

# Gender and Labour in Bengal's Past and Present

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**W***ives and Widows at Work: Women's Labour in Agrarian Bengal, Then and Now* (2023) is a timely addition to the literature on women's labour and life choices. The book traces the relationship between women's participation in the workforce and marriage practices in West Bengal from the colonial era to contemporary times.

Besides the introductory chapter, outlining an overview and scope of the book's subject matter, the book comprises five independent yet interconnected chapters. Chapter 2 attempts to establish a link between landholding patterns and women's employment in contemporary times. Chapters 3 and 4 delve into the connection between women's participation in wage employment and marriage practices like child marriage and widowhood. Chapter 5 examines the feminisation of paid domestic service. The concluding chapter analyses the discourses in the late colonial period surrounding women's work and life choices.

The authors point towards three main indicators of women's well-being, namely low workforce participation rate, high rate of underage marriage, and high incidence of widowhood in West Bengal. The authors, through their study, note that these indicators have remained relatively stagnant despite the historical transformations since 1911. According to the authors, colonial perspectives have resorted to cultural explanations, including unchanging and rigid social norms to explain the persistence of high levels of widowhood and child marriage in South Asian societies, particularly Bengal. However, the arguments presented by the authors in this book question the sufficiency of cultural explanations. They provide economic explanations for these phenomena, with the authors' primary argument being that women's marriage

## BOOK REVIEWS

**Wives and Widows at Work: Women's Labour in Agrarian Bengal, Then and Now** by Deepita Chakravarty and Ishita Chakravarty, *Hyderabad: Orient BlackSwan, 2023; pp xxv + 262, ₹1,290.*

and life choices have been influenced by economic opportunities, which in turn are influenced by landholding patterns.

### An Economic Explanation of Women's Life Choices

The chapter "Landholding Pattern and Nature of Work" begins with the assertion that women's workforce participation rate is generally higher in rice-cultivating regions. However, an exception to this is West Bengal, especially in rural areas. Therefore, the chapter examines the relationship between landholding patterns and women's workforce participation rate to explain the lower rate of participation in West Bengal in comparison to other rice-cultivating states with a similar level of technological use. While the National Sample Survey (NSS) data for 2003–04 is used to examine landholding patterns and inequality in access to land, Census data for 2011–12 is used to investigate women's workforce participation. The NSS data suggests that the proportion of households in the landless category is higher for southern states like Tamil Nadu and Andhra Pradesh, being 55.43% and 48.75%, respectively, in comparison with West Bengal at 34.69%. In contrast, the workforce participation rate (WPR) for women in agricultural labour was much higher for Tamil Nadu and Andhra Pradesh at 162.4 and 218.3 per 1,000, while it was only 29.5 per 1,000 for West Bengal. Thus, the authors argue that women tend to work predominantly as agricultural labourers in a region with high inequality in landholding.

While the data provided by the authors also includes Karnataka and mentions it to be one of the rice-cultivating states of India, its examination is missing from the analysis. Their analysis with regard to landholding inequality and women's participation in the labour force fails to explain the case of Karnataka, where the inequality is lower at 0.7221 compared to West Bengal at 0.7361. Further, landlessness rates are lower than in West Bengal at 30.76% and participation of women in agricultural labour is also higher at 128.4 per 1,000. Thus, the authors' argument overlooks the fact that it is not only inequality but also the *nature of that inequality* that matters in explaining the relationship between WPR and the landholding pattern. The chapter would have greatly benefited had the authors either acknowledged this as a limitation or provided an analysis for the same.

Further, while explaining the higher participation of women as cultivators in Odisha's workforce when compared to other eastern states, the authors explain the same by citing a higher proportion of the Scheduled Tribe (ST) population in Odisha. It has been noted that the WPR is generally higher for Scheduled Caste (SC) and ST women as extreme poverty leaves them with no choice but to enter the workforce (Srivastava and Srivastava 2010). However, the authors' failure to explore social group distributions in landholding patterns leaves unanswered questions regarding the relationship between landholding patterns and the higher participation of SC and ST women in the labour market.

The authors then move to find a connection between women's participation in wage employment and marriage practices like child marriage and widowhood. Analysing the contemporary data on child marriage in the chapter, "Work Opportunities and Marriage," the authors observe a decline in underage marriages for all states in India. However, the decline for West Bengal is not as sharp as other states such as Rajasthan and Uttar Pradesh. According to the 2015–16 National Family Health Survey (NFHS) data, the incidence of underage marriages is the highest in

West Bengal at around 40%. Comparing this with Tamil Nadu, with a low incidence of underage marriage, the authors argue that the incidence of underage marriage declines with an increase in industrial employment. Drawing from studies on the garment manufacturing units of Bangladesh and the textile industry of Tamil Nadu, the authors argue that such employment opportunities can act as a deterrent to underage marriage. Their argument is based on an observation that such opportunities in industries generally require formal education and skill training, which increases the schooling years. However, they also argue that employment opportunities that do not require formal training might not have any impact on the incidence of child marriage. It is clear from the example of Andhra Pradesh, where despite women's higher participation in the agricultural workforce as well as manufacturing units like bidi production, the incidence of child marriage is high, standing at the fourth position in 2015–16. Therefore, rather than stating the obvious that industrialisation transforms social norms, an in-depth analysis into the causes behind the decline in child marriage in the other states of India would have helped the study. Data provided by the authors shows that the incidence of underage marriage in Uttar Pradesh has declined from 64.3% in 1998–99 to 21.2%, taking it from the fourth position to the 10th position in the list. Therefore, the causes behind such a decline, which has taken place without any parallel increase in the industrialisation level, would have helped further our understanding of this issue.

