

**Gender Discrimination for Working Women in Rural Bengal
(19th Century -1st Half of 20th Century)**

Dr. Barnali Chattopadhyay
Associate Professor
Hooghly Women's College
(under The University of Burdwan)
Pipulpati, Hooghly – 712 103
Contact no: +91 9830122391/ E-mail: barnali.chattopadhyay@gmail.com

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In the villages of 19th Century Bengal, the women were engaged in organized and in unorganized sectors (mostly) as cultivator, agricultural labourer, in household industries, manufacturing, other-than-household industries, livestock, forestry, fishing, hunting etc. In a traditional village society, the occupational structures were based on their castes. There was no separate mention of the women's contribution, nor was a section under which their contribution was classified in Census Report. 'Woman' as an entity was neglected, and if she happened to be poor and from the countryside, there was hardly any document to prove her existence in the society.

Women of the higher caste families were generally not involved in any occupation, as most of these were joint families and had collective earnings to maintain themselves. In the Jessore district, the upper-class Hindu and Muslim females engaged themselves in domestic service in their own houses.¹ The females of the 'zamindar' (land lord) class were used to supervising the work of domestic servants of their houses. A newly married bride of a zamindar family thus engaged herself only in arranging flowers for worship, preparing betel leaves for her in-laws and keeping her husband's dresses - as appeared in a Bengali novel.²

In a lower caste family, the male member's earning was not sufficient to maintain a family. Their women, besides housekeeping, had to engage themselves with a financially rewarding job. The occupation followed by them, was that of her father's or husband's. Of the numerous castes that depend upon their women to earn a living for their family, the weavers occupied

¹ Bengal District Gazetteers, 1912 Jessore, p-89

² 'Dhatridebota' by Tarashankar Bandyopadhyay, p-115

the foremost place.³ As a rule, females of Burdwan district did not assist their husbands in outdoor works, but the Sudra women, especially when they were widows and had no one to take care of them generally served as menial servants in respectable families. The Bauri, Bagdi and Hari women generally worked as day labourers and fisher women. The male members of their families almost invariably depended upon their females for the sale of their goods and amongst food-mongers females were also found equally useful.⁴ The poor women confined themselves to their domestic duties and such other works as spinning, rope making, husking grains, preparing rice etc. The women of the following castes were often found assisting their husbands in agricultural and industrial pursuits: Tanti, Chasa, Napit, Kumor, Keot (or Jelia), Malakar, Goala, Jugi, Kalu, Dhoba, Lohar, Khoyra, Dom, Muchi, Teli, Bauri, Bagdi and Hari.⁵ It is very difficult to determine in each caste, to what extent the women of the family assisted their male members.

In the census of 1881, females were not entered as employed unless they were engaged on special work of a distinctly definite character. In a traditional Bengali society, married women and unmarried girls were employed in various types of household work. In the census report they were shown as unemployed. So no distinctions were observed between those who were actually employed and those who were not. In the 1891 census, a female's occupation had been returned as that of her husband's or father's, and not her own occupation, thereby rendering these statistics almost useless.

In cultivation and shopkeeping, for instance, it was impossible to estimate how many of those returned as employed really took part in field work or the work of the shop, and how many were only the wives of the cultivators and shopkeepers. The general labourers on the other hand, were in all probability really employed, as were the women in service of all classes. In several of these occupations, the wife helped her husband - the fish caught by the males were sold by their women. Same could be said about the milk sellers and the green grocers, whose women sold in the streets the produce of the cow byre and the gardens. Some poor women were often seen working with the men at basket making, bamboo work, cloth weaving and mat making, which were all employments of the lower castes. Husking, grinding & perching of grain, the spinning of thread, the collection and sale of cow dung for fuel and the profession of midwifery were listed under special occupation of the women.⁶

