

Women and Labour in Late Colonial India

The Bengal Jute Industry

Samita Sen



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1 Migration, recruitment and labour control

The exclusion of women from modern factory industries is no doubt related to their low proportion in the population of the cities and towns in which the factories and mills were situated. Both these – women’s exclusion from industry and their absence from the city – were the products of a gender-specific pattern of migration which started in the late eighteenth century, gathered momentum in the late nineteenth century and still continues, though to a much lesser extent. Men travelled long distances to cities and towns where they spent long periods of their working lives. They occasionally visited the villages where they left their wives and children to procure a subsistence from a range of occupations. This pattern of migration obtained in many industrial centres of South Asia. The Bengal jute industry was no exception in this regard. It meant that Calcutta and its industrial suburb were continuously augmented by fresh male migration and that the proportion of women available for industrial employment was consequently low. Such an explanation of women’s exclusion from the jute industry, however, raises more questions than it answers. To begin with, the proportion of women in the adult population of Calcutta and the mill towns was higher than their proportion in the jute mills. So there remains, still, a question of relative ‘exclusion’. The problem could be and was sometimes inverted: given the culture of segregation and seclusion, as in the purdah system which operated so stringently in Bengal, why at all did women enter jute mills where they had to work alongside men and under male supervision. And there is no doubt that initially women did work in jute mills, if in dwindling proportions over time. There were, always, a few Bengali women, primarily widows and deserted wives. There were also women who came with families or alone from Bihar, the United Provinces, northern Andhra Pradesh and the Central Provinces. Was it merely that these women were so desperate, their survival so precarious that they were forced into this undesirable occupation? Or could it be argued that women were unable to compete successfully with men for the coveted jute mills jobs?

On first sight, it appears that jute mill management should have favoured women's employment. They paid the women and children they employed less than the men. Many of the really large Managing Agencies like Thomas Duff had bases in Dundee in Scotland. There women, who were paid less than the men, were employed in large numbers across the shopfloor. Many managers and supervisors in the Calcutta jute industry were Scotsmen trained in Dundee. The Calcutta mills could not have been unaware of the cost advantages of employing women. Yet, all those concerned – managing agents, managers, supervisors, colonial officials, the indigenous elite and jute mill workers – deemed women unsuitable for the Calcutta jute mills. Why was this so?

Historically, capitalists have shown a preference for women's labour in three different ways. First, as in China and Japan, women's wages were so low as to offset the higher cost of recruiting them. There the cotton textile industry was able to draw on a large pool of young unmarried women. They harnessed cultural values of chastity and female subservience to exercise an extraordinary degree of control over their workforce. Second, women have been valued, as in the tea plantations of Assam, for their reproductive functions – to stabilise the labour force and ensure that it is self-reproducing. Third, all the world over capitalists have used and reinforced the notion of women's wages being 'supplementary' to the main earnings of the male head of the household to pay women less and ensure the flexibility of their workforce.

The first option was not available to Bengal's jute mill owners: there was no pool of young single women since the ages of marriage and childbearing were very low. But why were the mills not interested in a self-reproducing labour force? And why were they not interested in women's cheaper labour? These questions will have to be examined in light of the specific historical circumstances that shaped labour-force formation in Calcutta and its industrial environment.

The early jute mills – location and labour supply

The early jute entrepreneurs selected the sites for their new mills with some care. Their mills had to be near enough to Calcutta to obtain access to its infrastructural facilities but they also needed to be able to draw quickly on a large number of workers.

Jute mills near Calcutta were able to gain from the transport systems which converged upon the city. There were, first, the railways: the East Indian Railway, the North West Railway and the Bengal–Nagpur Railway. The Eastern Bengal State Railway operating from Sealdah ran parallel to the river and traversed what was to become by the turn of the

century the great heartland of the jute industry.¹ This became especially significant after the 1890s when the railways brought men from villages of United Provinces, Bihar, Orissa and the Central Provinces. In addition to the railways, rivers, canals and roads carried raw jute from eastern and central Bengal to Calcutta and the mill towns. And the Khidirpur docks were the route through which manufactured jute goods found their way to markets in Europe, Australia and America. Three-eighths of the outward trade from Calcutta port comprised raw and manufactured jute.²

When Auckland selected Serampore as the site for the first jute mill in 1855, he had been attracted by William Carey's experiments with a paper mill.³ In addition, it was not only close to and had easy access to Calcutta, but was also one of the chief centres for the jute handloom manufacture (Dhaniakhali, Sheoraphuli, Baidyabati and Bhadreswar). The yarn was prepared by men and women wove the cloth.⁴ This inverted the practice in the Bengal cotton handloom industry in which women were forbidden by ritual taboo to touch the loom: they could only spin.

The Hooghly district, in which Serampore was situated, had been for long a centre of commerce and manufacturing.⁵ In the late nineteenth century, almost 40 per cent of its population were engaged in industry, commerce and services, an unusually high proportion in Bengal. The Hooghly jute mills could draw on the poorer weavers, on men and women from neighbouring Bankura and even from Chota Nagpur and Cuttack.⁶ Thus, the Rishra Mill was soon followed by India Jute Mill, Hastings Jute Mills and Presidency Jute Mill.

The first successful jute mill was established in 1859 in Baranagar, a hub of manufacturing and engineering industry.⁷ The other early centre of the industry was Howrah. Its wagon was hitched to Calcutta's star. It prospered as new docks were opened at the port. The Howrah town had a flourishing trade in country and imported cloth. The first flour mills were established there in 1855. Jute mills followed and by the 1870s there were five mills in the vicinity of the railway station.⁸

In the 1880s, when new mills were mushrooming, the Jubilee Bridge

¹ *Imperial Gazetteer*, Calcutta, IX, Oxford, 1908.

² *Annual Report on the Administration of the Bengal Presidency*, 1879–80.

³ D. R. Wallace, *The Romance of Jute*, 2nd edn., London, 1928, p. 8.

⁴ *Imperial Gazetteer*, Bengal, VII, pp. 266–9.

⁵ Hameeda Hossain, *The Company Weavers of Bengal: The East India Company and the Organization of Textile Production in Bengal, 1750–1813*, New Delhi, 1988.

⁶ *Imperial Gazetteer*, Hooghly and Howrah, XIII, pp. 165–6, 208.

