

January 21, 2026

When Trump's Tariffs Come for Bengaluru's Garment Workers

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With US tariffs, Bengaluru's garment factories face the threat of cancelled orders or orders that may never come, creating greater insecurity in an already insecure employment terrain.

Much has been written about United States' President Donald Trump's decision to impose heavy tariffs on India. Its impact on the manufacturing sector, particularly the textile and apparel industry, and the potential consequences for lakhs of garment (women) workers have also been [laid out](#).

The threat of tariffs that the US president is currently trumpeting has to do with the entrenchment of global supply chains linking global North and South since at least the 2000s. Even though power has skewed towards private corporations headquartered in global north countries, footloose global capital found some degree of resistance from a combination of local, national and transnational organising and collectivising. In the garment global supply chain, domestic unions and workers' collectives have proliferated in apparel-producing countries to demand accountability from transnational apparel corporations. Where this work has centred labour rights, it has been undertaken under extremely difficult circumstances.

What, then, does this moment of Trump's tariffs represent for labour rights and labour organising? I narrate this story from Bengaluru, which while being better known for being an Information Technology city, is also a garment city. The city has over five lakh garment workers, most of whom are women, and produces apparel for some of the largest and well-known clothing brands in the world. Bengaluru's story as a garment city is simultaneously global, national and local.

Apparel Policies

The expansion of the global ready-made apparel sector was largely driven by the phasing out of the Multi-Fibre Agreements (MFA) from 1995 onwards. The MFA was an agreement that restricted the export of apparel from countries in the global South to countries in the global North to pre-allocated quotas. While this was done in order to protect the domestic apparel industry in the latter set of countries, what it essentially did was to engineer a wider geographical spread of the production process.

If in the 1950s, newly industrialising countries such as Japan, Taiwan, Hong Kong, and South Korea began to export low-cost apparel to developed countries, the introduction of the MFA resulted in garment entrepreneurs in these countries shifting their apparel production to China, Vietnam, and South Asian countries to make use of the quotas allotted to these countries (Alam et al. 2018). These countries retained their share of apparel production even after the MFA was withdrawn across the world.

It is time for the Indian state to recognise that capital will always remain footloose and that ensuring security and dignity to working classes is what will help retain its legitimacy.

In India, the export-oriented garment industry began in the 1960s. The first phase which lasted up to the mid-1980s was driven by a demand for Indian handloom garments in the US and Europe. The second phase from the mid-1980s saw a steady growth in knitwear garments with this segment overtaking handloom exports significantly between 1980s and 2000s (Roy 1998). This growth was accompanied by changes in state regulation of garment production. In the initial decades of post-independence India, the apparel sector had been reserved for the small-scale sector and a large number of small units were set up by entrepreneurs leading to a "decentralised and networked production structure". From 1985 onwards, deregulation of the industry began and technical modernisation enabled firms to increase capacity (Murayama 2008). With economic liberalisation in the 1990s, national textile policies began to encourage exports, and the import of machinery and other necessary items were no longer prohibited. Such measures allowed for the ready-made apparel sector to expand its operations.

These related changes in the international and national context (introduction of MFA, phasing out of the MFA, liberalisation in India in the 1990s and deregulation of the sectors), have had their bearing on the ready-made apparel sector in Bengaluru. As Alessandro Mezzadri (2016) has shown, the city's growth as an export centre from the early decades of 2000s has been accompanied not only by

an increase in manufacturing capacity but also the relocation of garment units from Mumbai to the city and consolidation of production inside factories.

Bengaluru's Garment Workforce

It was around the same time that multiple changes were taking place within the garment factory itself. First was a shift from a piece-work system where skilled (male) tailors were employed to stitch entire garments to an assembly line production, where different components of a single product are manufactured and assembled along a chain of workers, called the assembly line. This is executed by a batch system where workers are divided into different batches and assigned roles along the assembly line.

This form of production employed women in large numbers. This marks the second shift-a change in the composition of the workforce. Starting from the late 1990s, women migrated or commuted daily to the city from nearby towns and villages to work in the garment factory. Most were women who could no longer rely on the farming sector to keep their families afloat. These women were first-generation in many ways: coming from agricultural castes in the old Mysuru region where women often worked within the household or occasionally on the family-owned fields. The women who joined garment factories in this period had no familial tradition of women undertaking paid employment, and that too in a factory. Many of these first-generation industrial women workers who were also migrants in a globalising city. The precarities these intersections entailed, however, remained obscured from public scrutiny until welfare organisations Garment Mahila Karmikara Munnade (Munnade) and the Garment and Textile Workers' Union (GATWU) entered the fray in the early 2000s to organise the new emerging women-led workforce in the city.

