

Women Workers in the Jute Industry of Bengal : 1914-1947

Sutapa Sengupta

In 1855 first spinning machine was brought from Dundee to Calcutta and a jute mill was set up at Rishra by one Gorge Auckland. Then within fifty to sixty years, the industry had grown so rapidly that Bengal soon became the major jute producing and manufacturing zone of the world by replacing Dundee at Scotland. Interestingly enough Jute industry did not yield any favourable result either to the Indian jute cultivators or to the mill workers. Whenever crisis arose in the international market mill management reduced working hours and took the policy of severe retrenchment. Female workers who belonged to the unskilled section of the total working force were the worst affected faction. The mill management had no intention to provide any economic protection, insurance or proper medical benefits to the female workers in jute factories. Even the male co-workers and the trade unions were indifferent to the issues related to maternity benefit, wage, working hours and medical insurance of the female workers. The female labour force faced dual exploitation as a gender faction within the hierarchical social structure.

Jute spinning was extensively practiced by the Indians centuries before the British occupation. “The spun yarn was used for bedding, cloth, screens, matting and garments for the poorer people and many other domestic purposes throughout India. Spinning was performed on primitive bamboo contrivances operated by hand”¹ Till the mid of the 19th century jute was a small scale handicraft industry, confined to the poorer section of population like petty peasants and fishermen of Bengal. In 1855 first spinning machine was brought from Dundee to Calcutta and a jute mill was set up at Rishra by one Gorge Auckland. Then within fifty to sixty years, the industry had grown so rapidly that Bengal soon became the major jute producing and manufacturing zone of the world by replacing Dundee at Scotland. By the opening of 20th century a vast number of jute mills scattered by the two sides of the river Hooghly near Calcutta became the main artery of the whole eastern India’s commerce. The industries made Calcutta such a busy business centre that a tourist guide to the city in 1906 once commented that “to write about Calcutta without saying a word of jute would be as bad as to deprive the lamb of its mint Sauce.”²

Bengal had a virtual monopoly in the production of raw jute. In the year 1921-22, Bengal produced more than 88% of the gross Indian production of jute. In 1945– 46 it was nearly 60% of the total jute production of the country.”³ The jute empire of Bengal however was not built in a day. Several favourable factors like availability of coal from nearby coalfields, abundant supply of labour, familiarity of the local people with jute spinning and wearing, good geographical location, facility of transportation and the existence of a Port cum business centre like Calcutta attracted the European entrepreneurs with technical knowledge to invest in the jute industry of Bengal. Initially, the nascent industry was heavily dependent on Dundee for the technical knowledge.⁴ Entrepreneurs who came

from England taught the Indian workers and artisans spinning and weaving and the fitting and repairing of the machinery.⁴ Eventually the support laid by the colonial government facilitated the rapid growth of the industry within next fifty years. The process once initiated by Auckland in 1855, reached its zenith to build up a vast “Jute Empire” in the east. The fast growing Jute industry in Bengal manufactured such a huge quantity of jute product in next two or three decades that the product became almost a monopoly of Bengal.

The following chart will show European entrepreneurship in this sector.

Year	No. of Jute mill came into existence	Name of the mills	Name of the Entrepreneurs
1855	1	Rishra at Hoogly	George Auckland
1862	2	Gouripore and Serajgunj	Dr. Barrie and Dr. McDonnell
1866	1	Indian Jute mill	Mr. Howarth
1868 – 73	5	Champadany, Shamnuggur,	
1874 – 75	8	Howrah, Oriental (union), Asiatic (Sorra), Clive, Bengal, Pressing & Manufacturing Co.(Baliaghata), Rustomjee(Central), The Ganges, The Hasting.	
1876	1	Kamarhatty	Jardine, Skinner & Co.
1910 – 14	3	The Albion, Empire, Angus	
1914 - 18	6	Bally, Caledonia, Lothian, Orient, Waverly, Craig	

The Indian entrepreneurs, especially the Marwaris were not lagging far behind. They stepped into the venture of jute manufacturing during the First World War when the industry was at its boom.