⁷ J. C. Marshman, 'Notes on the Right Bank of Hooghly', *Calcutta Review*, 5, 1845.

⁸ S. R. Deshpande, *Report on an Enquiry into the Family Budget of Industrial Workers in Howrah and Bally*, Delhi, 1946.

over the River Hooghly was opened. Entrepreneurs were attracted to the relatively rural and undeveloped east bank. Kankinara, Alliance and Anglo-India mills were erected around Naihati and Titagarh; and Standard, Kinnison and Kharda mills were established near Kharda Railway Junction. Mill owners chose isolated sites in order to draw on the labour of the surrounding agricultural population and built near railway junctions hoping to attract migrants as they got off.

Until the 1870s, Bengal mills appeared to have had no great difficulty in obtaining labour. There were workers from surrounding villages, from Calcutta and from neighbouring districts of Bengal. From the late 1880s it began to seem as though the halcyon days of labour abundance were over. The increased competition for workers among mills, especially the loss of skilled workers like weavers to rival mills, troubled managers. They now began to complain of serious labour shortages. '[T]he scarcity has been felt for some time past, and which is now so acute that, speaking generally, most of the Mills in the Association could find employment for at least 10 per cent more work-people than they at present have.'⁹ Against these complaints about labour shortage must be weighed the evidence of stagnant wage rates.¹⁰ The apparent paradox might be explained by short-term local bottlenecks in the supply of labour in a period of rapid expansion, which occurred in Titagarh and Shyamnagar.¹¹ It may also be the case that the volume of complaints by employers reflected their anxieties about securing not simply sufficient labour but more crucially, an adequate supply of disciplined and skilful workers.

Even towards the close of the nineteenth century, Bengal had a seasonal and localised labour market. Throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, East India Company servants and other employers grumbled about the scarcity and the high price of labour in Jessore, Faridpur, Hooghly, Howrah and 24 Parganas.¹² Calcutta appeared to be suffering chronic labour shortage from the eighteenth century onwards. As the demand for artisans, labourers, porters and domestic servants increased in the city, wages were pushed up by shortage of food. The East India Company commissioned contractors of various

⁹ H. M. Haywood, Acting Assistant Secretary, IJMA, *IJMAR*, August 1899.

¹⁰ Ranajit Dasgupta, 'Material Conditions and Behavioural Aspects of Calcutta Working Class 1875-1899', *Occasional Paper No. 22*, Centre for Studies in Social Sciences, Calcutta, 1979, pp. 40-1.

¹¹ DUL, TDP, Directors' Minute Book, Shyamnagar Jute Factory, 17 December 1899.

¹² F. H. Buchanan, *A Geographical, Statistical and Historical Description of the District or Zilla of Dinajpur in the Province or Soubah of Bengal*, Calcutta, 1833; Henry Mead, 'Work and Wages', *Calcutta Review*, 37, 73, 1861, pp. 149-59; WBSA, General Miscellaneous, August 1868.

kinds – *sardars*, *buxies* and *daffadars*. It pressed the Zamindars in the 24 Parganas to mobilise labour. Both incentives and intimidation failed. Moreover, the East India Company's rhetoric of a 'free labour market', its dependence on agricultural prosperity for a high tax yield and for the supply of many of its chief export items made it impractical to plunder the immediate environs of Calcutta for cheap labour.¹³

There were, however, short-distance and temporary streams of migration even in the early eighteenth century. By the close of the century, the districts were able to draw on the ruined weavers and a few destitutes. In times of famines and shortages, as in 1769–70 and 1788, there was more concerted movement towards the city.¹⁴ In the harvesting season, workers came from Midnapore, Orissa and Chhotanagpur. Calcutta attracted artisans and poor peasants from neighbouring 24 Parganas, Nuddea, Hooghly, Burdwan and Midnapore. By the end of the nineteenth century, such migration had increased considerably and the last four districts accounted for about half the immigrants in Calcutta.¹⁵ Yet, when more concentrated inputs of labour were required, as in road and canal construction, workers had to be imported from outside Bengal.¹⁶ Presumably the costs of importing labour were offset by much lower wages.

Most temporary migrants were men. Of women migrants, it was mostly widows and deserted wives of low castes like *Haris* and *Muchis* who came alone to Calcutta.¹⁷ In fact, the scope for women's employment was limited. They were employed as domestic servants and in food processing, and they played ancillary roles in some artisan occupations like textiles and pottery. They also participated in retailing, as carriers in the building trade and in some menial services. There were lodging-house keepers, washerwomen, barbers, sweepers, midwives and large numbers of women were reported as prostitutes. By the late nineteenth century, some of even these occupations in which women predominated were declining.¹⁸

¹³ P. J. Marshall, 'The Company and the Coolies: Labour in Early Calcutta', in Pradip Sinha (ed.), *The Urban Experience: Calcutta, Essays in Honour of Professor Nitish R. Ray*, Calcutta, 1987.

¹⁴ *Report of the Commissioners appointed under the Chairmanship of George Campbell, to enquire into the famine in Bengal and Orissa in 1866*, I.

¹⁵ W. W. Hunter, *A Statistical Account of Bengal*, I, London, 1876.

¹⁶ Dhangars were brought from Chhotanagpur 'at enormous expense' for the Rajpur Jheel. Lord Dufferin, Report Submitted to the Viceroy, P. Nolan, *Report on the Condition of the Lower Classes of Population in Bengal*, Calcutta, 1888 (henceforth Dufferin Report).

¹⁷ Usha Chakrabarty, *Condition of Bengali Women around the Second Half of the Nineteenth Century*, Calcutta, 1963.

¹⁸ *Report of the Census of the Towns and Suburbs of Calcutta*, H. Beverley, Calcutta, 1881, pp. 44–50. Other than 19 per cent in 'stated occupations', women were recorded

On the whole, the labouring poor were chary of higher wages in Calcutta. They preferred wages in combination of cash and kind. In 24 Parganas, Howrah and Hooghly, jute cultivation and trading increased rapidly.¹⁹ There were winter crops, turmeric, sugarcane, chillies and tobacco.²⁰ Anyone with some access to land could grow vegetables (especially potatoes) for the urban market.²¹ These offered the poor a variety of employment. By contrast, the city held little attraction. Women, especially, suffered from the crowded living conditions in the city. The loss of communal facilities like segregated and secluded ghats for bathing and the relative dearth of 'subsistence' activities like the gathering of fuel and food may have made Calcutta both uneconomic and unpleasant.

