

Dependent Earners of Colonial Bengal: The Unremunerated Contributors

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Abstract: This research paper aims to analyse the history of under-remuneration and under-representation of the working wives of colonial Bengal's marginal families despite their substantial contribution to generating the familial income. Albeit, women of all relations in impoverished rural families had been involved in various forms of labour by their own capacity, this study categorically mentions the working wives. The reason is, unlike the other female participants, the young wives did not have the experience or knowledge of working in a new family economy and had to face several battles on their own to create a positive balance between production, consumption, and surplus making for the household income. Regardless, these women were often stranded as unremunerated and unseen agents in the socio-economic structure of rural Bengal.

At present, the study of female labour is consequential in both the disciplines of gender and labour history. However, in most South Asian scholarship, the labour of low-wage-earning, marginal woman has been categorised as a supplementary means of income and these actively working women have been characterised as 'dependent' earners. Nonetheless, the paucity of substantial archival and published public evidence has also exacerbated these women's position in existing historiography.

This study is an attempt to address the unseen labour of these working wives of colonial Bengal and to portray the injustice they suffered from each significant section of the society. To ensure authenticity of the paper, qualitative research method has been conducted through extensive collection and analysis of primary and secondary source materials.

Key Words: Work, Women, Bengal, Domesticity, Dependency, Census, Remuneration, Recognition.

Undervaluation of marginal women's socio-economic contribution had been a practice which stemmed from pre-colonial times in Bengal and the British regime was no exception. In indigenous rural households of Bengal, family served as the fundamental setting for the quotidian application of labour and the male household head held the prior claims on female labour. Thus, women associated with

family income in rural households of colonial Bengal, specifically the wives had to cope with the ignominy of being subordinate to husbands, a status labelled to them for being enmeshed within the domestic realm. Despite their perennial contribution, in existing scholarship and official discourses, these working wives have been characterised as 'dependent earners' which most certainly deprived them from the equivalent approbation of being income generators like their male counterparts. The main thrust of this paper is to reflect on the under-representation of these earning women in the patriarchal society which often left them unremunerated and unrecognised. This study will also probe into the major administrative records of the colonial period which are the decennial census reports, to evaluate the representation of these 'dependent' earners by the British authority.

Methodology

To underscore the history of under-representation of these working women, this research proceeds with multifaceted approach combining both gender and subaltern perspectives. To ensure the authenticity of this research, unpublished data from the Wooden Bundle file titled as 'Statistics' from National Archives of Bangladesh has been used which provided substantial correspondences between higher officials debating on the projection of women's occupation in the census reports. Along with that, I have conducted a thorough content analysis of decennial census reports of colonial Bengal of 1872, 1881, 1891, 1901, 1911, 1921 and 1931; travelogues and memoirs of individuals who witnessed colonial Bengal such as H.F Buchanan, James Kerr, Girish Chandra Ghosh, Herbert Hope Risley, W.W Hunter. The print media for instance, the *Bamabodhini Patrika* (started in 1863 aiming for the betterment of women) has been a vital source material for this study. To apprehend the research gap more accurately, this study will also ruminate the diverse source materials from secondary scholarship. Scholars like Samita Sen, Dagmar Engels, Geraldine Forbes, Meredith Borthwick, Indrani Sen, Bharati Ray, Nirmala Banerjee, Sumanta Banerjee, Maroona Murmu and many such have contributed immensely to navigating the history of these undervalued working women.

