

Work in art, art in work: [un]changing representations of work in the art of Kiron Sinha

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While in European art there has been a long tradition of the depiction of people at work, this only formed part of the art repertoire in India in the early part of the 20th century. Kiron Sinha, one of the Bengal School of artists, sketched and painted people at work in rural India thus providing us with a record of the nature of rural work from the 1930s-1970s. We have analysed the paintings and sketches made by Sinha of women undertaking work in rural India. We see them engaged in various tasks that require manual material handling (MMH) and awkward postures. We compare these images with similar tasks being undertaken in India currently and find that very little has changed. The nature of work Sinha portrayed exists today, still in the informal sector and still characterised by long work hours, poor conditions of work, low pay, low job security and a subsistence lifestyle. Despite a surge in the technological capabilities of India, we see that there has been little change in the methods of work and required skill sets of rural women workers engaged in the informal sector. With over 70% of Indians directly engaged in MMH, the physiological stress on workers across India remains high. This is an issue especially pertinent to women as they are more reliant on the informal sector than men. Sinha's work provides compelling evidence of the lack of change, reinforces the need for change, and gives us a timely reminder of the opportunities for improvement in healthy and safe work for rural women into the future.

Keywords: Kiron Sinha, representation of work in art, Indian labour, informal sector, rural women

1. Introduction

Depictions of European peasants at work included in the medieval Calendar cycles from the 12th to 16th centuries (Alexander 1990), provide us with information about the lives of working people that are otherwise difficult to access from that time. From about the mid-19th Century, European artists took an increasingly political approach to their work (Barringer 2005). Artists such as Degas, Seurat and van Gogh depicted the social condition of people at work as they portrayed the everyday life that they saw around them (Herbert 2001). Today, their works provide a unique visual insight into the nature of work at the time.

In medieval India, artists focused on idealised religious themes and the lives of the royals and aristocracy at the hunt, in battle, and during their lovemaking, while little attention was paid to ordinary people (Ravindran Arora, Ramya, Subba Rao, and Raj 2011). During the first half of the 20th Century a group of artists, who came to be known as the Bengal School, began to portray people in everyday situations (Herwitz 2004). They did this in the context of the socio-political changes leading to Indian Independence (Osman 1997). While establishing a new Indian art style, their work reflected ancient traditions in modern times. The so-called Bengal School was most active in India in the early 20th Century at the time of the British Raj. It was an influential movement in both the Indian art world and the Indian independence movement (Guha-Thakurta 2005). It was centred in Calcutta [Kolkata] and Santiniketan, West Bengal, and fostered by Nobel-laureate, Rabindranath Tagore, and his nephew, Abindranath Tagore. In Santiniketan, Rabindranath Tagore founded the Visva Bharati University and appointed well-known artist, Nandalal Bose, as head of Kala Bhavan [the art school] (Dasgupta 2004). He and his associates fostered a modern mode of thinking in Indian art, aimed at developing a new Indian style that was not dependent on colonial influences (Elmhirst 1975; Eaton 2013). Kiron Sinha (1916-2009) was a unique member of this group.

In the early 1930s Sinha trained as an artist under Nandalal Bose at the Visva-Bharati University, but he was also greatly influenced by the use of light by the European Masters and the Impressionists; an influence that was rejected by Bose at that time. Sinha's work reflected the everyday reality of ordinary people

because he sketched and painted from life. Between the 1930s and 1970s he regularly travelled to the Santal villages surrounding Santiniketan (Kochar 1970) and sketched people going about their everyday work. In fact, in the early 1950s he was accompanied by the then young student, A. Ramachandran, now acknowledged as a master Indian painter and sculptor. Together in the villages and surrounding fields they sketched people at work, providing a valuable reflection of the nature of rural life and work in those times. A. Ramachandran regarded Mr Sinha as a “very fine artist who understood the local people and recorded their lives” (private communication). In painting what he saw in the villages, without traditional idealisation, Sinha provides us with an accurate, ‘at-the-time’, historical view of rural India at work, in pieces produced between the 1930s and the 1970s.