It is then not surprising that mills experienced periodic shortages of labour when they depended on local sources. Their problems were solved by long-distance migrants. From the mid-eighteenth century, Bengal had begun to draw non-Bengali labour from Orissa and Bihar.²² The so-called 'hill coolies' – adivasis from the Chhotanagpur hill areas – were on the move from the beginning of the nineteenth century and could easily be induced to migrate to Calcutta. By 1868, workers began to come from further afield.²³ By the end of the nineteenth century the trickle became a torrent. Men from Bihar, eastern United Province, Orissa and northern Andhra Pradesh changed the contours of Calcutta's labour market.²⁴

Calcutta and the surrounding mill towns lay in the way of three major routes of inter-provincial migration. First, there was the well-documented annual seasonal exodus of agricultural labour from Bihar, especially Muzaffarpur, Saran, Gaya, Patna, and Bhagalpur, and some west Bengal districts, especially Midnapore, Bankura and Birbhum, to east Bengal at the time of harvesting. Workers left home at the beginning of the winter for temporary employment in the harvest fields, roadworks, railways or other casual employment and returned in summer.²⁵

under the category 'indefinite and non-productive'. Of the women in 'stated occupations', 45 per cent were in 'domestic service', about a quarter were in 'hard manual labour' and about another quarter were in petty trades and retailing.

¹⁹ Hem Chunder Kerr, *Report on the Cultivation of and Trade in Jute in Bengal: The Bengal Jute Commission, 1873*, Calcutta, 1877.

²⁰ Dufferin Report, 1888. ²¹ *Report on the Internal Trade of Bengal, 1876–88*.

²² Marshall, 'The Company and the Coolies', p. 24.

²³ 'Labour Difficulty in Bengal', *Calcutta Review*, 47, 1868.

²⁴ Between 1881 and 1891 the proportion of migrants increased by 11.8 per cent; in the decade of the 1890s this increase was by 40.7 per cent. Between 1901 and 1911, the share of migrants rose by another 32.6 per cent. The increase was even more evident in jute mill towns where, by 1930, migrants outnumbered the local population in the ratio 2:1. *Report of the Census of the Towns and Suburbs of Calcutta, 1881*, II; *Census of India, 1891*, III; *Census of India, 1901*, VI, 1; *Census of India, 1911*, V, 1.

²⁵ See chapter 2 below.

Second, there were 'indentured' labourers for the British and foreign colonies. Agents and contractors recruited workers from United Provinces, Bihar and Central Provinces. Recruits were taken to the depot in Calcutta and shipped to various colonies like Fiji, Mauritius, Natal, Trinidad and Surinam. Third, there was both organised and unorganised recruitment for the tea gardens of North Bengal, Assam and the Surmah Valley. Workers were brought to Naihati or Calcutta, sent by steamer to Goalundo and despatched to the various gardens. A series of laws from 1859 enabled planters to recruit labour on coercive contracts.²⁶ The system was controlled by the Calcutta-based British Managing Agencies who also managed the jute mills. Their various interests were brought together in the Bengal Chamber of Commerce.

The jute industry, by virtue of its location, could draw on all these streams of migration.²⁷ Calcutta and Naihati were two major centres through which migrants passed and these urban centres offered them a variety of alternative employment. Naihati, an important railway junction in the east-west traffic, also lay at the heart of the greatest concentration of jute mills – the Jagaddal-Naihati-Bhatpara belt. Calcutta and Naihati had the two most important labour depots from which workers were despatched to (Assam and overseas) plantations. From 1904, Naihati took over from other smaller depots like Bhatpara, Ranchi, Palamau, Madhupur and Purulia, as the only halting place for labour recruited from Orissa, Madras Presidency, Central Provinces and Midnapore.²⁸

Inter-provincial seasonal migration was well entrenched long before jute mill migration started. The districts supplying the largest numbers of such seasonal migrants were also over-represented among mill labour – Saran heading the list. The classic pattern of industrial migration – male and circular – corresponded more closely to the seasonal migration of agricultural labour than the relatively long-term or settled family migration offered by plantations. Wages in plantations were lower than in the jute industry.²⁹ Distance and ease of communication too must have contributed to the migrant's decision to opt for 'free' migration to

²⁶ Even after the Workmen's Breach of Contract Act was actually abolished in 1926, the gardens continued to intimidate labourers with the threat of penalties for 'desertion' or 'absconding'. R. K. Das, *Plantation Labour in the Indian Tea Industry*, Bombay, 1954.

²⁷ Bagchi has called jute mill migration a 'by-product' of plantation recruitment. A. K. Bagchi, *Private Investment in India 1900-1939*, Cambridge, 1972, pp. 133-5. Chakravarty points out that the influx into jute mills started when colonial emigration was falling off. Lalita Chakravarty, 'Emergence of an Industrial Labour Force in a Dual Economy – British India, 1880-1920', *Indian Economic and Social History Review*, 15, 3, 1978.

²⁸ WBSA, General Emigration, April 1904, B6-9.

²⁹ Wage-differentials are difficult to establish. But it appears that jute workers were better paid than, at least, the plantation labour. Bagchi, *Private Investment in India*, p. 123.

