

# The Struggle of Women in Jute Industries of West Bengal: A Case Study of Barrackpore Industrial Area from 1900 to 1947

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'To write about Calcutta without saying a word about Jute' said a tourist guide to the city in 1906,' would be as bad as to deprive the lamb of its mint sauce'.<sup>1</sup> It is not an exaggeration to say that the industrialization of Bengal centers on this jute industry. In the second half of the nineteenth century, this industry expanded rapidly on both sides of the river Hooghly. As a result an entirely new social class the 'industrial working class' was emerged in Bengal. In 1906, it is known from Foley's report that 20 years ago, most of the workers of this industry were local Bengalis. But by the time they were replaced by non-Bengali labour from neighbouring regions of Bihar, United Province and Orissa.<sup>2</sup> mainly due to labour demand, improvement in communication system and their financial deficiencies compelled them to choose an uncertainty life of jute industry. The dream of a new life, however, gave them rays of hope for survival. Not only the men responded to this new dream, but also a large number of women responded too. According to the report of S.R. Deshpande of the number of people employed in the jute industry, one can notice the overall ratio of male and female is more or less 5:1.<sup>3</sup> Their arrival influenced the society, culture and economy of Bengal which attracted the attention of many historians.

[Table-1]

Number of people employed in the jute industry of Bengal, 1912-44.

Year	No. of factories	No. of adult males	No. of adult females	No. of children
1912	61	1,45,389	31,329	23,007
1913	64	1,58,261	34,010	24,106
1914	69	1,67,858	36,800	25,909
1915	70	1,81,445	40,674	26,646

1916	70	1,91,036	42,145	27,603
1917	71	1,92,667	41,395	27,320
1918	72	1,99,977	43,278	27,709
1919	72	2,01,009	43,112	28,628
1920	73	2,07,255	44,545	28,521
1921	77	2,07,908	44,705	29,235
1922	80	2,39,660	49,257	28,267
1923	83	2,42,652	51,495	28,400
1924	85	2,52,107	54,801	27,823
1925	83	2,56,312	55,511	26,474
1926	86	2,53,935	52,827	20,785
1927	85	2,53,681	52,935	19,249
1928	86	2,60,342	53,678	17,879
1929	90	2,67,717	54,670	17,278
1930	91	2,64,417	52,114	11,646
1931	93	2,22,573	42,254	3,462
1932	94	2,12,505	40,294	1,515
1933	92	2,08,246	37,337	1,134
1934	93	2,13,894	36,932	915
1935	95	2,25,372	37,749	278
1936	94	2,33,481	38,261	4
1937	96	2,49,737	37,997	9
1938	97	2,42,342	36,683	9
1939	101	2,43,496	37,699	34
1940	101	2,48,046	36,640	34
1941	101	2,51,388	35,255	38
1942	101	2,52,799	35,083	32
1943	101	2,45,125	34,759	35
1944	101	2,31,121	36,005	67

Source: S. R. Deshpande; *Report on an Enquiry into Conditions of Labour in the Jute Mill Industry in India*; Delhi; 1946; p. 6.

However, the historical research done on industrial belt has focused mainly on the so called 'labour class', which has been mostly male labour force centric. Not only in Bengal or India, but in the world, for a long time the history of workers was considered to be synonymous with the male labour force. Even Marxist writers did not think about women and children labour, although they were comparatively smaller in number could have a different problem or claim. But recently, the history of women workers has gained much space. Several researches are done in this area by several researchers. In this regard, mention may be made of the books like *Women and Labour in late Colonial India: The Bengal Jute Industry, 1890-1940* by Samita Sen, *Producing Workers: The Politics of Gender Class and Culture in the Calcutta Jute mills* by Lila Fernandes and *Persecution and Protest, Women Workers and Their Spokeswomen in Colonial Bengal* by Sutapa Sengupta.<sup>4</sup> Amal Das, in his article 'Banglar Chatkal Shramikder Chatkal-bahirbhuta Jiban (1870-1920)'; 'portrays the workers daily life, though here the male workers get much importance.<sup>5</sup> Professor Manju Chattopadhyay in her article 'Chatkaler Meye Shramik: 70 Bachhor Aage-pore' tried to uphold women's role in jute industry.<sup>6</sup> Despite all these efforts, a large part of women who are associated indirectly with jute industry did not fetch much focus in the main stream of history.

