 2004: 192-193; Chatterjee & Vyas, 2001: 74). It also provides legal services including legal education and legal assistance during litigation through its legal advisory centre. The SEWA Academy promotes its members' education and capacity building. SEWA established the *Mahila Housing SEWA Trust* in 1994 in order to improve the "housing and infrastructural conditions" of women engaged in informal economic activities.

SEWA also lobbies the government on several issues that are central to the working lives of informal workers (Bhatt, 2006: 70; Hill, 2010: 76-77, 139-142; Dave et al, 2009: 32). Additionally, SEWA resorts to direct struggle and agitation against myriad forms of discrimination against women informal workers (Bhatt, *ibid*; Hill, 2010: 76-77, 89-93). Moreover, at a fundamental level, the SEWA unionization provides for the much needed legitimization and recognition of informal workers and their activities (Hill, 2010: 76-83). Based on her study of the SEWA unionization, Hill argues that by organizing the most vulnerable, marginalized and impoverished women workers, the SEWA addresses their inherent insecurity, hesitation, fear, exclusion, anxiety, and oppression (*ibid*, 98).

While SEWA is a trade union of self-employed informal women workers engaged in a diverse range of activities, the *Kagad Kach Patra Kashtakari Panchayat* (KKPKP) is a trade union of waste pickers in Pune, Maharashtra (KKPKP). KKPKP registered itself as a trade union in 1993 (Antony, 2001: 17). Unlike SEWA, KKPKP admits both men and women members (Chikarmane & Narayan, 2005). However, the organization developed in similar fashion to SEWA. The promoters of KKPKP noticed that despite hard work, the waste pickers led precarious lives and were not represented through any representative organization. Accordingly, in order to promote the overall

interests of the informal waste pickers and facilitate their productive work, KKPKP — for the first time — organized these workers under a trade union.

KKPKP developed in ways similar to SEWA's early journey. The principal idea and impetus for the formation of an organization of informal waste pickers in Pune, Maharashtra, came from two university professors, who were implementing the *National Adult Education Programme* for child waste pickers during the early 1990s (Chikarmane & Narayan, *ibid*; Sonawane, 2007). The professors first campaigned for child education and source segregation of recyclable waste; they reached out to adult waste pickers and proposed their children be educated; and got identity cards issued to adult waste pickers from their university in order to enable them to smoothly carry on their work (Chikarmane & Narayan, *ibid*).

Having established their camaraderie with the waste pickers, the two activist-faculties came in contact with Baba Adhav, an experienced trade union leader and president of a trade union of headloaders (manual workers) (Chikarmane & Narayan, *ibid*). Adhav emphasized the importance of organizing the waste pickers as a trade union, and was actively instrumental during the formation of the trade union, KKPKP. The activist-faculties and the waste pickers with whom they established a "close and enduring reciprocal relationship [...]" reached out to the larger waste-picker community in the city of Pune to convince them to organize as a trade union. It was through a convention, organized by Adhav, the activist-faculties, and other individuals, in 1993 that the trade union of waste pickers, KKPKP was born. Thus, formation of the organization of waste pickers was a result of networking and close collaboration between different organizations (including a university), responsible and committed individuals, and the waste pickers.

One of the principal purposes of the union is to promote waste picking as productive, valuable, and meaningful work in order to ensure that waste pickers are recognized and respected as workers (Antony, 2001: 17-18; Shekar, 2009: 11). KKPKP functions on the same principles as SEWA. While on one hand KKPKP organizes to provide for socio-economic benefits to its members, on the other, it mobilizes its members for direct political action and lobbying. At yet another level, the union also uses the market efficiently by engaging in the waste-recycling business.