Calcutta rather than the greater security of 'contract' migration. In the aftermath of the famine of 1874, when the government sought to encourage emigration to the tea districts, many from the worst affected areas came instead to Calcutta.³⁰

It is likely that rural migrants knew something about the areas to which they were migrating. Intending migrants would use the advances made by sardars, recruiters and agents to pay debts or to tide over a bad patch. They would take a free ride to Calcutta and then complain to the Protector that they were 'unwilling' to proceed or had been coerced.³¹ Sometimes even sardars refused to honour the 'contract'. Local recruiting agents complained that sardars refused to return to the gardens after the expiry of their licence and would not give an account of the advances paid to them. An unwilling migrant had to be returned to his place of registration at the expense of the agents. In 1916 the Chairman of the Assam Labour Board complained,

[A]dvances and payments [are] made to prospective emigrants for the purpose of paying off debts or for the support of members of families left in the recruiting districts or on other grounds . . . Cases in which emigrants, who have received such payments and who have subsequently, when en route to Assam, declared themselves unwilling to proceed have lately arisen, and in some instances the same emigrants have repeated these tactics on more occasion than one.³²

To prevent destitution, the government had ruled that in all cases, the agents would be responsible for 'repatriation' of prospective emigrants to the place of their origin, that is to say, to the place where they were recruited and registered. Agents responded by delaying registration after recruitment. They registered workers in Calcutta in order to avoid the costs of repatriation. Many 'intending' or 'returned' migrants were thus stranded – a floating labour pool around the Calcutta and Naihati depots. There were many like Sikdar Pod and his wife, Khiro. They were promised employment in Calcutta and taken to a depot. They escaped but could not return home. There were two men from Arrah and Fyzabad who escaped before they reached the depot, but found it impossible to make their own way home.³³ There were men like

³⁰ WBSA, General Emigration, July 1904, A6–15. In a case instituted against four garden *sardars* accused of kidnapping six women and two men, all the testimonies indicated that the men and women had been decoyed to the gardens with promises of employment in Calcutta.

³¹ The 'Protector' was appointed by the Government to 'protect' prospective emigrants and also to oversee recruitment and migration for the plantations. WBSA, General Emigration, June 1911, B7–24.

³² Lt. Colonel W. M. Kennedy, *Report on the Working of the Assam Labour Board for the Year Ending 30 June 1916*.

³³ Kennedy, *Report on the Working of the Assam Labour Board*. Also see WBSA, General Emigration, December, 1911, B4–9.

Bindeshwari Prasad, who managed to escape from the Calcutta depot and wandered destitute looking for work in the city.³⁴ These and the few 'paupers' returned from the plantations in the overseas colonies joined the urban labour market.

By the end of the nineteenth century, adult men poured into Calcutta, the largest commercial centre in the region, to swell the crowds at the jute mill gates. So far as labour supply was concerned, the mill owners' locational calculations finally paid off, and paid off handsomely.

Shift to migrant labour – implications for women workers

Since it was long-distance migrants who met the jute mills' staple labour requirements, the fact that they primarily comprised men had a significant impact on employment patterns in the mills. First, women already working in the mills were disadvantaged by the influx of migrant men. Second, a few women did migrate. But they did so in conditions which confirmed their marginalisation.

It has been mentioned that when the industry depended on 'local' labour, they drew on poor peasants, artisans and destitutes. Women, more often, belonged to the last category. Widows and deserted wives were forced to work for hire when they were deprived of familial resources. The pattern of women's participation in visible economic activity was not regionally uniform. In the areas where the jute industry was concentrated – Calcutta, 24 Parganas, Hooghly and Howrah – women's workforce participation rates were the lowest.³⁵ The relative prosperity of the region which allowed local men to opt out of mill employment also allowed them to retain cultural sanctions against women's induction into jute mills. Thus it would be only single women – deserted wives and widows – who would seek employment in the mills.

Although it is difficult to arrive at a precise estimate of the proportion of women among jute workers in the nineteenth century, it appears to have been highest at the turn of the century. In the 1890s there were about 17–20 per cent women in the total workforce.³⁶ In these years, a 'good proportion' of the women came from within a radius of two or three miles away from the mills.³⁷ But in addition to local women, there were migrants from Midnapore, Birbhum and Bankura. Some of them

³⁴ *Dasi*, 1, 1, 1891; 2, 2, 1894.

³⁵ See chapter 2 below.

³⁶ The figures are difficult to ascertain. My own are taken primarily from IJMA reports and the Census. Also see Arjan de Haan, *Unsettled Settlers: Migrant Workers and Industrial Capitalism in Calcutta*, Rotterdam, 1994, p. 201.

³⁷ B. Foley, *Report on Labour in Bengal*, Calcutta, 1906, para. 29.

came to Calcutta and the mill towns, though a large proportion also went to the plantations and collieries. Many families left Midnapore to settle in the Sunderbans, '[o]thers came as millhands and coolies in the metropolitan districts'.³⁸ Before 1890, many women working in jute mills were from these three districts.³⁹ Quite consistently and even in the 1920s, among the various streams of migration to Calcutta and suburbs, the proportion of women was highest in the migration from Midnapore (at 56.8 per cent), followed by Hooghly (at 49.7 per cent).⁴⁰

In the 1890s, women comprised 29 per cent among the workers of Shyamnagar Jute Mill. Of these, 9.3 per cent were 'locals', i.e., they came from within a five-mile radius of the mill, and 10.4 per cent migrated from further afield in Bengal. By the beginning of the twentieth century, the proportion of Bengali women in the total labour force was considerably reduced. In 1905, when women constituted 22 per cent of the total workforce in the jute industry, only a very insignificant proportion was 'local'. The Preparing Department alone employed more women than men – about 80 per cent in Victoria, Shyamnagar and Titagarh.⁴¹

As in the case of the men, the growing flow of migrants tended to diminish the share of locals among women in the workforce. But in the case of women the decrease was sharper. Men from Bihar and UP tended to displace Bengali women who worked in departments designated 'unskilled'. Bengali men, to some extent, retained their hold over the more 'skilled' jobs. Indeed, after 1900, Bengali men were over-represented among the 'skilled' category, though they formed only one-fifth of the total labour force. In 1921, 39 per cent of 'skilled' workers came from districts where the mills were located, while only 20 per cent came from UP. Equally, Bengali men seemed to have been better represented in the 'skilled' category (31 per cent) than in the 'unskilled' (17 per cent).⁴² The 'skilled' workers earning higher wages were able to support their families in the jute mill area or in districts which permitted weekend commuting. Women from these families rarely worked in mills. As a result, the number of Bengali women in the workforce decreased

³⁸ Emigration from Midnapore amounted to nearly 4.8 per cent of the population, some of which went to Assam in the tea gardens and some to Mayurbhanj coal mines. L. S. O'Malley, *Bengal District Gazetteers* (henceforth *BDG*), Midnapore, Calcutta, 1911, pp. 32–8; Birbhum, 1910, pp. 30–6; Bankura, 1908, pp. 44–6.