At first, we need to keep in mind some basic things. In the jute industry, the ratio of men and women workers is roughly around 5:1. Beside this proportion, many women were indirectly associated with this industry. In fact, since the first half of the twentieth century, the character of these jute workers began to change and they gradually started to become permanent residents of Bengal, as a result they bring their family here too, so that their wives and children had gradually become a part of this industry.<sup>7</sup> We can categorise the women associated with jute industry as following, 1. Single female worker, 2. jute workers' wife, 3. both, the female worker as well as worker's wife, 4. Mistress of the *sardar* / worker (*rakshita*) 5. Professional prostitute. We must remember that the immigrants who joined the jute industry at that time were all illiterate, so there is nothing to say about their own literature. Although, later on, their children started getting education, the jute women workers of Bengal were unfortunate as they were not like the women of rural Bengal as depicted in Bengali novels. Even though a few Bengali writers, like Samaresh Bose were engaged in writing novels on the life

of these jute workers, the women workers did not get much attention. Besides one or two stray characters depicted in these novels failed to become the face of entire women workers associated with the industry. From the study of many historians, it is shown that the immigrant workers were involved in various traditional programs for their self-identity. And we must keep in mind that women took the main part to perform all these prayers and traditional programs.

It has already been said that almost all non-Bengali workers employed in these mills were illiterate. As nothing is available from their own literature. In order to understand the character, nature, and overall life of these workers, especially women workers, we will try to understand their condition in the society through the contemporary Bengali literature and a study of the imaginary characters depicted in the shadow of original character. In this regard the first name which came to our mind is the famous Bengali fiction writer Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyay. A full-fledged picture of the rural women society of Bengal appeared in his writings. Although there is no space for jute workers in his writing, his short story 'Mahesh' helps us to understand the condition of workers' lives specially women workers in Bengal, When Gafur, a distressed peasant told his daughter Amina about his decision to leave the village and to go to Phulbare jute mill, his daughter was surprised as she could remember that earlier her father never agreed to work in jute mills; because he had a belief that in jute mills the sanctity of religion and women could not be maintained.<sup>8</sup> The situation of women in the jute industry is understood by this small sentence. In the *Asamapto Chatati* of Mohanlal Gangopadhyay, the author describes the story of Kalu Sardar of Jagadal jute mill. In this story we get details of the pathetic situation of women who come to work in mills. According to the author, 'Kalu Sardar once returned from the country (village), with some young ladies. Everyone in village called Kalu 'Deota' (God). His behavior really was like a god. It seems that he was born to do good for others and had no selfish interest. But when Kalu Sardar came back to the jute mill his original character revealed. He kept the girls in a row like a prisoner in the house. Without his command, they couldn't go one step further. The girls were afraid. Kalu Sardar wandered all day long and drank, shouting on them and called them in his room whenever he wanted. This was going on for a few days. After getting sexual satisfaction, Kalu Sardar helped them to get work in jute mills.'<sup>9</sup>

In fact, from the last decade of the nineteenth century, mainly widows, divorcees from Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, and Orissa were compelled to come to Bengal for livelihood. They joined as single female workers in Bengal jute mills. They did not have any family. In Bengali novels they are branded as despicable women in the society due to search for their independent entities. They called as 'Magi' a derogatory word for woman by the higher caste society of Bengal. They did not care about the rules of society and claimed equal recognition with their male counterparts from society. Therefore, there was a separate arrangement for women in many liquor shops and its adjoining areas.<sup>10</sup> They did not do any work of the family in the conventional sense. Samaresh Basu's many writings show a resplendent picture of their life. His writings were male worker centric, although his women's characters helped to portray the poor condition of the women workers of contemporary Bengal. In Samaresh Basu's novel *B. T. Roader Dharey* we can see the single women workers employed in jute mills. One of the characters in his novel, Phulki is an aspiring woman; she does not hesitate to go on an evil path for her happiness. She is reluctant to stay under the command of any male, though men of the *bustee* are crazy about her.<sup>11</sup> In fact, among these single women workers of jute mills, we first saw female courage to break the stereotype of society, even though the gender awareness behind it was a big question mark.