The domestic industries also got developed around the caste system. In the village society agriculture and handicrafts were in sync, "supplemented by artisan production for direct use by the 'potentates' (i.e. not induced through the market)".⁷ Thus a self-sufficient production and distribution unit had been formed which was centered on the village and its rustic culture.⁸ In the family of peasants or those engaged in domestic industries, all members contributed in some measure in the production process. Women played a substantial part in

³ Census Report, District Bankura, 1891, p-10

⁴ Census 1891, dated Burdwan, the 16th May 1892, p-12

⁵ Census Report, District Bankura, 1891, p-10

⁶ Census Report of Bengal 1881, p- 185

⁷ Irfan Habib, Essays in Indian History, p-234

⁸ History of the Bengali People, Niharranjan Roy, translated by John W Hood, p-570

this process. In the household industry, the labour-force was recruited among the family members along with some hired ones.

The women as an identity was neglected traditionally, even in colonial period. The directions to enumerators distinctly enjoined the entry of women as unemployed, unless they had specific separate employments.⁹ A typical census report was a reflection of the male dominated society. It was hard to say how far the women were really the bread winners themselves and how far they were merely the wives of bread winners.¹⁰ The Census Report of Bhagalpur described that the employment of females was another source of difficulty, unless they were engaged in some special work of a distinctly definite character.¹¹ Even at a much later date, the 1991 census, the situation has not changed much, “women are often classified as non-workers, because of non-reporting of their work. It also happened that women, who worked for the major part of the year, are reported as working for less than six months”.¹² That was in no way is the real story of women’s participation in different jobs. They did not know the meaning of women’s liberation, or the definition of ‘career’ or ‘professionalism’. The only thing they realized from their very early age that they had to struggle for their own survival - where ‘struggle’ means different types of household works, as well as some livelihood earning works, related to their castes.

The following table of the Hooghly district throws some light on the occupations in which the females probably took the actual share to a considerable extent in the second half of 19th century:

Number of females engaged in 1891					
Sl. No.	Occupation	No. of females	Sl. No.	Occupation	No. of females
1	Rice pounders and huskers	22,871	2	Service unspecified	13,025
3	Fisher women	10,983	4	Priestess	10,066
5	Agricultural labour	9,564	6	Green grocers, & c	8,297
7	Cotton weaver	8,067	8	Mendicancy	4,757
9	Grain dealer	4,534	10	Potters, & c	4,245
11	Confectioner	3,076	12	Basket maker	2,838
13	Oil pressure & seller	2,815	14	Masons	2,447
15	Indoor servants	2,439	16	Washer women	2,437
17	Female barber	2,364	18	Cow-dung fuel dealer	2,188
19	Cattle herd	1,477	20	Mat maker	1,409
21	Grain parcher	1,279	22	Cotton spinner & sizer	1,156
23	Pan seller	777	24	Fire wood seller	641
25	Cook	567	26	Midwife	545
27	Shopkeeper	491	28	Vegetable and fruit seller	472
29	Fish dealer	375	30	Pulse and flour preparer and	342

⁹ Census Report of Bengal taken on the 17th February, 1881 by J A Bourdillon, C. S. – Calcutta, the 17th November, 1883, p-170

¹⁰ Census Report of Hooghly, 15th March 1892, p-25

¹¹ Census Report of Bhagalpur, 1891, p-8

¹² Sujit Kumar Dutta, Empowering Rural Women, p-11

31	Water carrier	315	32	Flax spinner, weaver and seller	109
33	Bamboo worker	85			

(Source: Census of Bengal 1891, Report, dated Hooghly the 15th March, 1892 page 25)

