

Executive Summary

This work owes its genesis to a careful examination of the voluminous literature available both in virtual and physical versions on subjects closely akin to, but not necessarily indebted to the subject of this work thereby creating a lacuna of unawareness only to be enriched through a single-minded approach.

Against the backdrop of a swelling population, growing income levels, compelling and rapid urbanisation, strengthening demographics, entry of organised market players and mushrooming of retailers ensuring wider and deeper market penetration, Indian retail industry is registering a phenomenal growth rate from employment and turnover perspectives and is estimated to rank second only to agriculture. According to a recent research find, clothing, textile and fashion accessories constitute the second largest block of the total retail market after food and grocery. With a near 14% contribution to the total industrial production in the country, textile industry is the biggest earner of foreign exchange among the various industrial sectors. In terms of employment generation for both skilled and unskilled labour, this has been, by tradition, the second biggest sector after agriculture and provides direct employment opportunities to around 35 million people thereby earning the status of one of the most beneficial and resourceful sectors in the industrial portfolio.

However in Kerala, textile manufacturing units particularly from the traditional stock ran into rough weather owing to declining manpower on account of meagre wages, low productivity, antiquated technology, insufficient product diversification, inability to feel the demands of the day and competition from other states. The state however is becoming a sprawling and dense market showcasing its own home produce through both small and large retail outlets across its length and breadth with resultant generation of additional employment.

Kerala features among the top consumer states and in textile consumption too. The role of the sales force that sustains and strengthens the retail industry, particularly textile retail outlets, deserves recognition and appreciation in no uncertain terms in the face of growing competition and rising and changing consumer expectations. Women constitute a significant portion of this fraternity owing to their inherent adaptive skills and the much sought after feminine touch to the art of selling.

Kochi has become the commercial and industrial hub of the state owing to its geographical advantages and a pronounced presence of information technology, stock exchange, chemical industry, electronics hardware, ship building, container terminal, oil refinery, spices and sea food and a multitude of retail ventures with particular reference to textile retail industry. With more than a thousand textile and garment retail outlets, large and small strewn around the city, employment potential looks promising and enticing.

However, beneath the promise, the possibility and the glitter these retail outfits radiate, lie buried certain stark realities, painful enough to justify investment of time and effort to conduct a careful study of and that forms the cardinal objective of this work. The aspects of the investigation trajectory can be broken down into:

- Labour input (workload)
- Compensation - remunerative and non-remunerative
- Training and motivation
- Interaction with supervisors
- Relationship with co-workers
- Customer engagement

- Organisational integrity
- Work life management
- Occupational contentment

What has emerged out of the field interviews conducted with employees of some of the leading retail outlets, spoke volumes of the hardships their work environment thrust upon them and were often a distinct narrative of inequality, gender exploitation and gender hierarchy, regimental work culture, frugal remuneration, unlawfully long work hours and consequent health concerns; all contributing in sufficient measure to a deep seated sense of discontentment and disillusionment. Coming largely from a deficient socio-economic background with little or no work exposure or professional skill, often their vocational choice is dictated by personal and family circumstances. Notwithstanding the hands-on on-site engagement which carried possible occurrence of understatement, there has also been a compelling need to adopt a heuristic approach as verification means and the results proved the inevitability of preserving a healthy employee-employer engagement resulting in suppression of realities on such areas of sensitivity. The findings are therefore necessarily representative of both admissions and observations.

The work itself is confined to Kochi corporation limits of Ernakulam district and owes integrity largely to the respondents' perspectives on the structured interview schedule though empirical information has at times been resorted to, for inference validation as stated in the preceding section.