Although the number of immigrant workers increased steadily since the 1890s, the workers initially did not bring their family in jute *bustee*. Their family lived in their ancestral villages. As a result, there was a huge difference between proportion of male and female workers, hence the normal sex life of jute workers was disrupted. Many unsocial practices corrupted their lives. Apart from drinking, gambling, the level of sexual crimes was increasing among them. The views that increasing the level of sexual crimes among the jute workers expressed by the Dr. Batra, Assistant Director, Public Health for Bengal before Royal commission. From the report of Dr. Curjel who visited seventy-six jute mills of Bengal in 1912-22, it was revealed that most migrant laborers came from Madras, Bihar and Uttar Pradesh to work in Bengal jute mills brought women with them. Many of these women worked in jute mills but they were not always the wives of the men with whom they lived.<sup>12</sup>

In fact, absence of their family life in Bengal created a chaos in their social life. This type of chaos is the manifestation of mistress

(*rakhita*) system. Many women considered it better to be mistress of any one influential people in the *bustee* area to save themselves from the ill-treatment of the society.<sup>13</sup> On the other hand, the male workers had long been away from their family and felt the need of mistress in Bengal for their physical satisfaction and maintaining their household activities. However, these concubines did not have any right to the rural property of their native families. They did not get the status of legal wives of these male workers till their last breath.

The picture of such chaotic life is also found in Bangali literature particularly from Samaresh Basu's composition. In the novel *B. T. Roder Dharey*, one of the characters, Loton's wife is a burning example of this kind of life. After the death of Loton, his helpless wife was compelled to become the mistress of Loton's two younger brothers, Harish and Nandu. The society looked down upon her. Her life was not less than a hell, yet she had to live this life, under the pressure of the situation.<sup>14</sup> In his novel Samaresh Basu, sympathetically upheld the life of the mistresses of jute workers.

Even though some influential workers were able to keep their mistresses in these *bustees*, it was not possible for most of common workers who had to stay long periods detaching from their wives and families. A number of brothels developed in those areas for meeting their physical needs.<sup>15</sup> The number of professional prostitutes increased greatly in the period under review. Dr. Curjel stated that she watched many prostitutes living in the vicinity of the Fort Gloster mill area. In fact, many women had chosen prostitution as a profession and easy way to escape from the torture of co-labourers and *sardars*, low wages, uncertainty of work, occupation hazard etc. During the field survey in Barrackpur industrial area, it was known that brothels existed in the slums areas of the region till 1970s.<sup>16</sup> From the composition of Samaresh Basu, this articulated life provides a touching picture of the situation. In 'B. T. Dharey' one of the characters in the novel *Phulki*, is a woman worker, she does not hesitate to give company to male sahibs for fame and luxurious living. Thus, the occupation of prostitution has become a common phenomenon in the *bustees* life.

The above issues, however, are only an aspect of society. In fact, it was wrong to think that only chaotic life was part of this society. The reverse life-style is also available. Since 1920 and 30s, many jute workers

started living in Bengal permanently with their family. As a result, gradual stability came to their lives. We mentioned before the women belongs to household are of different status- 1) workers' wife, 2) both, the female worker as well as worker's wife. Thus, from the second and third decades of the twentieth century, it is easy to understand the gradual changes in the jute industry.

Samaresh Basu described a unique picture of women's role in household life of jute mill workers. In this regard one can remember his character created in novel *B.T. Roder Dharey Dulari*. However, it is mentioned that although she is not direct worker associated with mill, she is indirectly involved in this industry. Dulari was the wife of Ganesh, a jute mill labourer. One can understand the importance of her in Ganesh's life by his own admission –

'But Dulari was a low caste poor girl. When I brought her to my house in the village, the people of my house and also her caste had beaten me in a barbaric way and thrown by the river side. Dulari was wandering in the forest to protect my severely wounded body. She cleans my blooded body by her tongue like a cow calf. Today she is going to die, whom I will pay back here, to whom? So, I thought I also should die... dying with her.'<sup>17</sup>

This short sentence helps us to understand the importance of women in the personal life of the workers. There were many people like Ganesh who cannot live without Dulari like women.