The above Table shows that in total 1, 27, 053 women were employed in different sectors of the Hooghly district during 1891. This was not only the picture of the Hooghly district, the participation of women in different occupations could be found everywhere in Bengal. Some of them worked as individuals, some assisted their male members of their families. A few other districts had different attitude towards their women. Most of the women in the Noakhali district were purdah-bound. The women of this district did not assist their husbands in outdoor agricultural works.¹³ The same attitude was found in Kishanganj - all the women in Kishanganj did not take part in agricultural operations. They only carried the mid-day meals to the fields.¹⁴ Only, the women of the fishermen caste, that too middle aged and old, sold fish in the village hats in Noakhali. Beyond this, not a single woman was to be seen in any public place. Some helpless poor women, generally widows, sold processed rice and vegetables in their villages.¹⁵ In the male dominated society, the women were controlled by introducing some restrictions. In a few cases, the social custom had been over-powered by hunger. The fishermen caste allowed only the middle aged and old women to go outside, as women of these ages would be less vulnerable. Widow women of Sudra castes, generally who had no one to take care of them, served as menial servants in respectable families.¹⁶ Here, caste was not the factor. Even widows had to earn for their livelihood & maintain their respects by searching for some safe work. In the respectable families, they at least got shelter, food and money.

The Howrah and Hooghly districts had a well-organized hand (rice) pounding industry, even in 1903. From the report of census 1901, 26% of the population was engaged in various industries in Howrah. In the numerous industries which flourished in the district, the actual workers aggregated to 101,535 including 17,215 rice pounders, of whom no less than 16,956 were women.¹⁷ Of the industrial population in Jessore, 38% were actual workers. Among them were 25,000 fisherman and fish dealers, 14,000 cotton weavers and 6,000 persons were engaged in husking rice, most of whom were women.¹⁸ In the Howrah district, the bulk of tenants were Kaibarttas. According to Mr. Ritchie, they were “beyond comparison, the best cultivators, and the most industrious and thrifty class in this district”.¹⁹ They kept a certain quantity of their produce at home, and the women of their family helped them by paddy de-husking. They supplemented their daily food by catching fish from pools *khals* (canals) or rice fields, or by getting vegetables and pot herbs from the fields or in-house nurseries. These women grew fruits like plantain, mango and pineapples in their orchards. These activities not only added to their savings, but they could also afford a number of silver ornaments and brass utensils. They were indebted in small parts to mahajans, had two square meals a day, and

¹³ Census Report of Bengal, Noakhali, dated 11th April 1892, p-12

¹⁴ Bengal District Gazetteers, Purnea, p-63

¹⁵ Census report of Bengal., Noakhali, dated 11th April 1892, p-12

¹⁶ Census Report of Bengal, Burdwan, 1892, p-12

¹⁷ Bengal District Gazetteers, Howrah 1909, p-96

¹⁸ Bengal District Gazetteers, Jessore 1912 O'Malley, p-88

¹⁹ Bengal District Gazetteers, Howrah, 1909, p-92

owned houses.²⁰ The history of 2nd half of 19th century Howrah had been one of continued progress. Agricultural conditions were on the whole favourable, and the number of births exceeded the deaths by a little under 17,000.²¹ No other district in Bengal was so little dependent on the outturn of its crops.

The cultivators of the Hooghly district were mainly Kaibarttas, Sadgops and Sheikhs - the best cultivators in Bengal as reported in District Gazetteers. In slack months they worked in the mills, caught fish, raised fruit trees, produced vegetables and herbs on homestead lands, these were all added to their income; their women also assisted by husking paddy and cleaning rice, helping in fishing.²² The statistics of census 1901 showed that 53.8% of the population was supported by agriculture, 20.3% by various industries, 3.8% by professions & 2.5% by trade. The proportion of the actual female workers was somewhat small, but it was over 50%.²³

District Gazetteers described that Bauri and other tribal women were seen by the hundreds to be engaged in this work toiling under the mid-day sun, in wind or water, planting and seedling with surprising nimbleness or resting for a while and chatting with each other with that lightness. Within a very short time they could plant the seedlings with surprising agility.²⁴ They were poor but their simplicity and happiness helped them work hard and be merry with smiling faces.