KKPKP has institutionalized socio-economic promotion programs for its members. The union has instituted credit co-operatives, group insurance, and a co-operative store for its members (Chikarmane & Narayan, 2005; Antony, 2001: 63). KKPKP has also promoted self-help groups for its members (Antony, *ibid*, 63-64). In 1995, KKPKP established a co-operative shop for waste trade run by its members. Twenty to thirty members are engaged in the shop that sells waste for recycling. This co-operative enterprise (i.e., the 'waste shop') arranges for provision of paid leave, provident funds, bonuses, and other social security benefits to the workers engaged in the shop. Additionally, in collaboration with the Life Insurance Corporation in India, KKPKP has arranged for a contributory group insurance program whereby its members are insured against disability, accidental death, and natural death.

KKPKP undertakes educational and literacy programs (Antony, *ibid.*, 62-64, 66). The union undertakes awareness initiatives on issues such as child labour, discrimination of girl-child, domestic violence, child marriage etc.; the union also pressures its members to refrain from child marriage. KKPKP also organizes direct action, and protest marches against the government. From 1999 onwards, the KKPKP has been organizing annual protest rallies with its members. It has been lobbying the government for the incorporation of waste pickers under the scope of the Maharashtra Hamal Mathadi and Unprotected Manual Workers (Regulation of Employment and Welfare) Act.

As testament to KKPKP's growing influence, the union is represented in a number of decision-making bodies such as the Collector's Child Labour Committee, Apex Committee on Sanitation (Pune Municipal Corporation), Advisory Committee on Domestic Workers Act, and others (Antony, *ibid.*). KKPKP also acts as the secretariat for an alliance of several waste pickers' organizations from different states in India, named the SWACHH National Alliance of Waste Pickers (SWACHH) (KKPKP Central Secretariat, 2009). SWACHH currently has twenty-four organizations working with issues involving waste pickers. The alliance developed a national policy on solid waste management, and proposes to lobby with government (s) in order to implement their policy proposal.

Finally, I will briefly mention another new organization of informal waste pickers in the country, albeit a much smaller one compared to the others mentioned earlier. I had elsewhere documented an organization initiative of informal waste pickers in Kolkata, in the state of West Bengal, India (Routh, 2014). As I articulated in the context of the organization initiative of waste pickers in Kolkata, India, the genesis of the trade union initiative of informal waste pickers had a strategic and functional character that was similar to that of both SEWA and KKPKP. This too was a case of organizing the erstwhile disorganized informal waste pickers who led precarious lives. Even though these informal waste pickers in Kolkata (in West Bengal) were productively contributing to the economy by engaging in the waste recycling process, they were largely ignored by the mainstream trade unions for union membership and hence remained unrepresented in the political-economic discourse.

The primary impetus for the formation of the trade union came from two university professors upon the advice of the ILO officials based in Delhi, India. However, since the professors did not have much grassroots connection with informal waste pickers they proposed and advocated the union formation to an NGO — the *Calcutta Samaritans*. Their objective was to integrate the NGO as a promoter of the trade union because the NGO provided access to the large number of informal waste pickers in Kolkata.

These trade union promoters integrated some of the well-known city intellectuals into the initiative. Integration of the city intellectuals gave visibility, legitimacy, and bargaining strength to the trade union vis-à-vis the government. The WB NUJS legal aid society — a legal aid society of a premier university — adopted the trade union as

one of their projects and initiated an informal literacy programme for the children of the waste pickers (imparted by the legal aid society volunteers). Integration of these different institutions and individuals made the trade union initiative a larger social phenomenon not limited only to the narrower perspective of the waste pickers. Nonetheless, it is primarily an organization initiative of informal workers. Waste pickers were active partners all through the unionization process, from the very beginning when the idea was mooted by the promoters of the trade union till the formation of the trade union. The larger social participation with active involvement of waste pickers generates power and opportunity for waste pickers, who are otherwise the most marginalized of all informal workers, as is clear from their exclusion even from the informal worker-specific law and policy of the country.