In 1919, G.D. Birla built up his first jute mill in Calcutta. In the same year Swarupchand Hukumchand also established another jute mill here. Within 1930, several other Marwari families entered into this sector. In 1909, where 38 companies were operating with loom total of 30,685 in 1914, immediately before the war the number of looms operating increased to 38,354 and in 1927, just a decade after the war the number of looms operating in 59 mills rose to 58,354.

Interestingly enough the industry did not yield any favourable result to the Indian jute producers. They were illiterate and unorganized. Therefore, became easy victims to the exploitation of the mill owners. They did not have any idea about the value of jute as a cash crop in the world market. The Advance, a Contemporary journal commented on 5th Sept. '30 – ‘... For the cultivator in 90% of the cases the cost of production means nothing but the barest amount necessary to keep the body and soul together. The world which thinks in the abstract will have no sympathy for the jute growers, far less sympathy will be shown by the jute princes of Bengal who deprived the poor cultivators of a large share of the profits which they made out of jute during the war and after. “The loss is yours,

the profit is mine” is perhaps the slogan of these merchants who have come from overseas.... Jute is the monopoly of Bengal but the long line of middle men who intercept the progress of jute from the hands of jute grower to the hands of the exporters has made the relation of the harvest price of jute to its market price an incredible fiction. Yet that is the tragedy of jute in Bengal. An industry which should be prosperous for all time is being ruined by a small coterie of self-seeking Profiteers.’ The report further suggested that, ‘an intensive effort should be made by our village reformers and village organizations whether Congress or Co-operative, to cut down the area of jute and overhaul the industry from top to bottom.’⁵

However the subsequent expansion of worldwide market indicates the growing demand for jute products. Initially, its export was very limited. For the first thirty years only traditional handloom products of jute were supplied in some South East Asian countries, other than Indian Coastal areas. Burma was the main consumer of Bengal jute products. But from the end of the last century the industry started to expand its market. This effort on Indian side initiated a rivalry with Dundee. The latter demanded protection from Home Industry and petitioned before the Secretary of State for India. Despite the bitter rivalry the Indian jute mills could manage to expand its market in Latin American countries like Argentina and Cuba. They got the orders of South American’s hessian clothes and Cuban sugar bags from these countries respectively. It has been found that, between April 1917 to March 1918 the Government ordered a prompt shipment of jute fabrics to Argentina and the Bengal jute mills supplied a total of 1378 million sand bags, 713 million yard of cloth and 100000 pound of twine and large quantities of wrapper and bags for war purposes in Mesopotamia and throughout the Country.⁶

But the industry faced a deep crisis after the war. Though the government purchased all existing stocks according to their orders overall demand in external markets fell sharply. Besides, the price of raw jute increased due to crop failure in two consecutive years of 1917 and 1918. The mill owners decided to reduce their production in the post world war period to overcome the crisis.

The sudden fall of demand for jute products because of their plentiful supply in the world market, created manifold problems like reduction of wage of the workers, a drastic fall in the price of jute products etc. The Amrita Bazar Patrika had discussed the problem and blamed the mill owners for playing negative role in this connection. It reported on 20th September, 1930. There has been over production of jute for last five years. The mill owners instead of reducing the output and checking the overproduction have gone on increasing the output. They have refused to reduce the working days. This action on their part has produced twofold effects of keeping down both the wages of the workers and the prices of the manufactured goods at the lowest level. “The crisis of this year” the newspaper observed, is the cumulative effect of the policy that mill owners have followed for several years past in keeping the mills working for long hours and helping thereby the sagging of the market. The jute mill owners were allowed to do what they liked in regard to this vital industry of the province and the result is the present serious situation.”

The news paper further suggested that, to save the cultivator, it is absolutely necessary that the Government should discard its Laissez Faire attitude and take action, legislatively or otherwise, to control the production by restricting the hours of work at the mills and by other suitable measures.⁷

Along with other problems the Great Depression (1930) and high tariff imposed on the cultivators seriously affected the steady growth of the industry. Only during the Second World War, the huge order for sandbags gave the industry a temporary sigh of relief. However to solve the problem other way the mill-owners took up stern attitude and policy of retrenchment which affected the labourers, especially the woman workers seriously.

