# Introduction

Bhikari Paswan was a worker and a trade-union activist in Victoria Jute Mills at Telinipara. He became involved in a spate of inter-union clashes and, in October 1993, he was arrested. He died while in police custody. Bhikari's father, Lakshmi Chand, sued the police. His case hinged on the evidence given by Bhikari's wife, Lalti. Subsequently, in July 1995, when the case was being heard by a Division Bench of Calcutta High Court, the Officer-in-charge of Bhadreswar Thana cast doubts on the prosecution's case by deposing that Lalti was not Bhikari's wife. In the protracted hearings it emerged that Lalti had been married to Jagu Paswan of Naihati and had not obtained a divorce. She lived with Bhikari, but was not his 'wife'. Her evidence as a witness, crucial as it was to the case, was undermined by the legal uncertainty of her marital status.

Lalti herself did not work in any mill. She became the central figure in the most controversial industrial dispute in recent years because of her disputed status as the 'wife' of a mill worker allegedly killed by the police. In the hands of political parties who espoused the cause of Bhikari Paswan, she became both a symbol of working-class resistance and the quintessential victim of managerial, state and police brutality. In either case, her 'class' position devolved from marriage (or cohabitation) and her dependence on Bhikari's earnings for her own and her children's livelihood. The police responded by undermining this equation. They questioned the 'marriage' from which the worker's 'wife' derived her formal legal rights *vis-à-vis* the state and the mill management. By doing so, they brought Lalti's identity as a woman (and wife) into clearer play. If Lalti was to be able to depose in court or assert her rights to redressal, she could only do so as Bhikari's wife and dependant. Lalti's legal and economic rights were premised, in that case, on her rights as a 'wife'. Her dilemma was clearly different from that of the worker, man or woman, who sought the help of unions or courts to win compensation. Thus, her situation underlined the problems of subsuming women into 'class' by virtue of marriage and motherhood. Her case is discussed here

in such length because it brings to the fore the importance of examining the interplay of gender and class which is the purpose of this research. This book is about the many dilemmas of women like Lalti and of other women who, though they worked with men in the jute mills of Bengal, found their experience of being 'working class' different from that of their male colleagues. It is a history of labouring women in Calcutta and its nearby mill towns between 1890 and 1940 which was the heyday of the jute industry. The period of this research predates Lalti Paswan; but that only shows the hardiness of the issue. The way in which social constructions of gender constituted Bengal's working classes has had long-term and enduring implications.

In order to examine these implications, this study steps beyond the immediate world of working class women. In any case, to understand how social constructions of gender shaped the lives and work of women wage labourers, wider social anxieties about women's role and position in the home have to be taken into account. The concerns about women's domestic and familial identity included, for instance, the middle classes in the cities. During the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, new constructions of gender relations were made explicit in course of the debates over women's emancipation, widow remarriage, and the physical and social seclusion of women. These wider constructions of gender relations sometimes extended from and at other times intruded upon the organisation of women's work in the countryside. By the late nineteenth century, changes in the agrarian economy had led increasing numbers of poor women to work outside the home to augment household resources. At the same time, many intermediate groups in rural society were adopting new practices of women's seclusion. Poorer women were seen to work more and better-off women were seen to work less: in both cases, there were changes in rural women's self-identity and the attitudes towards their work and status.

The rural context is, without doubt, critical to any examination of the constitution of the jute working-class. So far, the 'rural' connection of the workers has been invoked to understand every aspect of working-class life and behaviour. In popular and academic parlance, the figure of the industrial worker as the semi-rural semi-urban peasant-proletariat has abided for almost a century.[1] Mill owners explained the impermanency and the inefficiencies of workers in these terms. Indeed, they argued against welfare measures for these very reasons. The colonial state too, ironically enough, sought to thus understand workers' mili-

[1] This was first formulated by the Commission of 1908. *Report of the Indian Factory Labour Commission* (henceforth *IFLC*), London, 1909.