All the organizations discussed above have a core constituency of informal workers. However, their structure includes entities and individuals outside their core constituency. These organizations network with a range of institutions and individuals in order to promote the interests of their core constituency. They also adopt a collaborative (but non-compromising) approach towards government institutions. The characteristics and functioning of these organisations indicate that even though these organizations are registered as trade unions, they are *not* really *trade unions* in the traditional understanding of the concept. While their structure partly resembles trade unions and some of their activities are traditionally associated with trade union activities, these organizations of informal workers are *sui generis* associations, as I argue in the following section.

### 3. AN IDEA OF WORKERS' AGGREGATION

In a personal correspondence, Frederick Engels noted:

Since the Dock Strike [,] Tussy has [been] organising Trades Unions and supporting strikes [...]. These new Trades Unions of *unskilled* men and women are totally different from the old organisations of the working-class aristocracy [i.e., traditional trade unions] and cannot fall into the same conservative ways; they are too *poor*, too *shaky*, too much composed of *unstable* elements, for anyone of these unskilled people *may change his trade any day*. And they are organised under quite different circumstances — all the leading men and women are Socialists and Socialist agitators too. (Engels, 1976: 390) (emphasis mine)

The idea of *trade union* pertains to a specific trade, craft, or skill (Hyman, 2001: 2). Traditionally, trade unions are combinations of workers employed in a common trade, organizing themselves against repressions by employers and the state (ibid, 2, 30, 66). Such occupation-based organizations — representing a class — against employers still characterize modern trade unions (ibid, 30, 68; Upchurch et al, 2009: 2-3). The hostility underlying the genesis of trade unions explains why trade unions are constituted as oppositional force not only against employers but sometimes also against the capitalist production process (Hyman, 2001: 2). Accordingly, it is not surprising that Engels did not consider associations of unskilled and unstable workers, who are weak in opposing and could change their trade any day, as trade unions.



The industrial proletariat stereotype that shaped the idea of trade union is a misfit for the circumstances of informal workers (ibid, 34-35). Informal workers are not attached to one occupational identity, they move from one work to another; the natures of their works do not allow them to come together in a definite workplace; the workers are generally disorganized; oftentimes they remain without work; their worker identity is malleable; sometimes they are employed by an employer; at other times they are self-employed; at yet other times they work for multiple individuals, none of whom could be identified as the employer; and their concerns are more about immediate subsistence than the well being of the society at large.

Because of the nature of their activities and their *modus operandi* it becomes difficult for informal workers to organize as traditional trade unions in order to negotiate with several entities — not necessarily an employer or the state — that are contributory to their marginalized status. In view of their limited power and capacity, it is necessary for informal workers to integrate powerful and influential sections of the society into their movement. If informal workers' conditions need to be improved (which is the objective of their organizations), the involvement with a range of social-cultural-political-economic issues is absolutely necessary (Bhatt, 2006: 25). From this perspective, outsiders have an important role to play in informal workers' organizations.

Even though their influence on the Indian trade union movement cannot be conclusively ascertained, outsiders, that is, people outside trade unions or non-workers in a particular industry, were always part of the Indian trade union movement (Hensman, 2011: 69-70, 80; Haan & Sen, 2007). On the other hand, for the organizations of informal workers, as I indicate earlier, the primary impetus and initiative to organize comes from the *outsiders* who are not informal workers themselves. The outsiders play an identifiably vital role in establishing the avenues of power and influence of the organizations. Considering the nature of marginalization informal workers sustain, this power and influence is the most significant aspect of their organizations.

Informal workers' organizations are not only unique in so far as the role of outsiders are concerned, they are also different from traditional trade unions in their function. Trade unions in India have historically employed political means such as bargaining and strikes in order to negotiate with or embarrass the political party in power (Hensman, 2011: 157, 165; Sundar, 2008). Adversarial confrontation with employers is still the dominant strategy adopted by Indian trade unions (Hensman, 2011: 164). However, while the traditional trade unions sustain on the adversarial strategies (ibid, 165; Sundar, 2008), organizations of informal workers oftentimes adopt a more cooperative approach towards the state and the employers.