In the following paragraphs, two specific female dominated occupations – paddy de-husking and spinning are highlighted. In the traditional village society, paddy de-husking was primarily and exclusively a women's job, as concurred in the Bengal District Gazetteers of Howrah (1909). The domestic work of rice pounding and husking were carried on almost exclusively by women.²⁵ Some women husked rice for domestic purpose, while in villages, a great portion of rice was husked by the professional huskers, called 'Kutni'. The husked rice was purchased by the Baniwalas, who were the intermediary traders. They bought paddy from the cultivators, or through paikars, at the village 'hats' (markets), and collected the husked rice from 'Kutni' and sold it to the 'Kistiwala Beparis' or agents. These agents collected the rice for 'mahajan' or 'aratdar'.²⁶ The 'Kistiwalas' collected the husked rice and carried it to the Ramkristopur 'Aratdars', as well as other trade centres. 'Baniwalas' and 'Kistiwalas', both of these groups got advance money (dadni) from Ramkristopur Aratdars.²⁷ So, before the introduction of the rice mills, the trade organization of Kolkata depended on the rural huskers or 'Baniwalas' (intermediary traders who linked professional huskers and the agents). Later, demand for rice, either for export or inland consumption, helped in mushrooming of rice mills in Bengal, from 40 to 381 between 1918 and 1936.²⁸

²⁰ Ibid

²¹ Census Report of Bengal, 1911, p-89

²² Bengal District Gazetteers, Hooghly, 1912, p-172

²³ Ibid, p-176

²⁴ Bengal District Gazetteers, Bankura, 1908, p-69

²⁵ Bengal District Gazetteers, 24 Parganas, 1914, p-145

²⁶ Smriti Kumar Sarkar, The Rice Milling Industry In Bengal, 1920-1950, Calcutta Historical Journal, p-12

²⁷ Smriti Kumar Sarkar, The Rice Milling Industry In Bengal, 1920-1950, Calcutta Historical Journal, p-29

²⁸ Ibid, p-4

Employment in agriculture was seasonal, and it was known that agricultural labourers faced severe unemployment and under employment problems. It was arguable why women got themselves involved in agricultural operations. Recorded history and folk songs showed that some works like transplanting and weeding were generally female specific. Women got more employment than men in transplanting, weeding and harvesting. For instance, in the Saran district (now in Bihar), out of every 100 rent paying tenants who were actual workers, as many as 37 were women. The female agricultural labourers were more than double the number of male labourers, which was a remarkable fact. In this district, female labourers were more extensively employed than in any other district in Bengal.²⁹ Another argument regarding skill of the women labour was, that transplanting, rice-seedling were largely a woman's job, which was required to be done by the long hours of bending over, which being physically harmful.³⁰ Like other professions in rural Bengal, a division of labour could be found among the agricultural labourers. Transplanting and weeding were a woman's job while the men held the plough, made bundle etc. The transplanted crops were cleaned by the rural womenfolk. Winnowing and husking were done by women on a threshing floor with the help of some traditional tools. In this regard it may be noticed that all of these 'so-called' women's work was in fact very skillful in nature and crucial; though those were relegated as women's task, and hence were undervalued.

On the other side, low wage of male agricultural workers forced them to step outside of the native place. Here, the role of women was to supplement the family income. Sometimes they earned more than their male counterpart; but census never recorded them properly. K. Saradmoni argued, that women agricultural labourer's work never got recognized, "their contribution to the households' income was treated as marginal, and supplementary".³¹ If we look at the Khulna district, the women were generally domestic workers. They boiled or dried and husked the paddy, cooked the meals for their family, washed the utensils, looked after the domestic cattle and kept their home spic and span. There were many women who earned the whole or a part of their livelihood by husking the paddy but they had not been censused as such, because census reported that, "it is difficult to say into what class or classes they have been included".³² That means their female identity was the main barrier to be classified as professional, in census report. That's why in the Khulna district, only 85 female grain parchers and 15 pulse & flour preparers and sellers were censused in 1892.³³ It proved that, "the truth and facts about women's role and contribution, have not been recorded fully and correctly".³⁴