³⁹ WBSA, Home Judicial, February 1896, A423–440. Also see *Indian Factory Commission* (henceforth *IFC*), Calcutta, 1891, pp. 77–87.

⁴⁰ *Report of the Royal Commission on Labour in India* (henceforth *RCLI*), V, 1, pp. 4–8.

⁴¹ *Labour Enquiry Commission*, Calcutta, 1896 (henceforth *LEC*), Appendix O.

⁴² It appears that 'skilled' referred to any job involving work with machinery. *Census of India*, 1921, V, 2.

rapidly. By 1923–4, the few Bengali women found in the industry were either widows or single women.⁴³

From the beginning of the twentieth century, Bengali men tended to concentrate in mills south of Calcutta such as Budge-Budge and Fort Gloster, where the number of women employed had always been low.⁴⁴ Even in the 1930s, a mill like Budge-Budge continued to employ workers who drifted in from the surrounding districts rather than those who came from Bihar and U.P.⁴⁵

It is not clear how managers viewed the declining presence of women in their mills. They expressed widely divergent opinions regarding the viability of employing women. Some mills seemed to have considered women troublesome. The IJMA repeatedly threatened to dispense with them altogether if the government imposed restrictive legislation on their hours of work and rest. Their stance in these debates suggested that they had no particular interest in employing women.⁴⁶ Though these avowals cannot be accepted at face value, the first Factories Act (1881) did come precisely when the industry was expanding rapidly and hiring more workers. The IJMA's failure to prevent legislation alerted them to the dangers of regulation of female labour on the British pattern and employers began to discourage the extensive employment of women.

While the formal position of the industry was unfavourable to employing women, individual employers or their managers continued to have contrary preferences. Some managers periodically expressed a preference for employing women. In 1875, the Gourepur Mill manager told the inspector, 'A few young girls among them [boys] [were] brought in to counteract the threat of strikes among the boys.'⁴⁷ Later in 1921, one manager averred that he liked a few women around to 'keep the men content', or to have girls around, though they were less efficient than boys, because they were more tractable than the boys who were prone to strikes.⁴⁸

In either case – preference or aversion – managers accepted that the option was between *a few women* or no women at all. They did not contemplate a predominantly female workforce. Indeed, they would not

⁴³ Dagmar Engels, *Beyond Purdah? Women in Bengal, 1890–1939*, Delhi, 1996, pp. 212–13.

⁴⁴ *Annual Report on the Workings of the Factories Act in Bengal* (henceforth *FA*), 1911.

⁴⁵ *RCLI*, V, 1, R. N. Gilchrist, Memorandum of the Government of Bengal.

⁴⁶ WBSA, Judicial, November 1892, No. 95; *IJMAR*, 1887, 1899, 1907.

⁴⁷ WBSA, General Miscellaneous, September 1875, A 6–27.

⁴⁸ Curjel Report, Appendix B, Manager, Lawrence Jute Mill, Sl. No. 8. Das also reported similar views of managers. R. K. Das, 'Women Labour in India', *International Labour Review*, October–November, 1931, p. 397.

have found it easy to exercise such an option. To begin with, only a limited section of the local women had taken to jute mill employment. By the end of the nineteenth century, in any case, local labour was increasingly marginalised by the migrant workers. And the migrant workers were usually men. There was little family migration to the cities and only very few women migrated on their own. Mostly, men came alone or with a brother, a son or a cousin. Wives and daughters remained in the village. As a result, very little of this migration was permanent. Permanent migration was usually undertaken in family groups and included women. For officials, the number of women present in migrant groups constituted an index of the permanency of migration.⁴⁹ Some of the movement to the tea plantations of Assam, to the coal mines of Bengal, or to the settlements of the Sunderbans, represented family migration.

But this kind of permanent migration was rarely directed towards the city except in times of extreme distress and scarcity. A settled population of labouring poor from which large numbers of women could periodically be drawn into the labour force eluded Calcutta. The railways made temporary and circular migration easier. Workers could not only go to the city, but they could also return to the village more frequently. The need for permanent migration, and therefore migration in family units, was thus reduced. Men came without their wives and children from surrounding and more far-flung villages. They came to earn wages in Calcutta to supplement their agricultural earnings, but still retained the freedom to move between the city and the countryside.

In 1921, the Census Officer, Thompson, commented, 'a few workmen have children with them who were born since they immigrated but practically none have settled down to maturity to swell the numbers of the native born. They are no more than their temporary habitants.'⁵⁰ Calcutta had always had fewer women, but by the 1920s, Calcutta and the surrounding mill towns became an overwhelmingly male world. In the female population older women and children were preponderant.⁵¹ In the adult population, there were eight men to three women in Calcutta and eleven men to four women in mill towns.⁵²

Certainly, women from Bihar and UP often migrated without their families. Individual female migration over short distances often outstripped male migration, especially in rural-rural migration. Women also contributed large numbers to casual and inter-district migration,

⁴⁹ BDG, Midnapore, Calcutta, 1911, p. 33.

⁵⁰ *Census of India*, 1921, V, 1, p. 116.

⁵¹ *Report on the Municipal Administration of Calcutta*, 1920-1, I, p. 67 and table 9.

⁵² *Census of India*, 1901, VI, 1, paras 71 and 109. In Titagarh and Bhatpara women were about 25 per cent of the population. *Census of India*, 1921, V, 2.

and only some of this could be attributed to marriage.⁵³ Temporary and seasonal migration for agricultural labour, for instance, accounted for large numbers of immigrants in Saran. In 1921, of the 44,736 total immigrants, 20,000 casual immigrants came from contiguous UP districts – ‘and the majority of these are women’.⁵⁴

Such migration was usually casual or seasonal. Women from labouring families travelled alone or in groups during peak agricultural seasons to undertake transplanting or weeding work, or peasant women may have travelled to their natal villages to participate in harvesting as part of their household’s survival strategy. These seasonal women migrants neither revoked nor even challenged familial control over their labour. Rather, a pattern of periodic migration became integral to the deployment of women’s labour by the family. The dominant values of seclusion and segregation did not preclude labouring women’s participation in field and other visible work, even when it involved travelling long distances.