Workers in Jute Industry

Jute industries in Bengal flourished along both the banks of the river Hooghly in a small strip of land about 60 miles long and 2 miles broad. The fast growing industry engaged a huge number of workers from different provinces of India. They flocked to Bengal from the Central Province, Madras, Orissa, the united province and Bihar. Dipesh Chakraborty while describing their social and working environment has rightly commented that they used to share a similar condition of life and labour within their tiny geographical habitat.⁸ It has been estimated that in the decade of 20's in the last century the total labour force engaged in this industry was around three lakhs in number. At that time Bengal had 62 jute mills of which 56 had more than 400 employee each.⁹ The Census Report of 1921 indicated an increase in the number of the jute labourers. But the world wide depression significantly reduced the number in the decade of early 30s. Almost fifty thousand workers were thrown out of employment during this period. During this period a sudden fall of demand for jute products because of their plentiful supply in the world market, created manifold problems like reduction of wage of the workers, a drastic fall in the price of jute products etc. The Amrita Bazar Patrika had discussed the problem and blamed the mill owners for playing negative role in this connection. It reported on 20th September, 1930. There had been over production of jute for last five years. The mill owners instead of reducing the output and checking the overproduction had gone on increasing the output. They had refused to reduce the working days. This action on their part had produced twofold effects of keeping down both the wages of the workers and the prices of the manufactured goods at the lowest level.

In order to combat with the steady decline of the demand of jute product in the international market management also made an attempt to reduce the total working hours. The Bangavani Reported "In view of the dullness of the jute market the owners of the jute mills have decided in future to work the mills only for three weeks and to suspend all works for the last week of the month. It is needless to say that this proposal is as unjust as alarming to work for 54 hours"

Severe retrenchment on one hand and reduction of working hour on the other made the situation worse for the jobless workers. They started looting and plundering indiscriminately. However, the most affected group was the female labour force. From 1930 onward a decreasing trend of the number of the female labour was prevalent. Children were also equally affected. In other words, the unskilled, unorganised sector of the factory workers suffered most due to the world wide depression.

A clear indication of this decreasing trend of women's employment can be found from the following survey in the jute industry of Bengal 1912 – 44.

Year	No. of factories	No. of adult male workers	No. of adult female workers	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	19,245
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	3462
1932	94	2,12,505	40,294	1515
1933	92	2,08,246	37,337	1134
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

Year	No. of factories	No. of adult male workers	No. of adult female workers	No. of Children
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: Report on the enquiry into the condition of labour in the jute mill industry in India:- S.R. Deshpande

Several Government reports also indicated a steady decline in the number of female and children workers. While in 1930, 52,114 female and 11,646 children workers worked in 91 factories in 1931 the number reduced to 42,254 and 3462 respectively, though the number of factories increased during this period.¹⁰

The women labour force could never again recover from this decreasing trend, even in the post independence period. The reason of this decreasing trend may be investigated in an in depth study of the socio-economic condition of the labour-force with special focus on their womenfolk.

Condition of the mill workers with a special focus on women

In May, 1920, a labour bureau was set up “to collect all available information on labour condition in India and classify and tabulate it.”¹¹ The reason behind this was political. The memory of the Russian Revolution was still afresh in the mind of the British Government. Along with that the war had compelled the Government to reconsider the social and economic condition of the industrial labourers. This attitude of the Government suddenly brought the labour question into lime light.

The contemporary official reports showed that the Government of Bengal always showed an attitude of avoiding confrontations with the mill owners. This encouraged the factory inspectors to push aside all controversial issues.