The 'Dependent' Workers and the Patriarchal Denial

In rural Bengal households of marginal peasants, poor artisans or agrarian labourers, the fundamental concept of male being the only recognised provider did not originate from the separate means of production and household management; but rather from the undervaluation of women's economic labour and the promotion of their dependent status. According to Bharati Ray, "There are indications that most of the traditional livelihoods of Bengal called for participation of women."¹ Samita Sen reminisced that, within a while after the consummation ceremony after marriage, the young brides would start fetching water and working in the fields, taking part in manual labour and selling their surplus household products.² The poorer the families, the more they reinforced gendered labour within the household which expedited the family income that mostly depended on the rigorous labour of their women. Characteristically, the number of women often exceeded the number of men in rural households which in most cases denoted more hands to assist in earning. The Bengal district gazetteers recorded women labour and its contribution in the family income precisely. The Bengal District Gazetteer for Hoogly (1912) reported that in Hoogly, half of the fish sellers were the wives of the fishermen.³ W. W. Hunter in his *Statistical Account of Bengal* recorded the works of women from different castes, "Bauri females arrange the betel leaves into bundles...Kumhar women assist in preparation of earthen pots...Malakar females prepare artificial flowers...Namasudra and Sheikh women help in gathering and husbanding paddy."⁴ Regardless of the strenuous involvement in the family economy, in regular indigenous families of the lower strata of colonial Bengal, women's labour had been far removed from waged labour. Most of the tasks where women contributed with their male family members or had sole responsibility like spinning or rice husking were addressed as parts of their domestic duties as they were administered within the household. Albeit, their share constituted a major part of the family income, unless it got directly encompassed in an exchange network it was not considered productive.⁵ Dagmar Engels rightly projected about these women's unrecognised labour, "Activities which

counted as work when they were done by men became 'leisure' activities when they were done by women, even of crafts, such as spinning, were included which produced marketable goods or useful household products."⁶

The demarcation of market-based income or income generated from household was not the only parameter to contemplate these working women as dependent earners and not remunerating them adequately for their service. Many of these wives worked outside the house, helping their spouses. In agrarian families, many of their women worked in the fields; in peasant or artisan families, their women provided services in the *andarmahals* of aristocratic families. In 1865, James Kerr authored his experience of these working women by expressing that the lower ranked women were often seen working in the fields along with men, carrying out burdens on their heads and doing all sorts of manual labour.⁷ Babu Girish Chandra Ghosh in one of his speeches in 1868 opined that the multitude of poorer class of women of Bengal baffle the attempt to describe them minutely.⁸ Describing several occupations these women were involved in, he situated that the barbers' wives were very often occupied in paring the nails of the ladies of *andarmahal* and painting their feet and fingers in '*alta*'.⁹ However, these women were exceedingly undervalued. British observer F.H. Buchanan in 1815 insinuated that women were paid very poorly for grain processing.¹⁰ Apart from the primary records, among more contemporary scholars, Geraldine Forbes attributed that, "The dominant gender ideology constructed women as dependent housewives; the reality was that thousands of women worked to survive".¹¹ Nirmala Banerjee summarised the sectors of labours these women were involved in, in both household and outer society: Firstly, in superior crafts for extended markets where they worked either as household helpers or rarely, as sellers; secondly, they worked in caste specific occupations, like, weavers, sweepers, barbers, washerwomen, potters; thirdly, women who were involved in subsistence craft which they basically produced as resources for their own families and occasionally sold in markets.¹² Banerjee also attributed that these women were increasingly marginalised in the society and rarely received any independent income as they worked as a household team.

Bharati Ray also proclaimed that many of these economically active women did not receive a 'readily identifiable personal income' despite contributing significantly to balancing the economic equilibrium of the household.¹³ Sugata Bose too advocated that from mid nineteenth century, there was increase in the unpaid component of women's labour and a decline in its paid component.¹⁴ Thus, even though many of these working women performed the exact tasks for which their independently earning sisters were being remunerated, these women were left unremunerated or underpaid because of their dependent wife's status. For instance, when women worked as washerwomen without any male assistance, they earned a specific amount for their labour; but when the wife of a washerman undertook the same labour along with her husband, her earning was pigeonholed as family income.

