

Home-based Worker's Oral History



Home-based work and the Elderly: Manjula from Nashik

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Manjula, 60 years, is a home-based worker. She does *thibbak* work for a company, which refers to assembling plastic components of irrigation equipment. Several women in her community perform this task. Manjula's family comprises her husband, two grown sons, a daughter-in-law, and two grandkids. One of her sons works in the police force, while the other is a stockmarket agent. Her husband owns a *paan* shop. Over the past five years, Manjula has been assembling these plastic irrigation components together. Before that, she was a skilled cook and made food in her employers' homes for 22 years. Due to her age, she had to give that up and hence she turned to home-based work.

Manjula receives two full sacks of 2000 irrigation pipe-pieces, they are usually of two types (1000 each), which must be connected together. At first, the pieces are manually fitted together loosely. Afterwards, the conjoined piece is hammered to create the finished product. A middleman delivers these components in the morning, and returns to pick up the finished products in the evening. It is not just Manjula's efforts that go into making these pieces. She is also assisted by her daughter-in-law, who earlier worked in an insurance company. Together, the two ladies can assemble a maximum of 1000-1500 pieces per day. For every bunch of completed 1000 pieces, Manjula receives Rs. 25. That works out to Rs. 0.025 per piece. This is inhuman wage for a day's worth of work. They are paid the entire amount on a monthly basis, and the payment can be delayed. This work was the only source of income for the family during COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent lockdown. Manjula complains of back pain due to sitting for long hours. This work more than a source of income is a source of using time for doing something meaningful with their time.

Poor women such as Manjula, turn to livelihood opportunities in the informal economy to support their families. However, in this case, Manjula's daughter-in-law also moved out of the formal sector and took up informal work. It shows how generations get stuck in informal employment, and a cycle of poverty is created.

This story shows how informal workers can be found along different sections in international supply chains, such as the agri-supply chain, wherein the presence of informal workers is geographically extensive. The big brands and high level contractors take away all the profit margins, leaving elderly workers like Manjula to make do with crumbs along the way.