

## PREFACE

The 1973 International Labour office report on Kenya and its use of the term 'informal sector' sparked off a great deal of controversy in the development literature over the meaning and usefulness of such a concept. A number of theoretical and empirical studies have been conducted, in the meantime, to highlight the problems and prospects of the informal sector all throughout the world. The researchers across the world are of the opinion that informal sector is fundamentally diverse in nature in the sense that the opening of employment opportunity is more than it is in the formal sector. To be more specific, as the chances of women to get employment in the formal sector are much less than the advantageously placed males, the informal sector is the main source of their employment all throughout the world, particularly in the less developed countries.

It is a well known fact that though women are an increasing part of the labour force, they continue to suffer disadvantages in terms of benefits, job mobility and occupational segregation. In India, they are very much part and parcel of the labour market but their role is less recognised. It is so because most of them are engaged in the informal sector activities which often do not have the immediate exchange values or at the most less exchange values. As such, the potentials of the informal sector have remained undermined. A number of theoretical as well as empirical studies on the informal sector and on the socio-economic aspects of women workers have been undertaken by the researchers in Indian context. But these two issues have been treated as two separate aspects. It is an irony that even the researchers have neglected the lowest strata women workers of the informal sector by not dealing with their problems and the contributions they are making. This thesis is

a sincere attempt towards exploring the problems and prospects of the women engaged in the informal sector activities such as agriculture, domestic service, construction work, petty trade, homebased manufacturing and a few other self-employment activities. For the purpose, the women workers of the hill areas of Darjeeling district in West Bengal have been considered to be the focal point of our discussion. This study has tried to examine their multiple problems at micro level, tested the probability of potential growth and suggested some course of actions that may lead to the improvement in the status of these neglected women.

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