Much has changed in India since the beginning of the 20th century, but much is left unchanged, particularly in the nature of labour for rural women in the informal sector. In this paper, we examine the representation of rural women’s work by Sinha and compare it to the current reality.

1.1 The informal sector

The National Commission for Enterprises in the Unorganized Sector (NCEUS), also known as the Arjun Sengupta Committee, was established to advise the Indian government on the nature of work in the informal sector. In the Indian context, the term “informal sector” (used interchangeably with “unorganised sector”) is defined as:

...[consisting] of all unincorporated private enterprises owned by individuals or households engaged in the sale or production of goods and services operated on a proprietary or partnership basis and with less than ten total workers (NCEUS 2008: 3).

“Informal workers” (used interchangeably with “unorganised workers”) are defined as:

...those working in unorganised enterprises or households, excluding regular workers with social security benefits, and the workers in the formal sector without any employment/social security benefits provided by the employer (NCEUS 2008: 3).

Formal sector workers have both permanent employment and are awarded social security; neither of these provisions is available to workers in the informal sector (Bhowmik 2009). The vast majority of Indian workers are in the informal sector and are therefore, informal workers. According to the final report of the NCEUS, workers in the unorganised sector constitute more than 93% of the total workforce of India. Women at least equal men in the numbers employed in the informal sector (NCEUS 2009a: 1).

There are many different types of jobs in the informal sector but they tend to share some common characteristics: lack of job security and autonomy (no work-no pay system), lack of additional allowances, often casual or seasonal, having irregular work schedules, requiring intense human labour, and prolonged working hours. Workers in the informal sector belong to low socio-economic groups and in order to obtain basic needs they have to consistently perform strenuous jobs throughout the year (NCEUS 2009a: 60). They have limited opportunity for the relief of holidays or weekends. They are more likely to suffer from different health problems from workers in secure employment. Most of them are victims of work stress leading to mental fatigue. They suffer from diverse physical discomforts, including musculoskeletal discomfort, due to excess workload, awkward working postures and physical fatigue (NCEUS 2009b: 149) as illustrated in Mr Sinha’s work. Together these factors lead to poor occupational health status.

1.2 Women in the informal sector

While both men and women work in the informal sector, women are marginalised by the double burden of reproductive labour and domestic labour in addition to their paid work. They therefore suffer considerable disadvantage and this is increased for women living and working in rural areas (Pandya and Patel 2010). It is also evident that women workers rely more on the informal sector than men (Geetika, Singh and Gupta 2011). An estimate by the World Bank shows that 90% of the women working in the informal sector are not included in the official statistics and their work is undocumented and considered as disguised wage work, unskilled and low paying (Geetika et al 2011). The majority of women in the informal sector work for low and highly unequal wages compared to their male counterparts. Much of women’s work remains unrecognized, uncounted and unpaid: work in the home, in agriculture, food production and the marketing of homemade products. According to the 2011 Indian Census, 25.6% of the female population is designated as ‘workers’.

During 2005-06, Work Participation Rate (WPR) of women was about 31% in rural areas and 14% in urban areas according to the Indian Census. The unemployment rate of women is found to have declined from 3.1% in 2004-05 to 2.2% in 2005-06 in rural areas and from 9.1% to 7.9% in the corresponding years in urban areas. Women's work, particularly in rural areas, is also diminished by women's low education levels and their marginal participation in the workforce where they may only be employed for part of a year (NCEUS 2009b: 35, 41, 51). The status of women's employment in rural India continues to decline (NCEUS 2009b: 64-65), so it is perhaps no surprise that women are reporting the highest levels of stress, stress-related illness, burnout and depression ever recorded (NIOSH, 1999). The impact of the situation reaches far beyond the workplace, into the home and the personal wellbeing of women

2. Method

The largest collection of Sinha's artworks is held by BulbulArt in Australia. An initial analysis of the full body of Sinha's works systematically reviewed the collection to select representations of rural women's work. Following this, a visual content analysis was conducted on the selected works to identify recurring themes (Van Leeuwen and Jewitt 2001).