tancy or the lack of it. The village connection explained at times a greater and at other times a lesser commitment of the worker to the city and the factory job. Until recently, social scientists have held, with equal plausibility, diametrically opposed views about its implication for collective action. It is sometimes argued that the resilience of 'rural' ties of kin, caste and community divided workers, fractured their solidarity and vitiated the growth of a 'working-class' consciousness. The contrary view holds that networks (of kin, caste and community) carried over from rural society provided a physical, material and ideological basis for political collectivities in the urban context and promoted cohesive action.[2]

And yet, the most significant consequence of the 'rural' connection has rarely been considered: men jute workers, factorised wage labourers, lived and worked in the city while the women and children worked in the village in petty commodity production, services or retail; the household was spatially fragmented; the members of the household were engaged, simultaneously, in different production regimes; and the working-class household and its strategies of survival straddled the village and the city. Given the close interaction of agriculture and industry (and by implication the rural and urban economies) in shaping the milieu of organised industry, in structuring the labour market and in determining workers' household arrangements, any attempt artificially to sustain distinctions between agriculture/industry and rural/urban can only be misleading. In fact, it is only by questioning such distinctions that we can fully appreciate the wider processes of labour within which industry operated. The 'rural' linkage was far from being extrinsic to the industrial situation. To begin with, the industrial working class was reproduced, generationally and socially, through the intensification of women's and children's labour in the rural economy. The jute mill owners, like other urban employers, depended upon a steady and continued supply of workers from the countryside. These workers were

[2] 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; Dipesh Chakrabarty and Ranajit Dasgupta, 'Some Aspects of Labour History of Bengal in the Nineteenth Century: Two Views', *Occasional Paper No. 40*, Centre for Studies in Social Sciences, Calcutta, 1981; Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Rethinking Working Class History, Bengal 1890–1940*, Princeton, 1989; A. K. Bagchi, 'The Ambiguity of Progress: Indian Society in Transition', *Social Scientist*, 13, 3, 1985, pp. 3–14 and 'Working Class Consciousness', *Economic and Political Weekly*, 28 July 1990, pp. PE54–60. A notable exception is Chandavarkar's attempt to break down the boundaries between 'urban' and 'rural', and 'workplace' and 'neighbourhood', in the context of the Bombay textile industry. R. S. Chandavarkar, *The Origins of Industrial Capitalism in India: Business Strategies and the Working Classes in Bombay, 1900–1940*, Cambridge, 1994.

usually men who left their female kin to work in the rural economy. A persuasive case for examining the close interrelationship between shifting gender equations in the countryside and the constitution of the urban working class can thus be made.

So far, however, these issues of gender have not evoked any response from Indian labour historians who have sustained their arguments about 'class' by narrowly focusing on 'organised' industrial workers. Since industrial workers are primarily men and usually 'single' migrants, it has been assumed that 'working-class women' have no specific relevance to 'class'. It has not even been asked why or how the industrial working class became overwhelmingly male. As a result, the more fundamental issue of how gender was, in fact, crucial to the very constitution of labour processes – not only in organised industry but in other arenas of economic activity – remains unaddressed. This study takes these questions as a starting point, but by pursuing diverse interrelated themes it also seeks to draw attention to the need for a more multi-dimensional approach to the study of labour.

At the most elementary level, the jute industry's increasingly male workforce offers an interesting case of women's 'exclusion'. Initially, the jute industry, like other textile industries of India, employed a low proportion of women. This proportion declined over time. At the turn of the century, women constituted about 20 per cent of total workers, the highest recorded proportion. For most of the period between 1890 and 1940, women were about 12 to 17 per cent of the workforce (Table 1). While the industry began to draw on an increasingly wider variety of castes, communities and regions, they drew more and more on men. As wages and working conditions improved through the collective political struggle of the jute workers, unionised male workers also contributed to a more rigid exclusion of women.