Whatever be the official reports the workers had to live in an unhygienic condition and were deprived of proper nutrition, pure water and minimum sanitary facilities. Dagmar Curjel, cited examples from different mills to show the indifferent attitude and ignorance of the authorities on the condition of the workers, especially about the women workers. She reported that the manager of the Lawrence jute mill gave vague answer about the workers employed in his mills and he “seemed to take little interest in their conditions.” Again the manager of Union Jute mill admitted that “he had been too busy to think about the health of the workers”, Curjel also commented on the manager of the Howrah jute mill that It was interesting to find that how little a manager knew about the origin of the labour employed in their mills. The managers did not bother about the workers’ condition till the flow of the supply of labourers was not hampered.¹²

The quarters and the workers bustees

The workers were provided quarters by the mill authorities near the mill area. But these quarters in and around the city of Calcutta were neither sufficient in number nor better dwelling to live in. Most of the time the workers chose private jerry built houses in “Bustees” located outside mill areas and usually controlled by the local influential men like sardars, clerks and shopkeepers because of the insufficient number of quarters and lack of privacy in single room mill quarters.

Though Curjel reported that the mill quarters were better in comparison to the private bustees, in reality they were not. The quarters consisting single rooms without any windows had attached varandah for cooking. The mill authorities charged two to four annas of weekly rent for such quarters. The quarters were usually erected on a line back to back

and very often lacked sanitary facilities and proper ventilation. Some quarters were occasionally made double storied, but these unplanned brick buildings were very much unhygienic to live in. At least eleven to sixteen adults lived jointly and “sleep in shifts” in each single room quarter, so it was not suitable to live for womenfolk.”¹³

The mill located far away from Calcutta could provide the migrant labourers comparatively better quarters as the authorities had more land in their hands but the mills nearer to Calcutta had no other options open except providing single room unhygienic and insufficient number of quarters to the migrant labourers due to the density of population. The better paid class of workers like clerks, darwans and sardars usually got better quarters with small private courtyards.

Neither the mill quarters nor the private bustee houses had proper sanitary facilities. The mill authorities usually built insufficient number of latrines at a considerable distance from the quarters and these were always in such an unsanitary condition that inhabitants used to prefer to use open drains instead. On the other hand the private bustee houses had no alternative arrangements other than using open drains nearer to their houses.

Living condition of the women dwellers

In most of the cases wives of the workers did not accompany their husbands from village to city. But those who brought their womenfolk with them used to keep them mostly in the city bustees. These bustee houses could offer minimum privacy to women. R.B. Gupta in ‘Labour and Housing’ indicated that “to secure privacy in a congested city, light and air had to be shut out and the women consequently live in the darkest and worst ventilated room.”¹⁴, They used to make separate arrangement either by hanging temporary purdahs or by closing the windows permanently. Still these rooms failed to provide the much desired ‘privacy’ to women living around mill area. Therefore the migrant workers always encouraged their own women to stay in villages. However this attitude of the migrant workers differed from community to community. Those who hailed from Bihar and Orissa had a tendency to migrate alone leaving their wives in their native villages. These village women in popular folk songs of Bihar described the mills and Calcutta as villains, who separated them from their husbands and lovers.” Setting out for Calcutta in search of job, according to them was as good as going to battlefields and if the man could manage to come back he would surely come back with gold but he could also be seduced by some women there and could forget their origin.¹⁵

Again, the Telugu workers preferred to bring their wives and other woman to work in the mills. The labourers from the Central provinces also had tendencies to settle down with families. The Bengali workers except a handful of Muslim families migrated from North Bengal usually worked alone and returned to their own villages after completing a day’s work. The migrated Bengali workers hailed from North Bengal lived within the mill area with their families and worked as a whole family unit.

There were other reasons of discouraging their womenfolk to migrate. Usually these workers very often possessed cultivable lands in their native villages. The womenfolk

left in the villages used to look after their cultivable lands, worked in the field at the time of harvest, maintain the entire household, cooked delicious and nutritious food for the family, looked after the livestock, prepare mattha and ghee from milk; in the leisure hour spun yarn and sold ghee and yarn in the market to add to the family income. In addition to this being in contact with healthy and fresh nature they gave birth to the healthy babies and take care to their children or in brief, they had proved themselves “in every way useful and valuable members of their families,” in villages.¹⁶

But in the city the situation was just the contrary. The economic pressure had compelled the women to take jobs in the mills. On the top of that they had to execute the duties of their household traditionally imposed on them as primary duty. Thus the rural urban continuum was particularly characterised by the male migration because the rural women were reluctant to come with their men.¹⁷ Male worker therefore used to keep two wives simultaneously, one at his place of origin to look after his household there and the other was to satisfy his biological and financial needs in the city.