This propaganda played a substantial role in women's cityward migration in colonial Bengal. Indigenous rural women who had no means left to survive with the undervaluation of their labour in the villages, began to flock into Kolkata mostly to engage in the female-centric wage-based occupations. Their traditional pattern of being under-remunerated also affected their wages in the urban economy. As Ranajit Guha has depicted, the colonial state also cashed on this gender biased remuneration policy.¹⁵ Nonetheless, the migration policy, consequently, intensified the ordeal of the working women of the villages as it further exacerbated the existing division of labour in the familial economy which accelerated male control on capital-intensive labour and relegated their women to labour-intensive works with invisible rewarding opportunities. Along with their regular share of the financial burden, these women also endured the brunt of hardship when the economic conditions for the family deteriorated due to natural calamities, sudden loss of household heads or during any other unprecedented occurrences. *Bamabodhini Patrika* in 1870 published a column authored by a woman named Krishnakamini who demonstrated the roles women could undertake during distress. Deepita Chakravarty and Ishita Chakravarty in their study on the working wives and widows, translated lady Krishnakamini's statement, "Especially, women in distress

cut grass, act as porters carrying loads and also as peons carrying letters from one village to another, work as maids, plant paddy, harvest the crop, weave on looms, sell good in market.”¹⁶ This mostly escalated with the growth of Kolkata’s labour economy in the nineteenth century when innumerable rural households lost their breadwinners as men were the main participants in the urban migration. Women who were stranded behind in charge of the rural households, took the greater responsibility for the continuance of familial income with what Samita Sen called “varied but intermittent foraging and gathering activities”.¹⁷ However, such breadwinning roles were too discarded by the share of the men’s wages from the cities which was ascribed to be the primary source of subsistence. A further blow which led to the redundancy of the recognition of women’s income was the advancement of industry-based economy. With the new grown mechanised labour, the local women began to lose their mainstay in tasks like spinning and rice husking as they began to be replaced by machines and were offered menial jobs at the mills which was nothing compared to their earlier hold. According to Mukul Mukherjee, each Bengali village had its own complement of working women who supplemented family income through husking the rice of the upper class and were paid invariably in food grains which had estimated value of Rs 12 per year.¹⁸ As per Forbes, “In Bengal, the female-dominated household industry of rice-husking was replaced by mechanized threshing machines placed in mills.”¹⁹

Upper Class Women and Concern of Status

By nineteenth century, the upper class elite Bengalis chose domesticity as ideology to uphold their status. According to Partha Chatterjee, the construction of a domestic space within which women were to remain as custodians of absolute domesticity had been projected as a counter for the subjugation of the Bengali elite by European power in the outer world. To quote him, “The home in its essence must remain unaffected by the profane activities of the material world- and women are its representation.”²⁰ Meredith Borthwick too attested that in the new colonial metropolis, control over women’s behaviour according to orthodox measures were enforced with greater rigidity than ever.²¹ Judith Walsh in her study on the domesticity of colonial

India, explained that the affluent local women were burdened with the responsibility of creating a secluded atmosphere in their homes which could compensate men for their loss of power in public sphere.²² Intriguingly, many of these secluded women prided themselves on their strict observance of seclusion.²³ These segregated elite women from the *andarmahals* bore tragic consequences for their rural contemporaries because the lower section of the society, in desire of replicating the same status, installed similar value systems in their households too. As H. H. Risley projected in 1892, the tendency to imitate the behavioural pattern of the higher castes operates much strongly in Bengal proper as the lower castes had strong reverence for the higher castes in social precedence.²⁴ Samita Sen also conceded that the “domestication” of elite women in the nineteenth century affected women of impoverished classes too.²⁵ This ideology of domestication questioned women’s engagement in service and profession and promoted women’s disassociation of production and consumption activities. This escalated the prevailing moral codes set for the women in the village patriarchy. As R.C Dutt conceded, the rural wives of *tanti*, *kumor* or *chhutor* were commanded to stand aside if any stranger passed from the same location.²⁶ The tendency to withdraw women from visible activities provided a notion of wealth and status as their disassociation from manual labour reflected on the ability of their men to be the sole provider. In this whole propaganda of female seclusion, the most overlooked fact was that in the upper echelon of the society, the women did not need to contribute to the family income, rather, they were bestowed with a constellation of serving women engaged in their service. Whereas, in the marginal families of colonial Bengal the women were expected to have enormous share in the workload of income generation, that too maintaining equal sense of seclusion to imitate the shrine of status the upper class men held in the society through the seclusion of their women. Samita Sen rightly remarked, “Women’s work, if not their earnings, was marginalized.”²⁷ Hence, gigantic expectation from the working wives brought these women nothing but under-representation of their giant share of work. The notion that women’s paid work was only for domestic survival and not a regular contribution to the