The traditional idea of trade unionism as an adversarial, politically charged, and oppositional movement is only incidental, but not central, to the informal workers' organization movements, because the organizations of informal workers not only agitate against the state, they also collaborate with the state on several issues (such as on welfare provisioning, mentioned earlier). Additionally, organizations of informal workers also support their members through various socio-economic initiatives.



Moreover, these organizations either promote or themselves undertake businesses on behalf of their members.

Moreover, legally organizing as trade unions is particularly problematic for self-employed informal workers such as street vendors. The legal recognition of trade unions absolves trade unions from liabilities arising out of conspiracies in furtherance of valid trade union objectives (Ewing, 2014: 277-278, 285)<sup>5</sup>. Such legal recognition also exonerates trade unions from the purview of the competition law (for example, when bargaining for minimum wages) (ibid, 285; Davies, 2014: 130)<sup>6</sup>. However, if self-employed informal workers, who could also be seen as businesspersons running tiny businesses, engage in trade union activities in determining the (minimum) exchange rates for their goods and services, thereby influencing market outcomes, their trade unionism could fall afoul of the competition law regime (Davies, ibid), and could perhaps be construed as conspiracy. One must be mindful though, that such purported violation of the competition regime is only a possibility when the outcome of trade unionism directly influences the market. A competition regime is market-centered; it is not concerned with non-market factors that might be more important for improving the conditions of informal workers.

In any case, for informal self-employed workers, there is a possibility that their unionization could be conflated as employers' association, particularly when those self-employed workers employ other worker (s) (Davies, ibid). In view of such possibility, it is useful to briefly consider whether the informal self-employed workers' organizations mentioned above resemble the guilds or guild-like structures of the pre-industrial revolution era, which were associations of self-employed craft-workers sometimes engaging other workers (as trainees). Could a guild-like institution serve as an effective model for the organization of informal workers?

The organization of informal workers, as I described earlier, both in its manner of organizing and its *modus operandi*, are also different from the medieval guilds or guild-like structures. Even though the term is variously defined, guilds were roughly independent local permanent professional organizations of people in the same profession or craft, whose primary aim was the maintenance of trade monopoly (Lucassen et al, 2008: 6; Roy, 2008: 95, 120). Additionally, guilds and guild-like structures have also been characterized as furthering their members' political, social, cultural, and religious interests apart from their economic agenda (Lucassen et al, 2008: 9, 14, 16). From a functional point of view, if we take into account the range of activities undertaken by the organizations of informal workers, guild-like structures come close to informal workers' organizations insofar as guilds were concerned with comprehensive betterment of the lives of their members (including, for example, by imparting training, and offering insurance and social welfare for their members) (Lucassen et al, ibid: 16, 18; Roy, 2008: 96, 100).

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5. Also see The (Indian) Trade Unions Act, 1926: sections 17, 18, and 19.

6. Also see The (Indian) Trade Unions Act, 1926: section 19.

However, delegation of state power to the guilds, an important characteristic of the guilds (Lucassen et al, *ibid*: 12), is completely absent from the informal workers' organizations. Guilds were not only an extension of the state; they were representatives of the producers, the consumers, and the community at large (Webb & Webb, 1911: 17). As a general rule, guilds also excluded women craft members from formal membership (Lucassen et al, 2008: 16-17). A significant difference between the guilds and the informal workers' organizations described in this article is that guilds were formerly powerful organizations and an extension of the state (*ibid*: 17-18; Roy, 2008: 95), whereas informal workers' organizations remain at best marginal players in respect to state policy nor are they in any way linked to the state as apparatuses.