Women’s individual migration to the cities was usually of a very different character. Many women who came to the city were single: widows, deserted or deserting wives who came alone, or ‘with men who were not their husbands’.⁵⁵ Some women were those cast off by their families for a variety of reasons. Widowed or barren women, those suspected of infidelity, wives whose husbands had married again, found it increasingly difficult to survive in the village without familial support. Their earlier independent occupations – spinning, husking and food processing – were being gradually eroded. Their access to resources was increasingly dependent on their relational and behavioural role fulfilment within the family. The city offered them anonymity and wages. But married women or widows who left their villages alone or with their lovers, often abrogated all possibilities of returning to their village. For such women permanent migration to the city could have been either a preferred choice, or the last desperate alternative.

The most common incidence of such deprivation seems to have been through widowhood, as is evident from statements collected by the various labour commissions. Except one, all the women interviewed by the Indian Factory Commission of 1891 were widows who held that all their colleagues were widows too and that widowhood alone drove

⁵³ A. Menefee Singh, ‘Rural-to-Urban Migration of Women in India: Patterns and Implications’, in J. T. Fawcett et al. (eds.), *Women in the Cities of Asia*, Essex, 1984.

⁵⁴ A. P. Middleton, *Bihar & Orissa District Gazetteer* (henceforth *BODG*), Saran, Patna, 1930, p. 32.

⁵⁵ See chapter 5 below.

Bengali women into mill work.⁵⁶ Many widows, who were denied their customary right of maintenance by both their natal and conjugal families, came to the city in search of jobs.⁵⁷ Narsama Kurmi came to work in the jute mill because 'after the death of her husband the witness found that she could not earn a living in her native place, and her brothers were not willing to receive her back into the family on account of the extra work it would give them to keep her'. She had no children and so she came to Calcutta alone and secured work in the Howrah Jute Mill. Young Bochu Nilkanto came to Serampore with his mother when his father died. Noor Muhammad's mother 'compelled him to join the mill' when his father died. Mangari came to Titagarh with her husband who 'died of cholera' and she was compelled to join the preparing department of the mill. Her 'widowed mother' worked in the same department. Mangari's sister was 'a barren lady' and she too worked in the mill.⁵⁸

Many women came to the city to escape social and familial harassment. Sometimes women escaped persecution by their husbands or in-laws. Or a domestic quarrel might trigger off flight. Such women had little access to resources outside the family and migration might have seemed a viable option providing some economic independence. Often they left with men who held out prospects of high wages and good working conditions. Some of these women took up jute mill work. Some migrants sought refuge in the impersonality of urban life after violating kin or caste rules in the village.⁵⁹ Sociologists in the 1920s and 1930s cited such cases, often to demonstrate the social anarchy they associated with the mills' neighbourhoods.⁶⁰

A young caste Hindu woman, wife of a railway officer, ran away with Biswanath Singh, a weaving *sardar*, and came to Naihati. The *sardar* got her a job in the Finishing Department.⁶¹ Women who wished to marry outside caste or community often had little option but to migrate. For instance, Maharajia, a married Hindu girl, left her husband to marry a Muslim. Her second husband's family rejected her; she and her husband were forced to seek employment in Calcutta.⁶² The extent of

⁵⁶ *Report of the Indian Factory Commission*, Calcutta, 1891 (henceforth *IFC*), pp. 88–9.

⁵⁷ See chapter 2 below. ⁵⁸ *RCLI*, XI, pp. 335–65.

⁵⁹ Curjel Report, Appendix B, Mr Niyogi, Organising Secretary, Servants of India Society.

⁶⁰ G. M. Broughton, *Labour in Indian Industries*, London, 1924, p. 15; S. G. Panandikar, *Industrial Labour in India*, Bombay, 1933, p. 219.

⁶¹ Interview, Dr Kamala Basu, Naihati, 28 October 1989.

⁶² WBSA, Finance Emigration, February 1913. A little support for this kind of statement can be had from newspaper reporting of petty criminal cases. In the seven months between June and December 1929, the *Amrita Bazar Patrika* reported eight cases of 'abduction' and 'enticement' from villages to jute towns, while the *Ananda Bazar*

such 'individual' women's migration cannot be ascertained but it is beyond doubt that women were less mobile in long-distance village-to-city migration. Jute mill managers would have to intervene actively in this pattern of migration if they wished to employ more women. They already had male labour at their gates; and the costs of organising women's recruitment seemed steep by comparison.

The Managing Agents had a ringside view of organised recruitment: Assam and overseas colonial planters financed migration on a large scale. Both these groups of employers operated from a situation of acute labour shortage. Assam planters, faced with remote, uninhabited and inaccessible gardens, needed to 'settle' labour. The abolition of slavery had prompted colonial planters into alternative modes of recruitment. Both these employers particularly needed women (or 'families'). Assam planters wanted a self-reproducing workforce. The colonial planters were concerned about a possible 'social anarchy' from the skewed gender-ratio among their Indian labour. They did not wait for the free operation of the labour market to bring forth women. They deployed their own coercive apparatus with the collusion of the colonial state. They kidnapped, 'enticed' and recruited. In the process they ran the gauntlet of patriarchal opposition.⁶³

Women's migration outside the family context was characterised as deviant. Such migration, voluntary or involuntary, threatened familial control over women's labour and sexuality. These dominant patriarchal values, the norms of seclusion and gender segregation, were undergoing changes in the nineteenth century, eroded in some aspects and reinforced in others. But these changes did not by any means contribute towards 'freeing' women from family control or towards their large-scale employment in the modern capitalist sectors. Of course, there was a massive demand for labour – in the urban labour market of Calcutta, in Bengal's three industries, tea, coal and jute, and in the overseas plantations. But specific demand for women's labour was neither so large nor so compelling. The industrial sector in India, even in the 1930s, was indeed quite small as consequently was its demand for labour.⁶⁴

Patrika reported fifteen in the same period. The *Amrita Bazar Patrika* again reported nine similar cases of 'abduction' and 'enticement' in 1935, eleven in 1937 and sixteen in 1939.

⁶³ Samita Sen, 'Unsettling the Household: Act VI (of 1901) and the Regulation of Women Migrants in Colonial Bengal', in Shahid Amin and Marcel van der Linden (eds.), 'Peripheral Labour? Studies in the History of Partial Proletarianization', *International Review of Social History Supplement 4*, 41, 1996, pp. 135–56.

