

Not Just The Australian Open, Tiruppur Has Led Recycling Efforts And Homeworkers Are At The Centre Of It



This year, the Australian Open brought cheer to India's leading garment hub – Tiruppur. [The Hindu](#), a national daily, reported that ball boys and girls along with courtside statisticians, at the tournament, donned clothes especially tailored in Tiruppur. And these were no ordinary uniforms either. A local export house – NC John & Sons – crafted around 25,000 garments using close to 200,000 PET bottles. This is a massive conservation effort at a time when the global garment industry has come under increasing scrutiny for the damage it causes the environment.

Tiruppur – a busy garment hub in the Southern state of Tamil Nadu in India – has been in business since the 1970s. Here, huge factories, small-scale units and homeworkers are all part a booming business that produces garments for leading fast fashion brands, from around the world, as well as for the domestic market. The cost of churning out trendy clothes includes the generation of tonnes of waste on a daily basis.

However, efforts made by the likes of NC John & Sons, while laudable, are fairly recent. This does not mean that Tiruppur has ignored recycling efforts. Alongside the garment industry, Tiruppur has also been home to recycling units – big and small – that take on the fabric waste that flows out of factories and manufacturing units. And homeworkers play an important role in the running of these recycling units.

Homeworkers Are Recyclers



On a hot afternoon, 63-year-old Ramatha walks in, with a plastic bag in hand, to the courtyard of a temple near her home. She is barefoot and clad in a pink and orange saree that she wears with a fading green blouse. Once she settles down on the floor, Ramatha pulls out reams of grey, stretchy fabric from the plastic bag that she carries. Using a small blade, she starts shredding the fabric – releasing minute particles of fabric dust into the air.

Ramatha says that every two days she heads to specialised warehouses in Tiruppur to collect a bag of scrap fabric. She takes two days to shred through one kilo of fabric for which she earns INR 25 (approximately 35 cents). In a month, she says, she is able to shred around 25 – 30 kilos. And uses the money to supplement her income as a domestic worker. The shredded fabric that she returns to the warehouse goes into the making of vehicle tires.

Apart from shredding fabric, homeworkers, in Tiruppur, are also involved in sorting of fabric. In Tiruppur, small work sheds attached to homes are a common sight. Here, homeworkers – either the adults in a family or workers from a neighbourhood – come together to make their way through piles of discarded fabric. They usually sit on bare floors and sort the fabric without any masks to protect them.

A Price To Pay

Homeworkers take on the important task of recycling in Tiruppur. However, it holds few benefits for them. Their incomes, for their efforts, are meagre. And, they often, contract long-term health problems. Ramatha, who shreds fabric, says that she has trouble breathing and often spends a substantial chunk of her income on medical bills.

Considering their immense contributions to recycling and conservation efforts, homeworkers should be safeguarded against issues arising around occupational safety and health. Factories and contractors hiring homeworkers can equip them with safety masks and their work sheds with comfortable seating and fire extinguishers. The piece-rates extended to these workers too need to cover any medical costs they incur. Here, the Government too can step in and ensure healthcare facilities that are accessible to homeworkers. The Government's menu of healthcare services also needs to cover the needs of the homeworkers and ensure they receive prompt and consistent care.



Additionally, Government action should also include the formulation of laws that protect homeworkers. Legally recognising them as workers and ensuring their rights will strengthen homemaker initiatives that seek to establish fair wages and decent work conditions.

While Tiruppur and India basks in the glory of its recycling efforts – that have grabbed headlines at one of the world's leading sporting events – it is important to acknowledge the efforts of the workers who make these achievements possible.