Using these historical data as well as interviews conducted with the artist and his wife (in the period 2007- 2011), the socio-political context of the subject matter was established. The images were compared to the current work situation for women in rural village environments based on the literature and the experience and observations of the authors.

3. Results

Our analysis of the images of Sinha indicates that women in rural India from the 1930s to the 1970s performed labour intensive, physiologically demanding tasks involving manual handling of heavy loads, and awkward and sustained postures. The images portray women engaged in work activities in mining, construction, agriculture, textile manufacturing and embroidery, cleaning, and retail. Tasks included: carrying product or construction materials in baskets, or water in vessels, on their heads; manipulating materials, making bricks; crushing or compressing stone; mixing mortar; bending to plant rice and other crops; harvesting crops; stretching overhead to pick fruit; sweeping; sewing and weaving; standing or sitting in the fair or market, and working with children in tow (as illustrative of the double workload of women workers). The artworks do not indicate the nature of the workers' employment, their hours of work, their pay rates and working conditions, or their occupational exposure to various hazards.

While aspects of work have changed in India in recent years with increasing emphasis on service industries, work in rural village environments and in physical tasks in construction, MMH, and manufacturing have changed very little. This is particularly so for women workers who work outside the home, as the following contemporary images reveal. Women are still commonly found on mine sites, on construction sites, and in the fields working side-by-side with men. They are most often used as couriers of materials with heavy loads transported on their heads. Alternatively, they work in their homes in addition to their household duties. For example, Chikan embroidery (using cutwork and shadow work) workers are part of the informal sector. They are typically women from rural areas and lower socioeconomic classes. While, there are no reliable approximations of the number of embroiderers worldwide, Wilkinson-Weber (1997) estimates that there are between 30,000 and 100,000 in India.

3.1 Women in mining in the informal sector

Women are estimated to make up the majority of low-status, marginal workers in the informal sector in the mining industry, although this is difficult to quantify because either data are not collected, or illegal and scavenging activities are not revealed in census data (Mukhopadhaya and Lahiri-Dutt. 2014). In this traditional 'macho' industry, women mine workers are poorly acknowledged and relatively easily exploited; especially in the informal sector where highly exploitative, bonded labour of women is common (Ghose 2004). The conditions of work for women are poor compared to their male counterparts, with lower wages, non-existent safety conditions, and no paid holidays even for childbirth (Ghose 2004). In Sinha's time their work consisted of heavy labouring, as it remains in contemporary time as illustrated in Figure 1.



Figure 1. L: *At Work* by Kiron Sinha. C: *At the Mine* by Kiron Sinha. R: *Jharia Mining 1* by Daniel Berehulak

In 2013 in Midnapore (West-Bengal), on an illegal mine site in Figure 2, women were actively engaged in digging up gravel from the river bed in the pre-dawn hours, then used as labourers to transport baskets of gravel to waiting trucks parked on solid ground about 300m away. We estimate the weight of these loads to be 35kg. Apart from the size of the stones, the work is almost identical to that portrayed by Sinha in Figure 2, which depicts the man and woman in the process of lifting the full basket onto the woman's head. Often two or three people will help to raise the basket onto the head of the waiting woman. She is also likely to have helped to fill the basket, so her rest time is minimal.



Figure 2. L: *Preparing the load* by Kiron Sinha. R: *Midnapore Mining 1 & 2* by Verna Blewett

Women workers near mine sites may make their living by scavenging on tailings dumps or engaging in illegal mining operations by the side or larger, legal operations. They are subject to work-related injury and illnesses as well as physical and sexual harassment by police, guards and local criminals (Ghose 2004).