⁶⁴ In absolute terms, India's industries were doing well – at a steady 4–6 per cent annual growth rate. But in 1900–1, the secondary sector accounted for just 11.7 per cent of the national income and 10 per cent of the labour force. The jute industry contributed about 0.4 per cent to the national income. K. Mukherji, 'A Note on the Long Term

In the matter of women's migration, the colonial state was caught between the interests of British capital and the displeasure of indigenous elites, missionaries and some of their own district officials. The state's reliance upon the collaboration of various, shifting sections of the local elites gave force to opposition against 'greater freedom' and migration for women. Moreover, the state's revenue policies were premised on small peasant agriculture which in turn increasingly depended on the intensification of 'family' labour. From the middle of the nineteenth century, the Government of India introduced a series of legal and administrative measures to entrench familial control over women's labour. The widening of women's migration options could threaten these equations.⁶⁵ In the late nineteenth century the debate about the rights and wrongs of women's recruitment reached a peak. When the Assam Labour and Emigration Act (Act VI) of 1901 was finally passed, it included several clauses dealing specifically with women's recruitment. Together these clauses denied women the right to take migration decisions. The Act accepted that husbands and children were to be 'protected'; and women who wished to escape them had to be prevented or punished. Its provisions were invoked by fathers and husbands to stop women leaving 'home', either alone or with lovers. Doubtless, the Act did very little to stop the 'enticements' and kidnappings which it avowed to address. Most district officials were indifferent to, if not actively in sympathy with, recruiting agencies, many of which were owned and run by Europeans. But ineffective as it was, the Act made women's recruitment more difficult and expensive.⁶⁶

Managing agents were not only fully alive to the trials of women's recruitment. They were chary of any 'active recruitment' that involved investing in workers' migration for jute mill labour. Some of them undertook 'active recruitment' for tea plantations – they constantly complained of labour shortage, generated stacks of paper, devised networks of agencies and regulations and resorted regularly to fraud and kidnapping to meet their targets. For the jute industry, they did relatively little. The Labour Enquiry Commission of Bengal, 1896, confined itself to only a perfunctory mention of the jute industry in an appendix because the IJMA displayed no interest. The IJMA, in fact, declared that they needed no 'system of recruitment'. The jute mills did not require recruiting agents or contract migration. They were not

Growth of National Income in India 1900–01 to 1952–53' in V. K. R. V. Rao et al., *Papers on National Income and Allied Topics*, Bombay, 1962; O. Goswami, *Industry, Trade and Peasant Society: The Jute Economy of Eastern India, 1900–1946*, Delhi, 1991, p. 11.

⁶⁵ WBSA, Judicial Police, August 1873, A95–98.

⁶⁶ Sen, 'Unsettling the Household'.

willing to finance recruitment. The labourers 'came and went as they pleased'. This proved sufficient for the industry's needs.⁶⁷

The mills eschewed even *sardari* recruitment. Between 1870 and 1905, when the industry was continually and dramatically expanding, *sardars* were probably used. But this never developed into an organised system of recruitment and its significance declined over time. *Sardari* recruitment was never the single method of recruitment, nor a very important source of labour for mills. By the beginning of the twentieth century the mills were refusing to pay railway fares for intending migrants. One weaver told Foley, 'If the mills sent *sardars* for men and paid them their railway fares, they would obtain men. If he himself was sent ... for 50 men and paid their railway fares, he could obtain 50 men.'⁶⁸ Foley suggested that there was a certain amount of *sardari* recruitment, but by 1905 this had already become negligible. Though official and management statements often refer to the *sardar* and his role in recruitment, by the time of the Royal Commission very few workers were brought to the city by a *sardar*.⁶⁹

It would appear that the manner in which migrants found their way into the city and into jobs in the unorganised sector was not very different from the way they entered mill work. Large numbers of migrants from Bihar and Orissa sought temporary or permanent employment in mills, warehouses, tank-digging, brick-making and in a vast range of casual and manual work like *palki*-bearing, *punkha*-pulling and as *coolies*.⁷⁰ Jute mill labour was in no way set apart from the urban poor engaged in a variety of casual and unskilled employment. Rickshaw pullers and carters, for instance, were often attracted through agents like *chaudhuris* and *sardars*, old and trusted employees from UP and Bihar, who usually recruited from their own areas. But entry into these occupations was not restricted to those who came in through intermediaries.⁷¹ Jute mill workers too were a part of this vast urban labour market encompassing Calcutta, Howrah and Naihati.⁷²

⁶⁷ W. Parson, Secretary, Bengal Chamber of Commerce, WBSA, General Department, Emigration Branch, August 1905, A26-39.

⁶⁸ Foley Report, Appendix I.

⁶⁹ Only four out of twenty witnesses were recruited by *sardars*. Many more found employment through kin and village network. *RCLI*, V, 2, pp. 76-80; XI, pp. 355-65.

⁷⁰ *Report on the Administration of the Bengal*, 1878-79, p. 124.

⁷¹ Labour Investigation Committee, Ahmed Mukhtar, *Report on Rickshaw Pullers*, Delhi, 1946.

⁷² Bala Missir operated a carters' network. WBSA, Home Political Confidential (henceforth HPC) 199 (1-5) of 1925. In 1923, Jagdeo Bania secured employment with 'the notorious cart chowdhury Bala Missir'. WBSA, HPCO, 908 of 1930. Also see M. K. A. Siddiqui, 'Caste among the Muslims of Calcutta', in S. Sinha (ed.), *Cultural Profile of Calcutta*, The Indian Anthropological Society, Calcutta, 1972, p. 42.