On part of the womenfolk the social situation in the mill was quite oppressive. It was next to impossible for a woman to stay alone within the mill compound. If deserted by someone, a woman worker instantly sought protection from another man. In return she gave away her earnings to that man. A women worker used to readjust her working position with that man within the factory. Sometimes Curjel observed, she also moved from one mill to another accompanying her male “protector.”

Working condition of women in jute mills

Women formed about one quarter of the labourers in jute mills their working condition was very bleak. Initially when jute industry was flourishing the mill owners welcomed cheaper but efficient women labourers to compensate the inadequacy of male workers but since the beginning of the industry women workers were treated as unskilled and unorganized section of the jute labour force. They were never trained to work with machines therefore became victims of unequal wage structure and other exploitations. During the Great depression when the demand for jute products of Bengal in the world market was drastically reduced, the unskilled women labour force became the easy victims of severe retrenchment policy taken up by the mill owners, who were then desperately fighting to combat the worse situation by reducing their establishment cost.

However protective legislations like maternity benefit, payment and provisions for separate washing facilities and crèche were assigned to the women workers by the Government. But unfortunately they could not get rid of gender exploitation. In 1920 the Government made an amendment in the factory Act of 1891 and tried to consolidate the working hour for women at eleven per day. The legislation also prohibited night shifts for them. But the mill owners had no intention to follow the rules. The severity of exploitation could be imagined from a resolution passed by the Dundee chambers on December 26, 1894. It stated, “Injustice to home industry through locality of Indian factory Act allowing women and young persons to be wrought 22 hours and children 15

as against 10 at home.”¹⁸

However, the introduction of Electricity in 1896 made the situation worse for the Indian workers. The Indian Jute Mill Association being in favour of running machinery round the clock refused to restrict working hours. In order to evade the law they adopted multiple shift system. As a result it was found that very often children below fourteen to nineteen years were actually working as many as eleven to twelve hours per day ¹⁹. The labour Enquiry Commission reported that the Government although had seriously attempted to reduce and fix-up the working hours for the children and women labourers at eleven hours per day and the night's rest following the rule set-up by the International Labour Convention and also passed a law prohibiting women and children to work within the mill before 5.30 in the morning and after 7.00 in the evening. The mill owners used to evade these laws. They did not even bother to provide a better working condition to the women labourers. In 1926, a report of the International labour Organisation indicated that more than 20,000 women workers were deprived of minimum leisure fixed up by the International Labour Organisation.

Women were usually treated as unskilled labourer and thus appointed generally in different ancillary departments other than running machinery. The owners employed the women workers mainly in hand sewing at 'magi-kol', other than that they were also engaged in batching, jute cutting, winding, drawing and ranging frames.²⁰ Very often they also worked at ghari-kal i.e. the department for regulating times. The women workers engaged in ancillary works had to maintain a certain speed to keep pace with the main process of manufacturing ²¹ only the hand sewing department had no stipulated hours of work. The entire work within a mill was supervised by the sardars. Being the unskilled section of the working force they used to receive less attention of the authority as well as their male counterparts. Their hour of working, security of job, even the wages varied from one mill to another at the discretion of the employees.

However the number of working days in a week had been reduced from seven to four in the post world war period from 1923 and multiple shift-system was introduced. Taking advantage of shift system women and children started working in two or more mills simultaneously to earn more money. Curjel in her report commented that this multiple shift system had led to many abuses due to unhealthy and illegal practices encouraged by the sardars and the mill managers. A report produced by a factory inspector in 1930 revealed one such malpractice, 'a woman under examination may give two or three names with a certain amount of persistence.' In fact, the manipulation of attendance registers by sardars and babus helped to increase daily income. Managers had admitted the existence of ghost workers and reported that the money appropriated in this way "..... is divided between the Babus, the sardars and the man who is doing the two men's job.'²²

The women workers usually received weekly wages of Rs. 2-8-0 while the average wage of a half timer was Rs. 1-10-0. But none of them received full payment at a time

as the jute mill authorities had a common practice of keeping at least a week's wage as arrear to keep control on their respective labour force. Besides, a portion of their earning had been appropriated very often by the sardars as 'Salami'. Therefore the net amount earned by a women worker became so insufficient to provide support for living that she could not cease work for a longer period, even during her ailment or in case of pregnancy unless supported by any of her relatives.