familial income was reflected in some of the educated female voices too. *Bamabodhini Patrika* in a column addressed as 'Adarsha Ramani' (Ideal Woman) expressed that, "If the earning husband falls ill, will women stay crying by their bedside? That day, if necessary, the women will leave her home to earn money, will stand in the workplace with hundreds and thousands of other men and women."²⁸

Working Wives in the Census Records

Emphasising on the difficulty of tracing the sources to document the history of these working wives, Geraldine Forbes profoundly opined that, 'Our sources on women's work in the nineteenth and even much of the twentieth centuries are vague and un-analytical.'²⁹ Moreover, unlike the organised industrial sectors, the rural household-based economy was not subjected to any legislative acts or annual reports containing details of their work schedule and returns. The only administrative data which deliver a consistent record of working women and their contribution in the familial income, dependently or independently, are the decennial census reports of the British Raj. Engels also argued that the census findings and reports on selected villages or cottage industries are the only administrative evidence to analyse the contribution of women in family income.³⁰ For this study, census reports of 1872, 1881, 1891, 1901, 1911, 1921 and 1931 have been examined. However, there have been long debates over the accurate representation of women in the census reports of the British period. As Leonore Davidoff proclaimed, in the early official records, devaluation of female labour was evident as it was often subsumed within their male partners categories and was often termed as 'unproductive'.³¹ In case of Bengal, Maroona Murmu argued, "One hardly finds statistics as vague as those for the occupation of women in the entire range of census data. Conceptual biases were firmly entrenched in the censuses."³² Bharati Ray also admitted that these women were not adequately recorded in the census reports which were crucial sources to know the statistical history of colonial Bengal.³³ Dagmar Engels also attested that only a small number of women were returned by census enumerators as gainfully employed, because women's work was seen as the property of their husbands.³⁴ Satish Kumar too opined that women were

inconsistently categorised as details of their occupations were subordinated to the interests of the male workforce and their perception of 'appropriate livelihood' of women.³⁵

One main reason was that the marital status of these women automatically confined their data to the association of their husbands or other male household heads. As no clear instruction was provided to the enumerators on recording these working women separately, most of the women, shown employed by the enumerators were projected with their husbands' profession no matter what the nature of their work was. The Census Report of 1881 attested to this fact, "The truth is that the great bulk of enumerators have been singularly obtuse in comprehending the fact that the counting of the females was a matter of any importance in census work."³⁶ The report also remarked on the overall low estimation of women's labour in the country and the reticence of the people on all matters connected with their women.³⁷ Thus, local people also chose to not reveal much about their women to keep the seclusion policy intact and to avoid their shared contribution in income generation. In a correspondence to the Secretary to the Government of India, Home Department dated the 26th April 1869, E. Gay, the Secretary to the Statistical Committee remarked, "Thus, it is noticeable that, in each India census, the proportion of males to females is far greater than in Europe. It is worth consideration whether this may not be often erroneous and arise, from the people preferring to omit all mention, or deny the existence of females rather than answer the questions asked about them."³⁸ The British government chose the policy of non-confrontation with the locals over the enumeration of their female members. This lenient attitude in recording women was reflected in the Census report of Bengal in 1872. As per the Memorandum on the Census of 1872, "Very little information is given in the census reports respecting the occupations of women in British India. In most cases they have either been omitted from the returns or included with men in such a manner that the two classes cannot be separated."³⁹ The next census, Census of India 1881 mirrored almost same demeanour in documenting the contribution of these working women in Bengal. According to census report of

