
BOOK REVIEW

Women's Labour in Agrarian Bengal

Deepita Chakravarty & Ishita Chakravarty, *Wives and Widows at Work: Women's Labour in Agrarian Bengal, Then and Now* (Hyderabad: Orient BlackSwan, 2023).

Savita Anandelwar

Savita Anandelwar, English Department, Central University of Rajasthan, Kishangarh 305817 (Rajasthan). Email: savita.andelwar@curaj.ac.in

In recent times there has been a growing scholarly interest in working women and the feminization of agriculture. This well-written book is an addition to this growing literature. It has six chapters covering different aspects of the topic. Although the title says that it is a study of agrarian Bengal, much of it covers other rice-producing states as well, making it a comparative study to a large extent enhancing its readability.

The book concentrates on the period 1911-2011. It states at the outset, "Any researcher looking into present-day large-scale data on women's work in Bengal may find L.S.S. O'Malley's observation regarding the very low rate of women's work participation by Bengali women, made more than a hundred years ago, strikingly relevant" (p. 2). The introduction includes a brief review of relevant literature on marriages practices, work behaviour, landholding pattern and general well-being of women. In the last one hundred years or so, the Indian village economy was increasingly integrated with the market economy and the book traces the implications of this phenomenon for agricultural practices. Bengal has been plagued by the persistence of a large number of small cultivators. Although low female work participation rate, high rate of underage marriage and high incidence of widowhood are features in India as a whole, wide regional differences prevail and women's low workforce participation in rural Bengal in general is more pronounced. This is notwithstanding the fact that this state was one of the principal centres of the social reform movement and also one of the first to embrace English education.

The authors continue that the incidences of underage marriage and widowhood of women are generally higher in India vis-à-vis many other parts of the world and they are even higher in Bengal. Social historians have argued that marriage practices of the higher castes gradually percolate downwards with intermediary and lower castes following the norms of child marriage and ban on widow marriage as a means of attaining social respectability.

Chapter II deals with landholding pattern and nature of work. The authors point out that historically Bengal has been characterized by small agricultural holdings which became more fragmented after the land reforms. In course of time small holdings became even smaller as a result of demographic pressure. Besides, decline of the industrial sector took place even before colonialism ended. It resulted in a severe shortage of work opportunities in general and for women in particular. The authors say that in a predominantly rice cultivating state of West Bengal with relatively less mechanization, there has been one of the lowest work participation rates for women in agriculture in rural areas. The cultural bias against paid outside work by women is particularly strong in West Bengal. The authors point out, “Anecdotal evidence suggests that the small family farms, characteristic of West Bengal agriculture, are mostly taken care of by women. Women also engage in household manufacturing and petty trade in considerable numbers. It is possible that women who work on small family farms in the state, without remuneration or land ownership titles in most cases, largely remain outside the purview of data collectors” (p. 46). The authors have found that in most cases men take up paid agricultural work as labourers and women engage in unpaid work on small family farms owned by households.

The subject of the next chapter is ‘work and widowhood.’ It focuses on the allocation of the widows’ labour in the historical context. This is important because Bengal recorded the highest incidence of widowhood in some years in the regions considered. The incidence of child marriage of girls was much higher in western and central Bengal than in northern or eastern region. It was more among Hindus in western and eastern Bengal while more Muslim girls were given in marriage in central and northern Bengal. Subsequently, in all likelihood the decreasing proportion of widowhood was the combined result of demographic changes like decreasing male mortality and delayed age of marriage of girls. The plight of widows was deplorable. The authors elucidate, “One meal a day, low protein diet combined with frequent ritual fasting might very well explain the high mortality” (p. 126). Low sex ratio and low incidence of widowhood among the upper castes

might be partly due to the practice of sending them to far off places like Varanasi. Although the incidence of women's participation in agricultural labour was low in colonial Bengal, in some activities like rice husking, pounding, grain parching and flour grinding women outnumbered men.

Chapter IV deals with 'work opportunities and marriage' of women. It argues that more than poverty and illiteracy, lack of employment opportunities owing to poor performance of the state economy is mainly responsible for persistent underage marriage in Bengal. Remunerative work opportunity can ensure work participation and delayed marriage. Unlike Tamil Nadu and some other states, in Bengal women face competition from men even in domestic service. Apart from domestic sector, there is a concentration of urban women workers in the health and education sectors. Another sector is manufacturing for urban women. These activities are undertaken at home and not in factories. Besides, export-oriented industrialization created employment for women in factories leading to delay in marriages.

Chapter V is on feminization of paid domestic service in Bengal. Women moved from the fields to the cities, especially Calcutta in search of employment. The discussion starts with the partition of Bengal. The refugee women unaccompanied by adult male members were in frantic search of the means of survival and were often willing to work for a lower wage than the migrant males. Destitute and in search of shelter, at times they offered to work in return for food and accommodation only. The entry of such women into the domestic service market naturally pulled down the wage levels, especially for the girl children. For the first time in the year 1981 the girl children outnumbered the boy children in urban domestic service in the state. Many of them started work as early as six or seven years of age. Employing a girl child as a whole-time domestic worker was cheaper than employing an adult woman. Families seemed to have no idea about where these girls were working, what their duties were and what they were earning. These girls were called back for marriage when they reached puberty. Often after an interlude of about ten years, they returned to the domestic service labour market. At this stage they were sometimes widowed or deserted. At other times they did so to supplement the family income. Some women were also daily commuters who commuted from nearby rural areas to work in Calcutta.

The last chapter contains discourses on widowhood and work in late colonial Bengal. Along with discussions in periodicals, there were initiatives to establish shelters and training centres for widows and

deserted women principally by the educated women of middle classes. Many prostitutes in Calcutta were widows who came from different castes. Another large avenue of employment for poor widows and widows in the city was paid domestic service. Poor women also earned by performing on the stage because the emerging theatres generated demand for professional actresses. Yet another way to get employment was teaching and medical professions. This led to the establishment of training institutions. Some periodicals were run solely by women while others considered only women's contributions. Articles on women's education, conditions of widows, etc., were often published. Widow remarriage and making women self-sufficient were ways to improve the conditions of women. Conversion of Hindu women to Islam was treated with concern.

These are the principal contents of this book. Since there is not much academic endeavour to study the condition of women, particularly widows, it is a fruitful study. Based on published sources as well as interviews, it adds to our understanding of the subject. Use of standard published works adds to the authenticity of its results. At the same time, it has a glaring flaw. It has many a repetition of what has already been stated in the previous chapters and even in the same chapter. This should obviously have been avoided.