Nirmala Banerjee discussed about the discriminatory practices between the male and female labourers, which made the women inferior in position. "a) for identical tasks women are paid less & b) women are confined to a limited number of relatively inferior tasks".³⁵ Regarding

²⁹ Bengal District Gazetteers, Saran, 1908, p-93

³⁰ Nirmala Banerjee, Women's Work and Discrimination in Devaki Jain ed Tyranny of the Household, p-156

³¹ K. Saradmoni, Filling the Rice Bowl, p-28

³² Census Report of Bengal dated Khulna, the 28th March, 1892, p-20

³³ Ibid

³⁴ K Saradmoni, Filling the Rice Bowl, p-8

³⁵ Nirmala Banerjee, Women's Work and Discrimination, in Devaki Jain ed Tyranny of the Household, p-149

the first discrimination it could be noticed that In 1874-75, the average monthly wages of a common coolie and agricultural labourer, were 2 annas for a man, while 1½ annas for a woman in Champaran.³⁶ In the rural area of the Darbhanga district, wages were usually paid wholly or partly in kind. The field labourer generally got his entire wages as coarse un-husked rice, sometimes an able-bodied labourer received 4 seers of the cheapest kind of grain available, such as marua gram or barley-sattu. Women and boys got 3 seers only.³⁷ In the Bardhaman district, an ordinary labourer was paid Rs.11-4/- and a woman Rs.8-14/- a month.³⁸

These following references proved the second discrimination easily. Traditionally, women were scheduled for light work, despite knowing their physical capacity was beyond this. District Gazetteers also reported that the wages of the labour depended on the kind of work to be done. Heavy work, such as transplanting and digging, was always done by men and lighter work like weeding, was largely done by women.³⁹ In Birbhum, men generally worked in the fields. Female labourers participated at various stages of rice production. Their tasks were very crucial, skilled and labourious, but they were treated as less important and paid lower wage.⁴⁰

The wages for the unskilled agricultural labourer was very poor. In the year 1874-75, the wages of the agricultural labourer were 2 annas for a man, 1½ annas for a woman and 1 anna for a boy in Champaran. These rates had been continued even in the first half of the twentieth century, except the wages for a boy, which was 1¼ annas a day. Though it was customary that these labourers received a small quantity of parched barley or maize for their mid-day meal valued half an anna so that the average wage of an adult male was 2½ annas.⁴¹

The organization of spinning industry had two very striking features. First, it was generally the monopoly of women and secondly “it was not concentrated in the hands of a particular caste or section”.⁴² Even the highest caste women were also involved in it. Hameeda Hossain also argued that spinning of thread for cloth manufacture was a part-time activity of all classes of women in Bengal though a large number of poor rural women worked in this industry purely as professional.

Though the spinning was a part time domestic work, but it was ‘highly labour intensive’.⁴³ It required hard work to produce small quantities of thread. Women could spend only a few hours when they had some spare time from their domestic service. It is very difficult to estimate the number of people who were engaged in spinning, dyeing etc. during the 19th Century, as there was no regular census. In the 18th Century an efficient labouring woman spinner used to earn 12 to 14 annas to Rs.2 per month on an average, the maximum being