The wage earned by a woman, Curjel noticed, was not enough to meet the daily expense which was at least 5 annas for an individual. Thus several families messed together to reduce the cost of living a little. But the women deserted by their husbands found very difficult to survive in such situation.²³

Medical support the women workers received from the authority was negligible. Even they got very little financial protection in form of insurance in case of accidents. Accidents occurred occasionally during work. Curjel reported, The majority of accidents to women in jute mills resulted from attempt to steal oil by rubbing with tow from the machinery which was in motion.²⁴

There was no uniformity or fixed rule for paying compensation. The mill owners used to compensate the workers as per their own wishes.

Medical reports showed that they were prone to a very typical skin disease, which was known as "Jute dermatitis." The batching oil used to prepare better quality jute for hessian caused the disease and women being engaged in sorting and batching were usually infected by the disease. The Hindu women, who had a practice of using 'Saji Mati' instead of soap, were badly affected by the disease. Disease like pernicious anemia, rickets, were also very common among them.²⁵

The Royal Commission of Labour carried on an investigation in 1931-32. The Commission identified many helpless women victims suffering from pernicious diseases. It reported about a young girl suffering from a fatal type of anemia without having any treatment. Another report mentioned a girl suffering from severe ostocomalacia lying untreated. The investigation also told about a woman who had to stop her work because of blindness and pain in her eyes.

Apart from these, most of the womenfolk within mill areas suffered from acute asthma and fatal diseases like Tuberculosis, due to their ill ventilated accommodation and unhygienic way of living.

Venereal diseases also did not spare them since alcoholism and womanizing were the only leisure of the male labourers. The males often received different types of venereal diseases and gifted them to their innocent wives.

Several incidents and contemporary reports indicate that the women working in jute mills got no actual medical benefits at all. The worst situation they used to face during their pregnancy and childbirth. "No form of maternity benefits 'was given", though. "Fines were not executed for non-attendance." The women workers used to take rest from work during child birth from two to four days depending on their economic conditions.

However, the appointment of local dhais also depended on mother's economic condition. "The usual fee of a dhai varied from Rs. 2.8 to Rs. 3. A daily massage was given for two to three weeks in the post pregnancy period if Rs. 5 was paid to dhais as an extra amount. The dhais were also entitled to get the clothes used 'at the time of confinement' along with their fees. They received 8 annas less than their actual fees in case of a birth of a girl child.

The mill management had no intentions to provide economic protection to a female worker so far as the maternity was concerned. They were even reluctant to pay any medical facilities to the pregnant mother. This indifference of the authority increased the death rate of the new born babies within mill area and also led to the complete breakdown of the mother's health, neither she got sufficient foodstuff nor nourishment nor rest after childbirth. Their economic condition was so poor that they had to collect dirty jute waste to use during their confinement.

Curjel also admitted that the death rate was high among the children whose mothers were engaged in work.²⁶

Although there was specific government legislation for providing maternity benefits the authority never bothered to follow it. They did not even try to find out the real reasons behind the absence of women workers. Curjel in this connection reported that the managers of 25 jute mills, visited by her, failed to provide any information about the birth rate within their respective mill area.²⁷ The mill authorities deprived them of all sorts of benefits though were always eager to exploit their labour. They usually deprived female workers from additional monetary benefits in the pretext of appropriation of that money by their men.