'Active recruitment' of workers involving payment of advances, commissions and the costs of transportation was viable for the plantations because these were covered by contracts. Briefly, in the 1890s, the IJMA sought ways and means of tying down labour. Managers complained that workers brought to the city at their expense to work in their mills disappeared altogether or were found working in neighbouring mills or in other employment. They contemplated criminal prosecution to deter 'deserters'. Bengal Chamber of Commerce and IJMA tried to persuade the Government of Bengal to extend to them the facilities of the Workmen's Breach of Contract Act, enacted in 1859 specifically for the benefit of tea plantations. The mills in Howrah were already under the operation of the Act, but the Government of Bengal felt that the Act would be 'unsuitable for the Calcutta side of the river'. Another existing instrument was Section 492 of the Indian Penal Code which bound a worker brought at the expense of the employer 'by lawful contract in writing' for a period of at least three years. To invoke this law against deserting workmen, mills would have to enter into individual written contracts once at the place of origin and have these affirmed at the mill gates. The Government's response to IJMA's overtures was unenthusiastic. Mills crowded together in a small area and competing incessantly for skilled labour would be unable to enforce these laws.⁷³

The Government of Bengal was equally lukewarm about IJMA's proposal that local officials should actively encourage migration to jute mills. Given the competing demands for labour by agents for overseas emigration, tea planters and local landed interests, the Government was unwilling to play an obviously partisan role. Instead, they recommended the employment of recruiters.⁷⁴ But therein lay the hub of the matter. Recruitment through agents or *sardars* involved payment of travel expenses and a commission which could only be recovered from the worker over a period of time. Mill owners were not particularly keen on incurring these costs. The mills' labour shortage was not acute enough, they were not willing to commit themselves to continued employment of individual workers, and their ability to prevent desertion seemed uncertain.

Jute mill owners preferred their casual and informal recruitment. While this involved temporary labour shortages and a high turnover of labour, it also left them free to hire and fire at will. In any case, the remoteness of plantations not only made some women's presence desir-

⁷³ Haywood, *IJMAR*, 1899; Secretaries of Dunbar Mills, 24 Parganas, *Miscellaneous Annual Report of the Presidency Division, 1902-3*, WBSA, General Miscellaneous, November 1903, A 19-22.

⁷⁴ *IJMAR*, 1899 and 1907.

able; it permitted a degree of control over the women thus expensively recruited which jute mills were not in a position to ensure. Thus the jute industry rejected a system of modified indenture which would entail any responsibility on the part of the employer, or state recruitment which would bind them to employ workers, women or men, sent down by Government.⁷⁵ Mill managers also realised that while any form of indentured employment or *sardari* recruitment would protect their investment in individual workers, their investment would bind them to their workmen as surely as the written contract would bind the worker. A manifest preference for women workers through organised recruitment was thus inimical to the industry's interests. Although there were very few women in the industry, the mills had found a ready labour force. To ensure a similar supply of women workers, they would have to attempt specific and direct recruitment of women, invest in agents and pay rail fares, run the gauntlet of patriarchal legal restraints and win the co-operation of local officialdom. Women may have been cheaper on the shopfloor, but it cost too much to get them there. Without incurring any of these costs, the mill owners had got the labour supply they wanted in the male migrants.

The jute mills' labour strategy

It has been argued that local labour failed to meet the industry's expanding demand in the 1880s. It was the accelerated scale of migration from Bihar and UP that really provided for the mills. But the complaints about labour shortage persisted up to 1905, well after migrants had glutted the labour market. Thus some interesting questions about the mills' labour strategies arise. The mills' owners required not just 'sufficient' labour; they needed a flexible labour supply allowing for fluctuations in production. Labour surplus, placing them in an unassailable bargaining advantage, was crucial to their operational strategy.

In the 1870s, Calcutta mills had cut into Dundee's markets and made unprecedented profits. This had prompted a sudden rush of investment. In 1884, when overproduction threatened to take the bottom out of the export market, the mills combined to form the Indian Jute Manufacturers' Association.⁷⁶ The main purpose of the Association was voluntary restriction of production in order to maintain price levels. In 1886, they agreed to reduce the running time of the mills. This was called the

⁷⁵ W. Parson, Secretary, Bengal Chamber of Commerce, WBSA, General Emigration, August 1905, A26-39.

⁷⁶ The name was changed to Indian Jute Mills Association in 1902.

Short Time Working Agreement, a device to be tried, tested and strained in the years to come. But the IJMA was not able to unite the industry's interests and wield monopolistic power. Researchers have recently pointed out that the Association was, in fact, riven by internal rivalries. The IJMA found the first agreement difficult to reach and even more difficult to maintain and enforce.⁷⁷ Towards the close of the decade several new mills were floated at the cost of the full working capacity of existing mills. The IJMA was powerless to prevent the erection of new mills, even by its own members.⁷⁸ The Hastings mills, having secured 'the bulk of the woolpack orders' and working longer with electric light, thumbed their noses at the IJMA. Some mills retaliated by under-selling – a 'breach of the spirit and aim of the association', which the IJMA found 'impossible' to stop.⁷⁹ Thus, even when the jute industry served a buoyant market, intra-industry competition proved too strong for effective producers' combination.

The IJMA was also unable to eliminate 'time-cribbing'.⁸⁰ This referred to the practice of running mills longer than permitted by the agreement. Thus mills usually employed more labour than their official production figures warranted. Mr Nicoll of the IJMA, for instance, admitted that 'shortage' often referred to their inability to procure the 10 or 15 per cent additional labour that mills preferred to carry.⁸¹ Ostensibly, this was an insurance against absenteeism and the dilatory habits of Indian workmen.

No legislation can alter the nature and ingrained habit of Indian workers. They have been in the habit of leaving their work at odd and uncertain periods ... [f]or taking food, smoking, drinking water and necessary purposes ... [E]fforts have been made but with only limited success, to stop, or at any rate curtail these practices ... [T]he Indian mill hand takes frequent unauthorised holidays.⁸²

Accordingly, the mills averred that they carried almost '100 per cent more hands' than a similar mill would in Dundee.⁸³

Mills certainly required their 'superfluous' workers for clandestine production during short-term working. Since most mills worked more hours and more looms whenever possible, a certain amount of 'floating' labour was essential for their operational flexibility. The 1880s and 1890s, although by and large profitable for the industry, were also

⁷⁷ DUL, TDP, Shyamnagar Jute Mill papers, July 1885 to May 1886; Directors' Minute Book, Titagarh Jute Factory, 24 June 1885.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, October 1888.

⁷⁹ DUL, TDP, Directors' Minute Book, Shyamnagar Jute Factory, 14 May 1890.

⁸⁰ DUL, TDP, Shyamnagar Jute Mill papers, July 1885 to May 1886.

⁸¹ *IJMAR*, 1899. ⁸² *IJMAR*, 1907.

⁸³ WBSA, General Miscellaneous, August 1893, A1–36.