Moreover, the primary orientation of the guilds was economic (Roy, *ibid*: 96-97). In distinction, even though organizations of informal workers promote economic interests of their members, they are primarily concerned with the overall well-being of their worker members. Again, guilds were organizations of traders, manufacturers, and artisans and they possessed considerable power and influence within the production and distribution cycle. Even though some informal workers produce distribution goods, it would be a stretch of the imagination to categorize them as traders or manufacturers. Thus, the idea of guild fails to articulate the vulnerability, marginalization, and powerlessness of informal workers and their countermovement by means of their organization. Clearly then, organizations of informal workers cannot be characterized as guilds or guild-like bodies.

If the trade union concept falls short of explaining the organizational nature of informal workers and the idea of guild is far removed from their organization initiative, how can the organization of informal workers be conceptualized? My attempted answer is as follows. As the examples earlier indicate, informal workers' organization initiatives are based on functional necessities rather than on strict adherence to a specific form.

Because of the nature of their work informal workers need to bargain mainly with the state (primarily the government) and not with employers. Accordingly, their priority is to enhance their bargaining power *vis-à-vis* the government rather than an employer (i.e., when one exists). Given their marginalization, illiteracy, lack of awareness, and informational deficiency, they are in and of themselves unable to generate sufficient political power to influence the government (or the state) mechanism. This is evident from the exclusion of informal workers from the government scheme of things in India as noted by the NCEUS. Therefore, it is important that informal workers involve as many institutions and individuals as possible to give them greater bargaining power against the state.

To achieve this, temporary coalitions are as important as permanent forms and frameworks for informal workers' organizations. Accordingly, specific categories of informal workers need to ascertain which institutions and individuals can be important in specific circumstances. As shown by the experiences of informal workers' organizations, the choice of integrating outside entities is not always in the hands of

informal workers — a significant part of that choice depends on chance factors and priorities of these other entities. As the case may be, some of these temporary coalitions may possibly evolve to take more permanent shapes.

Further, under existing circumstances of impoverishment and marginalization of informal workers in India, workers need not concern themselves with long-term goals and consequences of their organization initiatives. They must think primarily about availing themselves of short-term benefits and advantages. To make use of (limited) available opportunities for their more immediate concerns, informal workers' organizations must decide their agendas and operate locally. Such localized determination of agendas and priorities for organizations of informal workers also mandates that organisations should be decentralized (rather than a centrally controlled union structure) and based on local social fabric. Such decentralised organisation is helpful because locally based organisations need not conform to any centrally adopted ideology, policy, or strategy and could be informal activity-specific.

The organization model I discuss in this article needs to involve the instrumentalities of the state as partners rather than adversaries. A state consists of the government, the legislature, the judiciary, members of parliament, opposition parties, local administrators, and local elected representatives. In the envisaged model, some of these constitutive entities of the state could be integrated into the organization process of informal workers. Additionally, non-state entities such as NGOs, social activists, and even universities or research institutions could also become coalition partners in the organization initiative of informal workers.

The model of organization of informal workers needs to be seen as a *flux* or as a *transient* evolving framework, which lacks definite form and characteristics — apart from the end-goal, the process of building the organization is important (Crow, 2010: 54). The organization model seeks to enhance informal workers' bargaining power through the strategies of, what Robert Putnam and Kristin A. Goss term the *bonding* and the *bridging* axis (ibid, 57-58; Putnam, 2001: 22-24, 28; Putnam & Goss, 2002: 11-16). While specific categories of informal workers can bond amongst themselves because of their shared or similar work-life experiences, they need to bridge and network with other entities that are empathetic to their cause and identify with their goal. However, the specific informal workers who are organizing should ultimately be autonomous — if the organizing workers are not autonomous, i.e., the ultimate decision-making power does not rest with them, the organization will fail. Any bridging with other entities should be initiated without compromising the interests of the informal workers.

