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## Why There are Fewer and Fewer Women at Work in Bengal

By: Padmini Swaminathan

*Fewer women are entering the labour market in West Bengal, a decline steeper than in the rest of India. A new book examines structural factors that entrench women and girl children in underpaid, invisible, or unpaid work.*

Marriage, divorce and widowhood practices are subjects that rarely engage economists or the discipline of economics. *Wives and Widows at Work: Women's Labour in Agrarian Bengal, Then and Now* provides a refreshingly different perspective to make sense of the secular decline in women's workforce participation rate in West Bengal, which is disproportionately more than that observed in the rest of the country. This process is also discernible in other important indicators of women's well-being such as age at marriage and incidence of widowhood.

Beginning with the contention that cultural explanations alone do not account for the persistence of the above phenomena, the authors turn to an examination of structural factors such as the nature of the agrarian economy and its possible interconnections with social behaviour. Deploying a comparative framework and using work as the entry point, the authors compare the eastern and southern regions of India, both places where paddy cultivation, which employs a large number of women, is more prevalent.

The book is in six chapters, parts of most of which were written and published elsewhere by the authors, either independently or together. This compilation enables Chakravarty and Chakravarty argue that the specific nature of the functioning of the economy in West Bengal from colonial times goes against arguments that try to explain the labour market behaviour of women as an outcome of individual choice – of either the employee or the employer. On the contrary, they emphasise “how the coexistence of structural constraints of distribution of rules, norms and assets together and by reinforcing each other can lead to a specific labour market outcome.”

Given that the cropping pattern in rice-cultivating states remains more or less the same, the authors examine the landholding structures in the east and south and their association with women's work participation rates. Their exploration of secondary data on landholding patterns by different size classes reveals, for instance, that around 55% of households in Tamil Nadu in 2008 belonged to the landless category. The figure for this in West Bengal was around 35%.

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An analysis of the secondary data reveals that a greater inequality in landholding is generally associated with more women working as agricultural labourers because the demand for hired labour increases with an increase in the concentration of land in a few hands. Using this logic, “Small-holding agrarian economy (such as in West Bengal) [...] is more likely to be cultivated by the peasants themselves where the peasant woman will have a very important role.”

Cost of cultivation data also helps the authors deduce the greater prevalence of family farming and peasant agriculture in the east in general and West Bengal in particular when compared with the southern states. Going further, it is argued that women's work in family farms is likely to be hidden and unaccounted for, unlike when they work in other people's fields for wages. A related insight is that unlike in other regions where there are more women cultivators when there is less inequality in landholding, Bengal, which has the least inequality in landholding, lags behind in the number of its women enumerated as cultivators.

The volume alludes to an interesting practice (recorded in colonial documents) called “pali” labour, which referred to ordinary peasant households managing their affairs by helping and assisting each other in the fields. Stating that this practice exists even today, it is observed that, “In such a reciprocal process of helping out each other in moments of need where the use of hired help was hardly known, it is difficult to imagine women of the cultivator families ‘enjoying leisure’ and not taking part in any kind of farm work.” Given that one had to either own land or have the power to control its use to be counted as a cultivator, the chances of women in Bengal being included in this list were low.

A chapter on “Work and Widowhood” discusses the literature that singles out West Bengal for its high incidence of widowhood and child marriage from colonial times. The attempt is to juxtapose these phenomena against the women’s work participation data to find out whether there is any association between women’s work and marriage practices. Drawing from a variety of sources, the authors infer that women’s labour in general and widows’ labour in particular are crucial to the sustenance of cultivating households.

The authors attribute the ban on remarriage of widows amongst cultivating castes to an increased need for family labour on the farm. This goes against the received wisdom of attributing the culture of celibate widowhood to an upper-caste ideology.

“Remarriage of the widows would have jeopardized the entire scheme of utilizing a most vulnerable, and therefore controllable, unpaid workforce: hence, the high incidence of widowhood in the labouring age-group of cultivator families. We suggest that such cultivating castes had probably been practicing the use of widow’s labour on the family farm since they took to agriculture.”

Further, the authors attribute the ban on remarriage of widows amongst cultivating castes to an increased need for family labour on the farm. This goes against the received wisdom of attributing the culture of celibate widowhood to an upper-caste ideology.

Discussing “Work Opportunities and Marriage”, Cahkravarty and Chakravarty argue that though colonial Bengal was known for its social reformers, the continuing practice of underage marriage in the post-Independence period has more to do with the lack of new economic opportunities than poverty or illiteracy. The industrial stagnation that continues to plague West Bengal, coupled with a low demand for agricultural labour, according to the authors, is not incompatible with early marriage. This is unlike states such as Tamil Nadu where women are being absorbed into emerging industries, including in rural areas. These women have to be better educated and have some mobility, both factors that to a considerable extent delay marriage.