The manner of this 'exclusion' begs a host of other questions about the material and social reproduction of the working class. Some of these questions are difficult to treat within a rigid framework of mutually antagonistic but internally cohesive 'classes'. To start with, the very gendering of organised industrial labour cannot be understood without

*Sources to Table 1:*
1. *Report of the Committee of the Indian Jute Mills Association*, Half-Yearly Report, December 1897. 2. *Social and Economic Status of Women Workers in India*, Labour Bureau, Ministry of Labour, Government of India, 1953, p. 14. 3. *Report on an Enquiry into Conditions of Labour in the Jute Mill Industry in India*, S. R. Deshpande, Delhi, 1946. 4. *Census of India*, 1901, Vol. VI, Pt. 1; *Census of India*, 1911, Vol. V, Pt. 1.

Table 1. *Average daily number of persons employed in jute mills of Bengal, 1897–1950*

| sl. | Date | No. of factories | Men | Women | Children | Total | % of women |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | 1897 | | 72440 | 17905 | 12104 | 102449 | 17. 4 |
| 4 | 1901 | | 64420 | 13489 | | | 20. 9 |
| 4 | 1911 | | 161239 | 35263 | | | 17. 9 |
| 3 | 1912 | 61 | 145389 | 31329 | 23007 | 199725 | 15. 6 |
| 3 | 1913 | 64 | 158261 | 34010 | 24106 | 216377 | 15. 7 |
| 3 | 1914 | 69 | 167858 | 36800 | 25969 | 230627 | 15. 9 |
| 3 | 1915 | 70 | 181445 | 40674 | 26606 | 248725 | 16. 3 |
| 3 | 1916 | 70 | 191036 | 42145 | 27606 | 260787 | 16. 1 |
| 3 | 1917 | 71 | 192667 | 41395 | 27320 | 261382 | 15. 8 |
| 3 | 1918 | 72 | 199977 | 43278 | 27709 | 270964 | 15. 9 |
| 3 | 1919 | 72 | 201009 | 43112 | 28628 | 272749 | 15. 8 |
| 3 | 1920 | 73 | 207255 | 44545 | 28521 | 280321 | 15. 8 |
| 3 | 1921 | 77 | 207908 | 44705 | 29235 | 281848 | 15. 8 |
| 3 | 1922 | 80 | 239660 | 49257 | 28265 | 317184 | 15. 5 |
| 3 | 1923 | 83 | 242652 | 51495 | 28400 | 322547 | 15. 9 |
| 3 | 1924 | 85 | 252107 | 54801 | 27823 | 336731 | 16. 2 |
| 3 | 1925 | 83 | 256312 | 55511 | 26474 | 338297 | 16. 4 |
| 3 | 1926 | 86 | 253935 | 52827 | 20785 | 327547 | 16. 1 |
| 3 | 1927 | 85 | 253691 | 52935 | 19249 | 325865 | 16. 2 |
| 3 | 1928 | 86 | 260342 | 53678 | 17879 | 331899 | 16. 1 |
| 3 | 1929 | 90 | 267717 | 54670 | 17278 | 339665 | 16. 0 |
| 3 | 1930 | 91 | 264417 | 52114 | 11646 | 328177 | 15. 8 |
| 3 | 1931 | 93 | 222573 | 42254 | 3462 | 268289 | 15. 7 |
| 3 | 1932 | 94 | 212505 | 40294 | 1515 | 254314 | 15. 8 |
| 3 | 1933 | 92 | 208246 | 37337 | 1134 | 246717 | 15. 1 |
| 3 | 1934 | 93 | 213894 | 36932 | 915 | 251741 | 14. 6 |
| 3 | 1935 | 95 | 225372 | 37749 | 278 | 263399 | 14. 3 |
| 3 | 1936 | 94 | 233481 | 38261 | 4 | 271746 | 14. 0 |
| 3 | 1937 | 96 | 249737 | 37997 | 9 | 287743 | 13. 2 |
| 3 | 1938 | 97 | 242342 | 36683 | 9 | 279034 | 13. 1 |
| 3 | 1939 | 101 | 243496 | 37699 | 34 | 281229 | 13. 4 |
| 3 | 1940 | 101 | 248046 | 36640 | 34 | 284720 | 12. 8 |
| 3 | 1941 | 101 | 251388 | 35255 | 38 | 286681 | 12. 2 |
| 3 | 1942 | 101 | 252799 | 35083 | 32 | 287920 | 12. 1 |
| 3 | 1943 | 101 | 245125 | 34759 | 35 | 279919 | 12. 4 |
| 3 | 1944 | 101 | 231121 | 36005 | 67 | 267193 | 13. 4 |
| 2 | 1945 | | | 40963 | | 303319 | 13. 5 |
| 2 | 1946 | | | 43165 | | 313133 | 13. 8 |
| 2 | 1947 | | | 41872 | | 319302 | 13. 0 |
| 2 | 1948 | | | 41966 | | 329429 | 12. 7 |
| 2 | 1949 | | | 41576 | | 322159 | 12. 9 |
| 2 | 1950 | | | 37531 | | 303364 | 12. 4 |