I propose that we term this model of organization of informal workers as *workers' aggregation*. The terminology aggregation suggests a “more loosely integrated collection [...]” (Allee, 1931: vii), which is a more appropriate concept for the nature of organizations of informal workers. One could possibly use several alternative terms in order to convey the idea of a broad-based organization that I hope to convey. The several closely connected possible terms could be: association, organization, collec-

tion, or group. There are, however, two problems in using either of these terms. The first is that all of these terms are very generic and accordingly, could indicate *all* (i.e., any) kinds of organizations including a trade union (ibid, 6-9). The second problem with these terms is that they roughly indicate a well-formed and structured homogeneous group.

Homogeneity is something that eludes organizations of informal workers. The idea that I want to convey, instead, is that the organizational model of informal workers is not a closely knit one with identical *trade* (worker) members; informal workers' organizations I described earlier are loosely formed organizations that integrate a range of workers engaged in several informal activities. It is also possible that each individual worker could work in different activities at the same time. Likewise, while moving from one informal activity to another, some workers lose their worker status for long times, but nonetheless remain members of the organization. Opting out of and back into an organizational fold is also very probable for informal workers. Moreover, in the organizational model I describe, outsiders and non-worker members play a significant role in shaping and developing the organizations.

For these unorthodox characteristics of informal workers' organizations, I propose that *aggregation* is a better term to convey the idea of a loosely formed group by (not identical but similarly situated) individuals for mutual benefits. The idea of aggregation, while still a generic term, at the same time also suggests some kind of specificity or peculiarity. Since the principal constituents of this aggregation are informal workers, it is a — *workers' aggregation*. It is not particularly difficult to see that aggregation as a standalone term is not a very articulate expression. However, when used in the context of informal workers, the opacity of the term is, in fact, helpful to express the loosely formed, reasonably flexible, collaborative, and broader social participation-based workers' organizations that are not trade unions, as I described earlier.

While an informal workers' aggregation needs to be primarily concerned with the interests of their worker members, their approach towards the institutions of the state and non-state entities ought to be collaborative rather than confrontational. A class-based confrontational agenda need not be a priority for a workers' aggregation, at least during the earlier stages of the organization process. This ambivalence towards a class identity does not, however, mean that a workers' aggregation need not be concerned about the larger political process. Indeed, one of the fundamental objectives in the development of the strategic aggregation of workers involving a range of individuals and institutions is to raise the workers' political negotiation power.

The possibility of gaining greater negotiation power is more likely to result from strategic cooperation rather than a class-based (or identity-based) division and conflict. Links with state and civil society institutions are imperative for workers' aggregation, but the ability to successfully operate even without a conscious class-based identity formation and activism should remain a central feature of aggregation. Accordingly, the idea of informal workers' aggregation eschews the distinction made

between the different kinds of unionism such as business unionism, social partner unionism, or class struggle unionism (Hyman, 2001: 1-5; Upchurch et al, 2009: 5). For an effective informal workers' aggregation, even though there should be a definite emphasis on collaboration with the different institutions of the state, these collaborations should not end up making aggregations subservient to the interest of the state, as are the experiences of either corporatist trade unionism or one-party unionism of former socialist states (Kraus, 2007: 39-40; Pringle & Clarke, 2010: 2-3, 145-146, 202-203; Upchurch et al, *ibid*: 10).

## **CONCLUSION**

In this article I conceptualize a form of organization that is evolving amongst self-employed informal workers in India. I term this organizational form of informal workers as workers' aggregation. The use of this terminology is intended to distinguish informal workers' organization model both from trade unions and from guild-like structures (or employers' or business associations). Workers' aggregations are a loose collection of several individuals all of whom are interested in ameliorating the conditions of informal workers. However, a workers' aggregation is not constitutive of only informal worker members. Several individuals and entities are involved in such an aggregation.