Transnational Connections

Part of the origins of Munnade and GATWU lie in activism in Europe in the late 1990s and early 2000s, with growing concerns about the exploitative conditions under which garments were being produced in countries of the global South. Known broadly as the anti-sweatshop movement, a number of campaigns began to emerge in these European countries where the apparel brands were headquartered. Studying the Clean Clothes Campaign, a crucial transnational actor in garment activism, Philip Balsinger (2014) has argued that anti-sweatshop campaigns were influenced by the slowly rising global justice movement against the effects of free trade and neo-liberalist policies and that these anti-sweatshop campaigns managed to put labour rights violations along global supply chains on the public agenda. Further, this led to the establishment of transnational advocacy networks comprising a variety of actors such as NGOs, foundations, elements of the media, churches, trade unions, and parts of intergovernmental organisations or governments (Garwood, 2005).

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Such newly formed global campaigns and organisations reached out to civil society organisations in countries such as India to gather together evidence on egregious violations. This also kickstarted a flow of funds from Europe to India in the form of grants and projects to set up civil society organisations, worker resource centres and so on to engage with garment workers and factories here.

One such organisation that began collaborations with international organisations was the Bangalore-based CIVIDEP. When Oxfam initiated a project to study the entire cotton supply chain in 2002, it partnered with the then newly formed CIVIDEP, to undertake organising (not necessarily unionising) garment factory workers. Oxfam's support enabled CIVIDEP to form Munnade which undertook a range of activities that brought women workers together (Rao and Muralidhar 2007). Former and presently employed garment workers and former middle-management officials from garment factories were brought together in a developing collective in this period of the early 2000s through the activities initiated by CIVIDEP and Fedina, another NGO. The nature of this collective is important to note: none of these were individuals with any connections with formal and conventional trade union organising.

Unionising within a female-dominated workforce was extremely challenging, if not impossible, given that women workers suffered from time poverty and often did not also consider themselves as workers. With responsibilities to the family holding priority over everything else (reports abound of the kinds of 'production torture' women face), GATWU's challenges have been formidable. Further, for activists themselves, the labour movement in Mumbai which led to the closure of scores of mills and the loss of thousands of jobs were a reality to contend with. Closer home, industrial action undertaken by Centre of Indian Trade Unions (CITU) at Ashoka Exports had led to the closure of the factory. Given such previous organising efforts in the garment industry had led to massive industrial closures, there was understandable apprehension among organisers, and likely some workers, about unionising. Nevertheless, garment organising efforts began with creating welfare-based initiatives for garment workers and then if any egregious instances of violation taking place in

garment factories came to light, to initiate action to support the worker/s. One such measure was to reach out to apparel corporations ('brands', as they are called colloquially).

Transnational connections to organising then accompanied the spread of garment capital to various parts of the world. Domestic unions such as GATWU benefited from being part of these efforts of organising across the supply chain. Importantly, initial learnings here, particularly the limited success in transnational collaborations which relied on appealing to clothing brands pushed GATWU to break new ground. Since 2007, the union has been engaged in campaigning with the state government for higher minimum wages and has achieved some periodic successes. Thus even as global supply chains proliferated, new forms, modes and practices of labour organising have also emerged as critical responses.

Capital wins, again?

However, with the US tariffs, Bengaluru's garment factories face the threat of cancelled orders or orders that may never come, creating greater insecurity in an already insecure employment terrain. With transnational apparel corporations [pushing suppliers](#) to absorb the cost of tariffs, it may seem, yet again, that imperial and global capital has won. Solutions like [diversifying export markets](#) are being proposed. This seems more like a band-aid solution. Instead, this represents an opportunity for transnational advocacy networks to shed hierarchies and work with domestic unions with renewed focus on ensuring apparel corporations recognise themselves as primary employers of workers in their supply chain. It is also time for the Indian state to recognise that capital will always remain footloose and that ensuring security and dignity to working classes is what will help retain its legitimacy. That may seem an uphill battle though if labour codes and the new struggle shaping up around it are an indication.

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