From 1891 onwards several attempts had been made through legislations to provide security and protection to the female labour force but in practice these laws yielded no result. Mill authorities used to misinterpret these laws to secure their own interest. When there was scarcity of labour, they simply ignored those laws to exploit women labour greatly needed at that hour, while in the post 1930, during the period of crisis the mill owners started misusing these laws to kick out women labourers as burdensome and unessential. Therefore, the Government's welfare legislations did not serve the interest of women. When there was ample supply of migrants male labourers the employers refused to take any extra burden for women labour force (in form of maternity benefit, giving 12 hours rest to them at night, facility of crèche etc). Besides, the laws did not provide any job security to women workers.²⁸ They were being pushed into the low category jobs in the unorganized sector and were deprived of any job security and employment benefit. Leela Fernandez commented that, the support was given to them to fulfill their biological necessity only. No protection was offered to women workers against any sort of cultural, social and economic discrimination.²⁹ Since the gender identity always played a stronger role than the class identity the gender interest always got more importance than the class interest. Samita Sen added a new dimension in the issue while

saying “..... Employees and workers, men-women sometimes shared these perceptions of gender. Employers paid women less than men because women performed tasks designated as ‘unskilled’ and fixed lower wages for them if these tasks were habitually undertaken by women. Men workers associated low wages, low skills and lower status with women’s tasks.” In mere pretext of biological suitability”..... male workers began to lay exclusive claim on the better paid jute mill jobs, leaving women access to only a very few low paid ‘suitable’ jobs. The proportion of women in the mills decreased rapidly and to the extent industry continued to employ women, they were progressively concentrated in two or three tasks.”³⁰ Very often the male workers of their own class remained indifferent about the economic demands of their women co-workers. The male dominated trade-unions usually had a tendency to overlook the problems faced by the female workers. Therefore women workers also did not get any interest to join the trade unions. A marginal increase in 10% of women trade union members during this period was a clear indication to this. Although the leadership was primarily in the hands of the men only handful of women labour leaders like Santosh Kumari Devi raised their voice of protest against the exploitation of the women workers and tried to mobilize them.

The assumption that the women workers were deprived due to their gender identity can be questioned. Gender was not the only decisive factor. Dipesh Chakraborty had rightly stated that there were several other elements like region, religion, language, race and community which influenced the entire working community as a whole. It was true that women were the victims of severe wage inequalities, it was not because of their being women, but the fact was as Samita Sen herself confirms, “Since their own women did not work on Sunday, weavers and spinners had not obvious interest in promoting women for better job,”³¹ The traditional peasant outlook of the workers that primary function of a woman were rearing up children and maintaining household was also a cause of their indifference. Though the changed social and economic scenario of the colonial milieu demanded women labour in economic sector they could not deny their prime duties of looking after their respective families.

This created a dual pressure on women who were literally squeezed between traditional and additional duties stipulated for them. Most of them were given to marriage at a very early age and thus had to maintain the household and looked after the children from the very beginning of their lives. Sometimes their husbands left them or the families grew that larger than they were compelled to join mills as casual workers to contribute a portion of the everyday household expenses. But unfortunately they never could acquire the status of primary bread earners of family. Their income was considered as an additional income.

At works the women workers had no opportunity for “upward mobility.” They could not even shift from one department to another. The sardars having that power of allotting jobs practiced favouritism towards their male community members. If ever a women

could manage a job, it was not secured, permanent or on equal footing with their male counterparts. Often the sardars sought undue sexual favour from them. If denied, the sardars immediately stopped giving them jobs. Within the boundary of a mill, workers like sardars, durwans, jamaders, European assistants, managers or male co workers of other communities nobody spared them. They had to face sexual harassment from the people employed in different positions in a jute mill. Samita Sen had cited at least three such occurrence between 1921 to 1928. In February 1921, the workers of Wellington jute mill went on strike on demand of the dismissal of one Bhaglu Sardar. He was accused of “extortion bribery and sexual harassment.” On September 9, 1923, she reported, “Gourepore jute mill had gone on strike over an alleged insult offered to a woman worker by a mill durwans.” During the festival of Holly some durwans of Meghna jute mill teased the women workers in 1928. This led to a strike in that mill.³²

An overall survey in the working condition of the women workers of jute mills reveals that it will be incorrect to victimize women workers only as “woman” or as “class”. In fact, they were the victims of dual exploitation or in other words they were exploited as a gender faction within hierarchical class structure.

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