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0521453631 - Women and Labour in Late Colonial India: The Bengal Jute Industry

- Samita Sen

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Women and Labour in Late Colonial India

The Bengal Jute Industry

Samita Sen's history of labouring women in Calcutta in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries considers how social constructions of gender shaped their lives. She demonstrates how – in contrast to the experience of their male counterparts – the long-term trends in the Indian economy devalued women's labour, establishing patterns of urban migration and changing gender equations within the family. She relates these trends to the spread of dowry giving, enforced widowhood and child marriage.

The book provides insight into the trials and tribulations of poor urban women who were often perceived as prostitutes and social pariahs by the middle classes and upper echelons of society. Even trade unions refused to address their problems seriously and women remained on the margins of organised political protest. Eventually, over the course of the period, women workers in the jute industry declined from 25 per cent to two per cent of the workforce.

The study makes a significant contribution to the understanding of Indian social and economic history and to notions of gender construction.

SAMITA SEN is a lecturer in the Department of History, Calcutta University

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Acronyms and abbreviations

| | |
|--------------|---|
| BCCI | Bengal Chamber of Commerce and Industry |
| BCMU | Bengal Chatkal Mazdoor Union |
| BJWU | Bengal Jute Workers Union |
| BP | Benthall Papers |
| BPI | Bolshevik Party of India |
| BSA | Bihar State Archives, Patna |
| CID | Criminal Investigation Department |
| Comm. Comm. | Commerce Department Commerce Branch |
| CPI | Communist Party of India |
| CSAS | Centre for South Asian Studies, Cambridge |
| DIG | Deputy Inspector General of Police |
| DUL | Dundee University Library |
| <i>EPW</i> | <i>Economic and Political Weekly</i> |
| FA | Report on the Working of the Factories Act in Bengal |
| HPC | Home Political Confidential |
| IB | Intelligence Bureau |
| <i>IESHR</i> | <i>Indian Economic and Social History Review</i> |
| IFC | Indian Factory Commission, 1891 |
| IFLC | Indian Factory Labour Commission, Morison, 1908 |
| IJMA | Indian Jute Mills Association |
| <i>IJMAR</i> | <i>Report of the Indian Jute Mills Association</i> |
| IOL | Indian Office Library and Records, London |
| <i>JAMWI</i> | <i>Journal of the Association of Medical Women of India</i> |
| Judl. | Judicial Department |
| LEC | Labour Enquiry Commission, Calcutta, 1896 |
| LIC | Labour Investigation Committee, An Enquiry into Conditions of Labour in the Jute Mill Industry in India, Calcutta, 1946 |
| MRD | Manager's Report to the Directors |
| NA | National Archives of India, Delhi |

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| | |
|-------------|---|
| <i>RCLI</i> | <i>Report of the Royal Commission on Labour in India,</i> London, 1931 |
| TDP | Thomas Duff & Co. Papers |
| UP | Uttar Pradesh (formerly United Provinces) |
| WBSA | West Bengal State Archives, Calcutta |

Glossary

Months:

| | |
|-------------------|--|
| Vaishakh | April–May |
| Jaistha | May–June |
| Ashar | June–July |
| Sravana | July–August |
| Bhadra | August–September |
| Aswin | September–October |
| Kartik | October–November |
| Agrahayan | November–December |
| Poush | December–January |
| Magh | January–February |
| Phalgun | February–March |
| Chaitra | March–April |
| abarjana | garbage |
| abru | veil |
| aghani | main winter rice crop in Bihar |
| akhara | gymnasium; society for physical culture; Baishnab centre |
| andar | women’s quarters in the house |
| anna | one-sixteenth of the rupee |
| anna | cooked rice |
| antahpur | inner apartments of the house |
| anturgha | delivery room |
| arkathis | recruiting agents for tea gardens |
| atta | coarse flour |
| ayurveda | herbal medicine |
| baboo (also babu) | Bengali clerk in European managed business |
| badli | temporary worker |

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Glossary

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| | |
|------------------------|---|
| badmash | rogue |
| bahinji | respectful form of address for sister |
| bairagi (also vairagi) | a Baishnab; a caste; a mendicant |
| bairer | outside |
| baper bari | married woman's natal home |
| barababu | Head Clerk |
| basti (also bustee) | slum |
| bazar | market |
| beshya | a prostitute |
| bhadoi | autumn crop |
| bhadralok | lit. gentleman, respectable men of the middle class |
| bhadramahila | lit. gentlewoman, respectable women of the middle class |
| bhaga | job-sharing |
| bhita | home |
| bibaha | marriage |
| bidhaba | widow |
| bidhabasrama | shelter home for widows |
| bighas | one-third of an acre |
| bihao | marriage |
| biri | tobacco wrapped in tobacco leaf, like a cigarette |
| bishakta | poisonous |
| burqa | cloak with veil covering entire body |
| chapati | hand-made bread |
| charka | spinning wheel |
| chaudhuri | recruiter; supervisor |
| chawls | slums |
| cheerah | flattened rice |
| chhotolok | lower classes; manual worker |
| chullahs | open oven |
| churi | marriage |
| coolie (also cooly) | worker |
| dai | midwife |
| dalal | agent |
| dayabhaga | Bengal school of Hindu law of inheritance |
| dhenki | manual rice-pounder |
| dhopanis | laundresses |
| durwans | gatekeeper, security man, armed retainers |