The authors shift their focus back to the colonial period in the chapter “Work and Widowhood” to examine the correlation between the nature of women's work participation and widowhood in the first half of the 20th century. They have majorly relied on the censuses conducted between 1901 and 1951. Their study found that while cultivation was prevalent across all regions during that period, participation as agricultural labour was much higher in Madras. Further, an investigation into the incidence of widowhood showed that it was the

highest for Bengal followed by Madras. The authors explain the higher incidence of widowhood in Madras by simply mentioning the higher female–male ratio and higher economic independence, which according to them led to better agency for women. However, for Bengal, they engage in a much more detailed analysis. Their study finds that the incidence of widowhood in the age group of 12–40 years was much higher among the cultivating peasant castes in comparison to both upper castes and labouring castes. The authors thus conclude that widows' labour was crucial for cultivating households, whether as a part of the in-laws' family or the natal family. They assert that remarriage would have jeopardised “the exploitation of the most vulnerable, controllable, and unpaid workforce” for cultivating castes. Thus, they suggest that a higher incidence of widowhood among cultivating castes can be better explained through the need for unpaid family labour rather than cultural explanations of upper-caste marriage practices percolating downwards. While the discussions around cultivating castes of Bengal are well explored, further investigation could have been undertaken for other social groups. Also, the claim regarding the economic independence of women in Madras, particularly during the colonial period, needs more substantiation rather than a mere reference to their higher participation in the

workforce. An analysis into the earnings of widows would have elucidated more on women's well-being and agency. It should be noted here that the authors have reassessed the questions raised in this chapter in a research article elsewhere, which tackles these questions with a more nuanced argument while keeping the presentation more articulate and focused (Chakravarty and Chakravarty 2022).

### Financial Compulsion

The economic compulsion of women working as paid domestic help is explored in the chapter on “From Field to the City.” The authors posit that the feminisation of domestic labour in the city of Kolkata gained impetus subsequent to the mass migration from East Pakistan. Using the census data, they showed that a majority of domestic workers in 1921 were from the neighbouring states of Bihar, Odisha, and the United Provinces. These earlier migrations were characterised by single male migrants. They further suggested that an influx of migrants from East Pakistan between the 1950s and 1970s included women and children, thereby reshaping the gender composition of domestic workers. Further, they argue that decreasing incomes from agriculture within West Bengal also pushed women from rural areas to urban centres. Finally, by 1981, the representation of female domestic workers had surpassed their male counterparts. The

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**BOOK REVIEW**

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chapter uses newspaper advertisements to indicate that widowed women were preferred as domestic workers because of their willingness to accept nominal wages. Often termed as “pocket money,” nominal wage was acceptable to the refugee women in exchange for lodging, which was a critical consideration for them.

The authors have also conducted in-depth interviews to understand the lives of female domestic workers. They first categorise domestic workers into three categories of city-dwellers, daily commuters, and full-time maids. Through their interaction with these domestic workers, they discuss the earning situations in their families, their aspirations, particularly for their children, and the difficulties faced by them. However, a discussion about the discrimination faced by domestic workers owing to their class and caste position is missing from the analysis.

In the final chapter, “When Should a Woman Strive to Earn? Discourses on Widowhood and Work in Late Colonial Bengal,” the authors focused on popular

Bangla periodicals released during the first half of the 20th century to study the discourse on women’s work and their life choices. While some periodicals published articles around progressive changes to empower women, it was common for them to endorse conservative views on women’s issues. Apart from publishing articles that promoted women’s role as a homemaker, Hindu women were commonly portrayed as victims of communal violence and injustice at the hands of Muslims. Further, an image of the helpless widow was promoted. The authors show that an ideology was constructed in these periodicals, where women’s labour was devalued and attached to the idea of male breadwinners. The underlying argument of this chapter is that despite all the economic reasoning behind women’s lower participation in the workforce, an ideological and cultural hegemony is necessary to keep the status quo.

Overall, the book provides a deep insight into women’s life choices like marriage and widowhood and raises several questions in front of the reader

to explore further. While some chapters were historical, others were based on contemporary data. Although the authors tried to explain the contemporary through the past, the majority of the late 20th century is missing from the analysis, a major drawback in the evidence on which the book’s arguments are based. But despite all its limitations, the book provides a powerful counter-argument against cultural narratives regarding the lower participation of women in the workforce.

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