reference to relations of conflict and interaction between and among various groups – workers, entrepreneurs, the state and its officials. Moreover, the relations of gender and generation that obtained within the working class created the specific conditions for its continued male character. Generally speaking, the organisation of work according to gender and age was naturalised by the deployment of familial ideology. As a result, the hierarchical nature of these arrangements often remain obscured. Yet, the way these impinged on the process of household decision-making had crucial consequences for the distribution of labour and its rewards. Also, equally significantly, if the working class was divided by gender and generational interests, they did not face a monolithic alliance between the state and the entrepreneurial class. The state had diverse interests which were further fragmented by competitive claims from capitalist entrepreneurs who, in turn, were riven by internal competition.

To take the issue of entrepreneurial behaviour: a re-evaluation of jute 'capitalism' is long overdue. R. S. Chandavarkar's recent analysis of the Bombay cotton textile industry indicates that many of the conundrums of Indian labour historiography follow from a mistaken presumption of capitalist unity and the capitalists' ability to establish control over factor markets. He argues that individual entrepreneurs were rarely in a position to maximise efficiency by long-term rational calculations.[3] Jute entrepreneurs, in particular, have been ascribed remarkable influence over the state and an ability to unify their individual interests. It has often been argued that the Indian Jute Mills Association was able to exert both monopolistic and monopsonistic pressures on the market. Led by expatriate Scottish businessmen, the Association is supposed to have achieved an effective racial alliance with the colonial state. In fact, jute entrepreneurs were riven by internal competition and IJMA failed as often as it succeeded in uniting mill owners. Also, the central and provincial governments were faced with conflicting claims. They were not always willing to and sometimes did not co-operate.

Jute entrepreneurs, while attributed unities and influences they did not possess, have been charged with failures in business strategies and practices. Doubtless, they were tardy with technological innovation and investments for modernisation. But one needs to be cautious. The jute entrepreneur or his managers were not really endowed with an infallible foresight beyond a host of pressing problems. Certain immediate indices of more or less satisfactory efficiency had to be met in the proximate future. Once so met, the challenge of the distant future tended to be

[3] Chandavarkar, *The Origins of Industrial Capitalism in India.*

more dimly perceived, if at all. Hindsight may reveal flaws in or failures of foresight. Nor is it unnatural for investors remotely situated from the scene of industrial activity to push 'to take the cash in hand [a]nd waive the rest'. Moreover, jute entrepreneurs operated with disorganised factor markets and a fluctuating international market. They were not engaged in a quest for efficiency in the very long term. Instead, they adopted their own particular labour strategies: they accepted a ready, if relatively casual, labour force; they refused to pay for training and settling an 'efficient' workforce; and they expected their labour force to be manipulable, deployable at will and for such short or long-term periods as suited them.