Moreover, unlike the traditional trade union movement, informal workers' aggregations undertake a diversified range of initiatives, in which they negotiate with the government (and employers), use the market to their advantage, and develop their own social protection framework. Additionally, these organizations network with other non-state entities including the civil society in order to enhance their bargaining power and visibility. This functional integration and organizational novelty is what constitutes an informal workers' aggregation.

The strategic novelty of informal workers' aggregations in India, while encouraging, is not a conclusive proof of a strong labour movement involving informal workers in the country. It is still only a minority of informal workers who are organized through membership-based groups; an even smaller percentage of such workers could avail themselves of the advantages of the multi-dimensional initiatives undertaken by organizations such as SEWA or KKP. However, given the recent attention paid to the precarious plight of informal workers in the country from several quarters, including that of the policy-makers, the very existence of a model, that is the model of workers' aggregation, is encouraging. Organizations such as the SEWA's prominence and increasing socio-political reach could possibly be seen as pivotal in an emerging movement of informal workers.

## **RÉSUMÉ**

En Inde, plus de 90 % de la main-d'œuvre fait partie du secteur informel. Malgré ce pourcentage énorme, les travailleurs informels sont encore aujourd'hui exclus de la législation et des politiques en matière de relations du travail. Ils sont exclus et invisibles notamment parce

que les travailleurs informels sont absents du mouvement syndical. Pour surmonter cette invisibilité, les travailleurs informels s'organisent dans des associations qui se distinguent des syndicats traditionnels. Ces organisations développent leurs stratégies et se donnent des statuts juridiques adaptés aux caractéristiques atypiques des activités informelles. Dans le présent article, je documente certaines de ces organisations de travailleurs informels autonomes en Inde. En documentant les caractéristiques et fonctions de ces organisations, je soutiens que celles-ci offrent un modèle d'action collective pour les travailleurs informels. Ces associations sont des organisations de travailleurs informels *sui generis* qui pourraient devenir le précurseur d'une initiative mondiale de travailleurs informels axée sur la solidarité.

Mots-clés: travailleurs informels, Inde, action collective, regroupement, syndicat

#### ABSTRACT

In India, more than 90% of the workforce is informal. In spite of this enormous percentage of informal workers, informal workers remain excluded from law and policy circles. One reason for such exclusion and invisibility emanates from the absence of trade unionism involving informal workers. Overcoming this invisibility, informal workers are increasingly organizing into associations that differ from traditional trade unions. These organizations devise their strategies and their legal statuses in view of the atypical characteristics of informal activities. In this article, I document some of these organizations of self-employed informal workers in India. By documenting the characteristics and functions of these organizations, I contend that these organizations offer a model for collective action by informal workers. I argue that these associations of informal workers are a *sui generis* organization of informal workers, and could become a precursor to solidarity-based initiative by informal workers globally.

Keywords: informal workers, India, collective action, aggregation, trade union

#### RESUMEN — ROUTH

En la India, más del 90% de la mano de obra es informal. A pesar de este enorme porcentaje de trabajadores informales, éstos permanecen excluidos de los ciclos de la ley y las políticas. Una de las razones para tal exclusión e invisibilidad proviene de la ausencia de un sindicalismo que tome en cuenta a los trabajadores informales. Para superar esta invisibilidad, los trabajadores informales se están organizando cada vez más en asociaciones diferentes a las tradicionales agremiaciones sindicales. Estas organizaciones diseñan sus estrategias y estatutos legales teniendo en cuenta las características atípicas de sus actividades informales. En este artículo se documentan algunas de estas organizaciones de trabajadores independientes de trabajo informal en la India. Al documentar las características y funciones de estas organizaciones, se afirma que estas organizaciones ofrecen a los trabajadores informales un modelo de acción colectiva. Se argumenta que estas asociaciones de trabajadores informales son creaciones *sui generis* y pueden llegar a ser precursores de iniciativas basadas en la solidaridad de los trabajadores informales a escala global.

Palabras clave: trabajadores informales, India, acción colectiva, agregación, agremiación sindical

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