1881, out of 248636 females, some 48000 had stated occupations. Of these, one-half were employed in domestic sectors, one-fourth were in hard manual labour and the other fourth in some sort of petty trade.⁴⁰ General report on the Census of India in 1891 also admitted inaccuracy in some particular sections of the returns concerning female workers. The report projected, "It can only be roughly stated that in all the occupations instanced, except in-door servants, cowdung-fuel preparers, cotton-spinners, sacking makers, midwives, rice pounders and women of disreputable life, the great majority of women are dependents."⁴¹ The subsequent census, Census of India 1901, however, provided a convincing detail of the work of these women. By grouping the occupations of all low wage-earning females in three groups, this report listed two specific categories where the working women of the male led households fitted. Firstly, women whose work was subsidiary to the family occupation of the chief earner of the household. For example, cotton-spinning was carried out by the wives of weavers and selling of fruits, vegetables and milk were conducted by the wives of fruit and vegetable growers, cow-keepers and fishermen. And secondly, women who worked together with their husbands such as in basket-weaving, working in tea gardens or coal mines and as field labourers.⁴² The Census of India in 1911 continued to record similar patterns of these women's work by stating that "it is regarded as a woman's job to dispose of the articles that her husband makes, grows, or catches, such as pots and household utensils, milk, ghee and fish". The report also mentions three sectors of work where women were active: silk-worm rearing, making of string and sale of fuel.⁴³ One decade later, the Census of India 1921 provided a more detailed statistics for women workers of Bengal by estimating that in Bengal 2,271,887 females were actual workers; 157 per 1000 male workers.⁴⁴ Most of these women were employed in ordinary cultivation, field labour, fishing, trade in food stuff, textile industry, basket-making, pottery, rice pounding and husking, so on and so forth.⁴⁵ The Census Report of 1921 also demonstrated that the proportion of dependents to workers varied much from occupation to occupation but they were influenced by a range of factors such as whether the occupation is one in which the women of the families could

work with the men and secondly, whether custom allowed the women of the class who followed a certain profession, to find employment independently, for example by husking paddy or keeping a small job.⁴⁶ The final census which this research refers to is the Census of India, 1931. This Census Report provided an in-depth discussion on the debate of earners and dependents. According to the report, “A general presumption was made that women were dependents; they were treated as working dependents if they merely assisted other members of the family in their work and as earners only if they received money or some other direct return from their work.”⁴⁷ The report further proposed that all women should be returned as earners whose income contributed to the primary income of the household and for others ‘subsidiary occupational tables’ were advocated.⁴⁸

Concluding Remarks

The under-remuneration and under-representation of the working wives of rural households have created a massive vacuum in determining the actual socio-economic aspects of gender and labour history of colonial Bengal. Though the article has specifically focused on the wives of male heads of the families, women of all relations, mother, sister, divorced or widowed relatives were active participants in income generation. The discussion erstwhile has projected how these women not just performed their regularly assigned part, rather, they had upper hand in the some of the professions like spinning and rice husking. However, every section of the society which held authority such as their own husbands, upper class men and women and the British officials involved in census making; have failed these women. Modernisation and industrialisation in British Bengal further deteriorated their earning status and these women without any agency, were coerced to the margin by their male associates who now compelled them to even more intense but invisible labour. The state policies and the elite intelligentsia did not include these women in any reform measures, rather cashing on the free labour of these under-valued earning women. Overall, it can be inferred that the comprehensive negligence exhibited towards these marginal working women spawned from the fact that these women were never acknowledged as a

significantly contributing part of the masculinist colonial economy. Through an analysis of the relevant primary and contemporary scholarship, this paper has attempted to bring to light the substantial but unacknowledged socio-economic contributions of these working wives of Bengal who deserve to be freed from oblivion.

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