3.2 Women in construction in the informal sector

Even large, urban construction sites in India are still labour-intensive today and women play a significant role in the workforce. While they represent just over half of all employees, they are almost exclusively employed as casual manual labourers with limited opportunity for skill development in trades (Baruah 2010). Women are often not even registered as workers with the employer, they merely accompany the males along with other family members, thus they may “remain invisible to statistics, policy and social security provisions” (NCEUS 2009b: 143). NCEUS (2009b: 143) estimates that 83% of all construction workers are employed by labour contractors; they work with no minimum employment protection or other benefits; poor working conditions; less than full wages; with no-one taking responsibility for their welfare.

Construction work, such as brick-making, is characterised by awkward postures, long hours of work, fatigue (work days being typically 12-14 hours per day), and the concomitant potential for severe musculo-skeletal injuries (Das 2014; Lakhani 2004; NCEUS 2009b: 143;).

The painting by Sinha seen in Figure 3 depicts women undertaking a variety of tasks in road construction including, in the foreground, using a *durmush* (Bengali). This implement has a very heavy base made of solid iron, like a large hammer head, fixed to a long, wooden pole that provides the handle. It was used by road construction workers to pound the upper surface of the road to make it even, flat and smooth. It is rarely used today, the *durmush* being effectively replaced by mechanical rollers, operated by men. However, despite the introduction of machinery on construction sites, for women the labour is still predominantly manual as depicted in Figure 3; this is especially so in rural areas.



Figure 3. L: *Construction site* by Kiron Sinha. R: Woman labourers work at a road construction site by Reuters.

3.3 Women in agriculture in the informal sector

Women have a considerable load in agricultural work in rural India because they are often left to manage the fields while the men travel to the urban centres in search of work (Singh 2007, Singh 2014). Much of the work comprises subsistence farming on small plots of land, or work for larger landholders. Agricultural work is particularly pernicious for its bonded labour (workers with so-called “unfreedom”); such arrangements deny workers the capacity to negotiate working conditions or to change work, and they are typically paid less than the minimum wage (NCEUS 2009b: 147). The work pays poorly, the hours of work are long and the work itself requires sustained, awkward postures and manually handling heavy loads. Rice cultivation is a major industry in West Bengal and the nature of production has changed little since Sinha sketched women in the fields in the 1950s, as shown in Figure 4.



Figure 4. L: *Planting Rice* by Kiron Sinha. R: *Cultivating Rice* by McKay Savage © Creative Commons.

3.4 Women in textiles in the informal sector

India's fine tradition of embroidered and decorated textiles has long depended on skilled, women workers who stitch in small groups in workplaces, or who undertake work at home in their 'spare' time, as Sinha depicted in the 1940s in Figure 5. Recent research found that Chikan embroidery workers are engaged in a highly repetitive hand intensive job, which increases their susceptibility to carpal tunnel syndrome (Gangopadhyay, Chakrabarty, Sarkar, Dev, Das and Banerjee 2014).

Modern practice is little changed from the earlier times with such work being identified as a leisure-time activity, but that is in fact undertaken by women on piece rates and identified as a persistent form of exploitative production (Wilkinson-Weber 2004). Recently there has been growth in the development of large clusters of small operators banding together to provide vertical integration in garment and textile manufacturing for export markets (NCEUS 2009b: 344) generating significant foreign exchange (Hiremath, Kattumur, Kumar and Hiremath 2014). Such arrangements can lead to improved autonomy for workers, but there is equally the opportunity for increased exploitation through dependence, skill loss and work intensification (NCEUS 2009b: 346-347).



Figure 5. L: *Stitching* by Kiron Sinha. R: *Embroidery* by Somnath Gangopadhyay

Handloom woven cloth remains a popular and sought after product throughout India with both men and women engaged in the work. Looms used in modern handloom production differ little from those in use in the 1950s as shown in Figure 6 and they are regarded as the "lowest in the hierarchy of technologies of textile manufacturing" (NCEUS 2009b: 151). Handloom weavers conducting work at home are reported to be among the most indebted of India's informal workers with increasing loss of power over middlemen in the purchase of raw materials and marketing of their products. Thus they experience long hours of work (typically 12-17 hours per day), increased overheads, decreasing income and diminished bargaining power in the market place (NCEUS 2009b: 143, 151). The health and safety implications of their work are significant and include declining eyesight, dust-related respiratory problems, and musculoskeletal problems (Hiremath et al 2014).