Thus, jute mill owners drew their labour from 'single' migrants. These migrant men were not 'proletarianised' in the classic sense, since they retained a rural base – some land or just a homestead in which the 'family' lived and worked. It was this rural base, moreover, which provided the 'single' migrants with a buffer against uncertainty in the urban labour market and, as a result, conferred on them the additional flexibility which the employers desired. Such migrants were usually men because they had control over migration decisions in the household and could opt for the higher cash wages of the city. Proletarianisation in these circumstances was unnecessary, as was the individualisation of labour. Men retained control over the household's migration decision because labour was not 'free' from family authority. It was the male head of the household, moreover, who used his familial authority to retain his flexibility in the urban labour market by commanding more intensive work from women for increasingly lower allocation of resources. As a result, women's migration followed a different pattern. They left their villages when their rural resources were exhausted – either accompanying their displaced families or alone, having been denied access to household resources because of widowhood, barrenness or inchastity. Such women were less prone to periodically visit the village 'home'. Even if conventional wisdom has exaggerated their abrogation of the 'rural connection', there must have been steep hurdles to the deserted or deserting wife's return to the village. Certainly, most women migrants had less rural or household resources to draw on by way of insurance. As a result, they were more often 'proletarianised' in the conventional sense than the men – a disadvantage in the insecure urban labour maket. Thus did gender play a constitutive role in the making of the jute working class.

Women's disadvantage in the urban market extended to the factory shopfloor. By ignoring the issues of job segregation and the gender division of labour, Indian labour historians have for long sustained the

notion of the 'factory' as an arena where increasingly homeogenised capital and labour are in conflict only with each other. Thus, the workplace itself is not usually seen as a source of differences and disunities among workers. Dipesh Chakrabarty, who has recently intervened most effectively against a purely 'class'-oriented approach to the study of Indian labour, argued that the technological backwardness of jute entrepreneurs conferred an unusual degree of deskilled homogeneity to jute labour. And yet, he argues, jute labour did not become a 'working class' because the pre-capitalist 'conditions and culture' obtaining in the larger society outside the workplace (and, by implication, brought over from the rural society) hierarchised and divided the workers more effectively than the workplace united. He steps, as it were, outside the relations of the workplace to understand 'communal' conflicts within the working classes. In his reading, communal divisions follow from 'pre-capitalist' hierarchies and remain relatively unaffected by industrial employment.[4] Such an argument could be extended to understand inequalities of gender in the jute mills and their neighbourhoods. Unequal gender relations were, of course, 'pre-capitalist' and were both prior to and obtaining outside the jute mill. Manifestly, jute entrepreneurs drew on existing ideologies of gender to sustain hierarchies of skills and wages. However, as this study will seek to show, gender relations are also 'capitalist'. While industrial employers did draw on existing and wider perceptions of gender, their own policies and strategies also served to modify, reinforce or even enhance gender inequalities and differences. Industrial employers created new and different myths about skill and segmentation which served to reinscribe gender hierarchies on the workforce. In the jute mills, the employers fostered personalised and informal channels of recruitment which tended to entrench gender-ghettos. They employed women in low-skilled and low-paid jobs on the grounds that their earnings were 'supplementary' to the men's and argued in favour of longer working hours for women on the grounds that their extra earnings would benefit their household. When employers wished to reduce their workforce they drew on domesticity and motherhood to delegitimise women's factory employment and thereby enhanced women's social marginalisation.

The employers succeeded in thus segmenting and stratifying their workforce no doubt because they were able to harness widely shared gender perceptions which, in turn, contributed to the effectiveness of employers' strategies, as also to their consequences. The state, the middle classes and male workers shared and sometimes even contested

[4] Chakrabarty, *Rethinking Working Class History.*

these perceptions of gender. The gendering of the organised industrial workforce can, therefore, only be appreciated in the context of a wider social phenomenon. In the last two decades, feminists have interrogated conventional notions of 'class' and noted broad similarities in the organisation of women's work across classes and cultures. Their interventions raise some critical questions about the role of gender in class formation. In nineteenth-century Bengal, gender was, in fact, emerging as a key to class identity. Increasingly, a variety of elite discourses marked out specific articulations of gender relations as the crucial mark of status. The organisation of marriage, motherhood and domesticity and the way these were defined for women became crucial, not only to the reproduction of class identity but also to the quotidian maintenance of class barriers.