Much has been written about women’s unpaid labour in the farm sector, namely, the amount of pre- and post-harvest operations performed by them. This book points out that “neither post-harvest labour performed at home nor work in the field is particularly a barrier to underage marriage and early motherhood” (p. 149). Contrasting Rajasthan (a non-paddy growing state) with West Bengal, both of which are characterised by a high incidence of child marriage, the authors point out that Rajasthan has a very high proportion of women who are engaged in cattle grazing. “It is clear that no specific training or education is required to do this work and therefore there is no contradiction between cattle grazing and early marriage.”

Following a disturbing decline in the child sex ratio (Census 2011), almost all states instituted policies targeted at improving the condition of the girl child. “However, the first and almost the only policy aimed at the girl child in West Bengal was adopted as late as 2014.” In their interaction with a group of students in a rural university in West Bengal, the authors learnt that the Kanyasri project did incentivise several parents to wait till their daughters became 18 years old and somehow completed 10 years of schooling. “Then once their daughters bagged the cash benefit under the scheme, they immediately invested the money to ‘buy’ a suitable groom.”

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The analysis of urban women’s work in West Bengal reveals a much higher concentration of urban women in domestic service amongst all work categories compared to other major states of India. It was around 20% in 1991, and rose to 23% in 2001 though it was only 10% in the same year in the country as a whole. “Domestic service does not require any educational qualification [...] and though it is wage work outside the home, a part-time domestic job can be accommodated with duties of a wife and a mother at home.”

The authors concentrate on the increasing entry of girl children to paid domestic work even as older women fail to get employed in the urban areas of the state in a chapter titled “From the Fields to the City”. Using multiple sources – conventional (censuses) and non-conventional (autobiographies, memoirs, and newspaper advertisements) – the authors first map the changing gender pattern characterising domestic labour.

They state that the “feminization of domestic service in West Bengal accelerated dramatically with Partition and mass migration from the other side of the border” (p. 175). This included girl children’s participation, which, contrary to the national experience, saw a rapid increase in urban West Bengal till 2001 (p. 184). It is documented in the volume that girl children’s work participation rate in urban areas of the state was the highest amongst 15 major states of the country in 2001.

There was a dip in the girl child work participation rate in 2011, probably due to a 2006 law banning employment of children and a better performance by schools in the state. But with the state not generating job opportunities for its young women, merely achieving 10 years of schooling cannot – and has not been able to – reverse underage marriage and/or motherhood. The latter is in no way incompatible with domestic service work.

Chakravarty and Chakravarty take us through the changing discourses on women and work before and after the 1920s in the last chapter. This is based on material sifted from articles, editorials, and reports published in periodicals, mostly written “by upper-caste Bengali Hindu men and women.”

The themes that engaged the upper gentry at that time included the need to address, real or imagined, Muslim abduction of Hindu women, widows in particular. There was also the need for “dependent” widows to be protected and to be gainfully employed as primary teachers, nurses and handicraft producers. Remarriage of widows was not so much a matter of their right but to control their sexuality to prevent Hindu women from running away with Muslim men and thus increase the Muslim population. It was thought best to avoid “undesirable” competition between the sexes, through, among other things, having different curricula for the two genders.

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There is no doubt that this book, through its research and analysis, provokes readers to revisit arguments attributing social practices largely to a region’s culture, and/or religious practices amongst certain communities. It provides a template for similar research to be carried out in other parts of the country to comprehend the link between commerce and social practices and the changing patterns of this connection.

More significantly, it underscores an important message – a mere increase in the number of years girls spend in schools without a concomitant attention to the disproportionate burden of unpaid work women do and taking steps to change the nature of employment generated by the economy will only have a limited impact. Even schemes aimed at promoting women’s education and persuading parents to delay the age of marriage will not be able to reverse the present trend.

Certain themes flagged by the book that remain under-researched include the limited engagement with Muslims though the community has a big presence in West Bengal. A more detailed comparison with Bangladesh across the border is in order because this country presents a textbook example of how a different kind of employment generation can draw out large numbers of Muslim women into factory employment and also increase the years of schooling for girls and raise their age at marriage. Bangladesh has also facilitated the international migration of women for domestic service through proactive policies and incentivised remittances.

A critical examination of why the 34-year-long uninterrupted rule of the Left in West Bengal in post-Independent India has not been effective in reversing practices that entrench women and girl children in low paid domestic service or as unpaid/invisible workers in subsistence agriculture needs a political economy framework that reliance on data systems alone will not suffice.

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