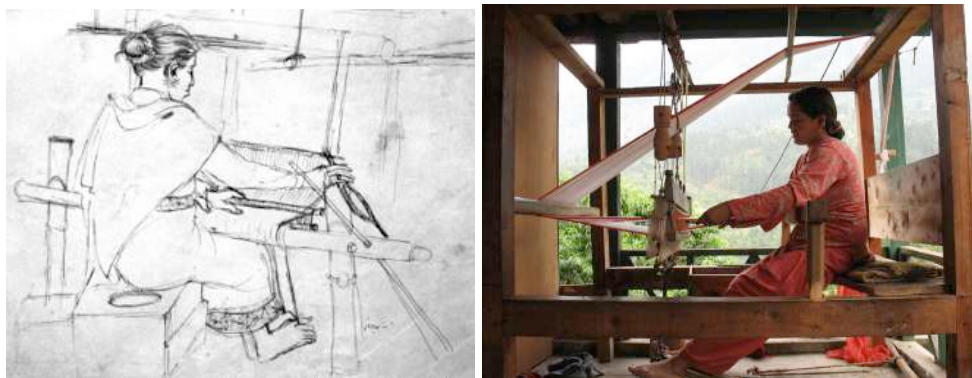


Figure 6. L: *At the Loom* by Kiron Sinha. R: *A Woman Weaving* by Shefshef © Creative Commons

3.5 Women in cleaning in the informal sector

Keeping homes and workplaces clean is not only women's work, but women predominate in this work using traditional brooms as seen in Figure 7. The short broom, which is more common, is used with a sustained, stooped posture.



Figure 7. L: *Sweepers* by Kiron Sinha. R: *Sweeping* by Anne T Bell.

The contemporary situation has changed little for these women. Women sweepers represent a particularly vulnerable group in the Indian community; being regarded as untouchable they are socioeconomically isolated from the mainstream community (Das, Pradhan, Mandal, Ali, Maiti, and Ghosh. 2013). Their education levels are very low, they are very poor, they are ignorant of their rights at work, and like women in other occupations, tend to put the needs of their children and male members of the household before their own—to their own detriment (Das et al 2013). However, their poor levels of knowledge about personal hygiene and occupational health are capable of being addressed. Recent research has shown that good results can be achieved if treated as a public health initiative at the community-level (Das et al 2013).

4. Discussion

Despite a surge in the technological capabilities of India, we see that there has been little change in the methods of work and required skill sets of rural women workers engaged in the informal sector. Historical depictions of work through the art of Sinha reflect the lack of change in some work settings in India, particularly in mining, the rural construction industry, agriculture and MMH tasks. With over 70% of Indians directly engaged in MMH, the physiological stress on workers across India is still high (NCEUS 2009a). This is an issue especially pertinent to women as they are more reliant on the informal sector than men.

Trades unions in India have a 90-year history, but the coverage is mainly workers in the formal sector (Bhowmik 2009). Overall, the trade union movement is fragmented and politicised and demonstrates indifference to informal workers (Bhowmik 2009). In the last 40 years the development of trade unions and employment associations for women (such as the Self-Employed Women's Association—SEWA) have improved women's voice in the industrial environment and are starting to break down barriers; but the participation rate is small and progress is slow (Baruah 2010). However, as Bhowmik (2009) asserts, the "minor gains informal sector workers have got are due to their ability to unionise".

Visual representations of rural women at work by Kiron Sinha provide compelling evidence of the lack of change as well as reinforcing the need for change. His body of work allows us to learn from the past in order to improve the opportunities for healthy and safe work for rural women into the future.

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