These processes were discernible in the urban environment of Calcutta and the mill towns. For example, the attribution of migrant status exclusively to the poor and to industrial workers was more an ideological disposition than a sociological description. The term was used to indicate the 'foreignness' of labourers and to underline their alien language, culture and lifestyle. Increasingly, the separation of the native and the migrant became overlaid with distinctions of high and low culture, moral purity and laxity, order and lawlessness. A specific characterisation of gender relations was central to such distinctions. In this discourse, the upper castes upheld the sanctity of marriage, the chaste, modest and secluded demeanour of elite women. In contrast, the poor lived in 'temporary' marriages, experiencing frequent divorces and desertions. They suffered the public appearance of their women in menial and manual occupations.

Elite discourses on femininity elaborated an ideology of 'domesticity' which was intensely preoccupied with the nature of women's work. Was domesticity to subsume or to delegitimise women's productive labour? The first was possible in the case of physically segregated or household-based work. The second usually applied to women's 'visible' work in the streets and mills of the cities. The idealisation of domesticity raised questions about how women's work was to be valued. Increasingly, domestic tasks, subsumed within definitions of femininity, were stripped of their labour content and denuded of their economic value for the household. The physical and social invisibility of elite women's work underwrote the denigration of women's remunerated work. The effectiveness of the ideology of domesticity as a mark of status lay not in preventing poor women from working, but in promoting the claims of middle-class women to the highly valued domain of exclusive housewifery and childcare.

What sustained the 'domestication' of elite women in the nineteenth century? There were in fact some significant similarities in the way the new articulation of domesticity affected women across classes. It is often forgotten that the urban middle classes also had a 'rural link'. A vast majority of men in clerical and service employment left their wives and children in the village. These women, like the wives of migrant workers, suffered relative devaluation of their contribution to the household. In the absence of the men, wives in poor and middle-class rural households had to take a greater role in decision-making. In the case of the middle-class wives, this involved supervisory responsibilities which became part of their extended housework. In the case of the wives of migrant workers, however, greater responsibilities also meant more intensified labour for poorer returns. Thus, poor women's visibility in active labour increased significantly in high-migration areas. In all cases, the men earned the cash that paid the rent and ensured access to credit. The middle-class women had fewer independent means of access to earnings – either as wages or in productive resources. Those among them who came to the city lost their earlier direct access to consumption goods – especially food – and their new 'domestic' activities became dependent on men's cash earnings. In the case of all these women, domesticity subsumed significant portions of their labour. Consequently, their productive role was marginalised and their labour devalued.

To appreciate this idealised 'domesticity' in any meaningful way, one needs to open up the nature and meaning of 'work' itself. Feminist researchers investigating women's work in the household, in food production and processing and in the informal sector, have directed our attention to how 'work' is often made invisible. Calcutta and the mill towns had fewer women and even fewer were deemed as 'employed'. In 1901, only 20 per cent of the female population as against 80 per cent of the male population were registered in various occupations.[5] This was a direct consequence of the intermittent nature of women's work. Women's entry into the wage labour market was often driven by household exigencies. For instance, married women undertook extra-familial paid work when male earnings were inadequate or inconstant. For many women this meant that they worked almost all their lives. Their work, however, was regarded as 'supplementary' by their employers and their families. As a result, women were inherently and essentially handicapped in the labour market at their very point of entry. They were forced into inferior and casual jobs like petty trading, domestic service and into small industries.

[5] *Census of India*, 1901, VI, Calcutta, p. 83.