So, it is easily understood that jute mill worker's society had a healthy normal life. However, these women were faced with severe exploitation in the society. They had to run their families with low income. Many times, they had to work for alternate earning. They had to bear the men's tortures within the family, and they had to endure all these. All the responsibility of the family and their children was to perform by them all day long. Their life was spent in desperate suffering.

Many women joined the work in jute mills in the hope of getting relief from poverty. But unfortunately, they were exploited in two-ways, on one side the mill owners used them to work with lower wages, on the other hand they had to carry all the responsibilities of the family. As a result, their life was more horrible. In this regard, we can remember Mangali, one of the characters of Samaresh Basu's the novel '*Jug jug*

*Jiye*'. Not only she fulfills the tasks of the house, she is also a direct jute worker.<sup>18</sup> After working for 10 to 12 hours in the unhealthy environment of these mills, they had to do all household duties in the family life.

Taken as a whole, the condition of female workers in jute mill *bustee* areas was very unhealthy. Women's financial status was not good at all. They have very little wage.<sup>19</sup> They did not get proper food, women could not spend much on their dresses, costumes. In 1931, the Royal Commission on Labour investigation report accepted the condition of the workers' as very poor. It has been suggested that daily wage of unskilled male workers of Bengal, Bihar and Orissa were lesser than eight paisa, women five paisa and boys and girls were less than four paisa. So, it is easy to say that these women workers were discriminated in that period.<sup>20</sup>

The environment of the workplace and housing of the female workers were very bad and was unhealthy. They often used to get sick due to a long time working in the factory. They were attacked by various diseases in the congested unhealthy environment of the *bustee* area. There was no arrangement for their treatment. Because of long working hours in the factory, they could not pay much attention to their families. Their accommodation was very unhealthy, dull and dirty. In a small house 5-6 people lived together. They could not enjoy any privacy at all. The toilets in the slums were terrible and awful. There was not the provision of drinking water. In almost all cases, they used open space for toilet.<sup>21</sup>

On the one hand, due to inhuman labour and on the other side living in unhealthy environments, women's health would have collapsed prematurely. Most women suffered from malnutrition and anemia. Due to the use of dirty water, cholera, typhoid or stomach disorders increased among women and children. Due to lack of adequate medical facilities, they could not live long. Jute women workers, especially those who were engaged in picking and grinding jute, were victims of some kind of skin diseases known as 'Jute dermatitis'. Many of the female workers, especially Hindu women, used 'Sajimati' instead of soap and as a result suffer various skin diseases.<sup>22</sup>

To conclude, it can be said that in the Bengali literature, the jute women workers of Bengal did not get much importance, but their position in the Jute Mill-centric society of Bengal was distinct and important. More precisely, changes in this society had been directly or indirectly

influenced by the women workers of the jute industry. In the second half of the nineteenth century when jute mills were developed in Bengal, women workers from Bihar, Uttar Pradesh and adjoining areas along with male labourers also provided labour force in these mills. In these mills, the importance of the women workers at the primary level can be realized from the name of a separate department 'Magikal' within the mill. With the help of the *Sardars*, these women workers had come to Bengal and it was these *sardars* who made filthy abuse on them. As mentioned earlier, this torture was not the last word in their life, as the main driving force in the radical change in jute mill society these women play a major role. The Dual Character of workers, i.e. half-peasants-half workers' nature have come to an end when the workers of this industry started to stay in the urban area permanently. Gradually, the jute workers migrated from the mill quarters and built small slums in the surrounding areas. Later these slums took an urban character. A mixed culture was developed in these slums, where women play a major role. So it may easily be concluded that women's role in this industry none the less significant than that of men.

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