³⁶ Bengal District Gazetteers, Champaran, 1907, p-93

³⁷ Bengal District Gazetteers, Darbhanga, 1907, p-84

³⁸ Bengal District Gazetteers, Burdwan, 1910, p-109

³⁹ Ibid

⁴⁰ Bengal District Gazetteers, Birbhum 1910, p-67

⁴¹ Bengal District Gazetteers, Champaran, 1907, p-93

⁴² H.R. Ghosal, Economic Transition in the Bengal Presidency, p-2

⁴³ Ibid, p-38

Rs.3 per month. This was not a bad amount during the 18th Century. An adult person required about Rs.1 per monthly as living expenses during this time.⁴⁴ Buchanan surveyed Bihar and Patna in 1811–12, and found that women, estimated at about one fifth of the population, numbering 3,30,426, were engaged in spinning. The value of the thread that each spun in a year was 7 rupees, 2 annas, 8 pies and the total annual value was Rs. 23,67,277/-. The raw material at the retail price amounted to Rs.12,86,272/-, thus leaving a profit of Rs.10,81,005/- or Rs. 3 ¼ for each spinner.⁴⁵ Another statement of Buchanan regarding the probable income of the spinners of Shahabad was that their total number was slightly above 1,59,500, and the annual produce of each was, on an average, worth Rs. 8/-.⁴⁶ Deducting the value of the raw material and the cost of beating, a spinner earned during the year a rupee and a half, per head.⁴⁷

This statement made it clear, that the earning of a spinner was very low. But two points should be noted, firstly, the districts which had just been mentioned, were not the full picture of the spinners of Bengal. Secondly, most of the spinners were housewives, so they could devote only their spare time, which were only a few hours in the afternoon.⁴⁸ It was also true, though the earning very small, it certainly added some value to their families. Apart from these, as part-time spinners there were some professional spinners, who devoted a long time during the day for spinning, especially where the thread was fine. To encourage the spinners, the Commercial Resident of Sonamukhi, offered a small premium to every spinner, who was able to bring sufficient fine thread in the market.⁴⁹

Hameeda Hossain also argued that the price which the spinner received for fine quality of yarn was not enough for her labour, so, most of the spinners were interested to spin the coarse cotton, as it was used for domestic consumption with a satisfactory price.⁵⁰ Whatever may have been the case with those who spun coarse yarn only, the spinners of fine thread generally made a fairly good income from their profession, “Charka amar swami put, charka amar nati, charkar daulate amar duare bandha hati” (The spinning wheel is as dear to me as my husband, son or grandson, It is due to the spinning wheel that I have an elephant in chains at my door).⁵¹ This folklore of Bengal proved the attachment of the women with the spinning wheel.

The spinners were generally poor, lacked in capital, and had to depend upon others. In rural areas small traders bought the yarn from the spinners and sold it to the large traders or merchants. So, the profit went to the traders and not to the spinners. Social customs and production structure made some barriers to reach the spinners to the merchants. Perhaps gender bias did not help them to earn more. So, the labour they put on this production, got

⁴⁴ *Banglar Arthik Itihas (Oshtados Shatabdi)*, Subodh Mukhopadhyay, p-70

⁴⁵ F. Buchanan, *An Account of the Districts of Bihar and Patna in 1811-12*, p-647

⁴⁶ F. Buchanan, *Shahabad Report*, p- 408–9

⁴⁷ F. Buchanan, *Shahabad Report Appendix – I*

⁴⁸ F. Buchanan, *Bihar & Patna*, p-647

⁴⁹ H. R. Ghosal, *Economic Transition in the Bengal Presidency*, p-2

⁵⁰ Hameeda Hossain, *The Company Weavers of Bengal*, p-39

⁵¹ H. R. Ghosal, *Economic Transition in the Bengal Presidency*, Notes & References p-13

very little in return as wage. The traders also never thought of introducing improved techniques in production process of the textile industry, their prime target being ‘to maximize profits by manipulating prices’.⁵²

The most striking thing was that women had a great contribution to this glory of Bengal textiles, because the entire quality of the textiles was dependent on the quality of weaving as well as the thread, which had been spun by the women folks of rural Bengal. But history never highlighted the contribution of women; the male-dominated society never thought to enlist women’s job as a contributor of this great art of Bengal. In a weaver family, spinning, dyeing of thread etc. were done by the women in the family, while weaving was carried out by the male members. That means the man enjoyed the benefits of finished products.

The contribution of the women to the economic development of rural Bengal was not recognized. They played the two defining roles - those of co-producers of goods and services and as wives and mothers carrying out domestic chores. They were totally ignorant about the importance of their place in society, but their workmanship and domestic duties made them adorable both at home and society.

⁵² H. Hossain, p-39

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