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xvi Glossary

| | |
|------------------------|--|
| garbhadan (also gauna) | consummation ceremony |
| ghari | clock |
| ghats | river front |
| ghee (also ghi) | clarified butter |
| gherao | surround in protest |
| goonda | ruffian |
| griha | home |
| gurkha | ethnic group from Nepal; security guards |
| hartal | strike |
| hasuli | heavy bangle, usually of silver |
| hat | local market |
| haathi | elephant |
| Holi | spring festival of colours |
| itar | lower classes (derogatory) |
| izzat | honour |
| jalacharaniya | castes who can serve brahmins water |
| jamadar | sweeper or guard |
| jandrel | aggressive and assertive |
| jangi | militant |
| jhara | token issued to women workers to leave the mill for nursing |
| gharoonis | sweepers |
| jhum | slash and burn cultivation |
| kabuli | pathan moneylender |
| kal | machine |
| kaliyuga | the last age of sin before doom according to Hindu mythology |
| kaprawallis | hawkers of cloth |
| khabo | eat |
| khatbo | work |
| khichuri | simple preparation of rice and lentils |
| khoraki | subsistence allowance |
| khoyee | fluffed rice |
| kshata | sore |
| kukri | sharp knife |
| kulakalanka | disgrace of the exogamous kin group |
| kulin | highest grade among brahmins |
| kutchra | mud huts |
| lakhs | hundred thousand |
| Lakshmi | Hindu goddess of wealth; ideal housewife |

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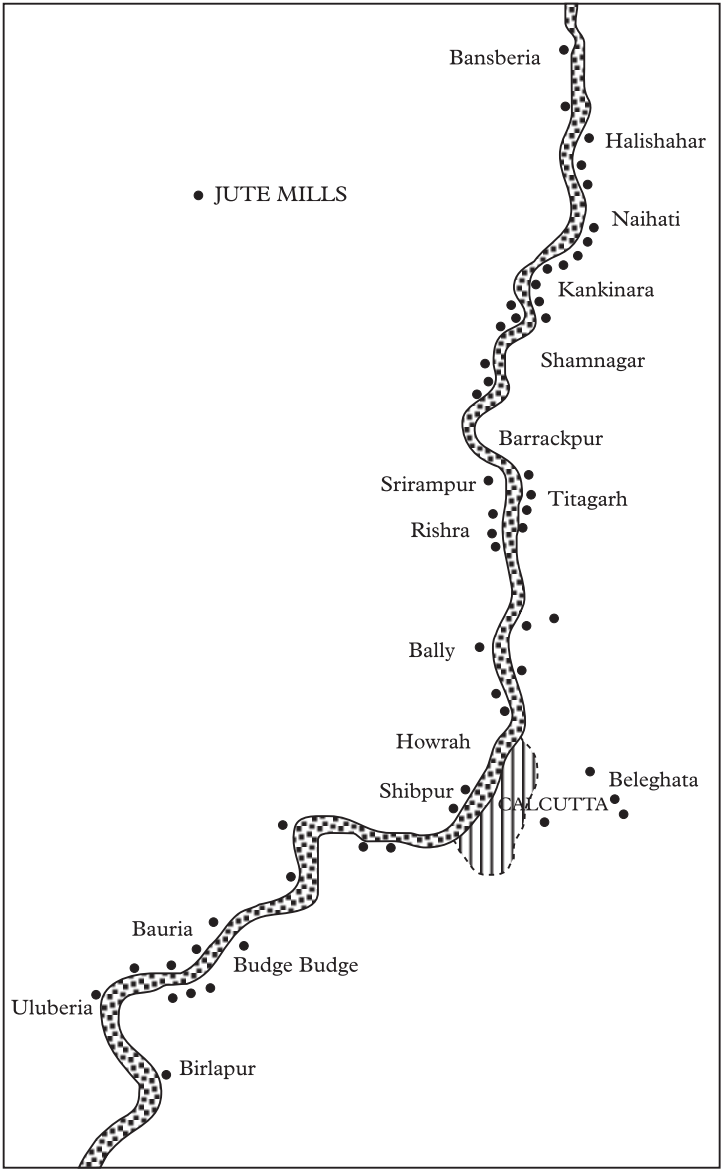
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Glossary

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| | |
|---------------------------------|--|
| laraku | militant |
| lathi | stick |
| ma (also maiji, mairam, mataji) | mother |
| madrasis (also madrassis) | lit. of Madras, used for people south of Orissa |
| magh (also magi) | lit. woman (derogatory) |
| mahajan | moneylender |
| maro | attack |
| mattha | butter milk |
| maunds | unit of weight varying from about 15 to 45 kilograms |
| meheraru | woman; wife |
| melas | fairs |
| mistri | workman |
| mooree | puffed rice |
| moorkhe | fluffed rice with jaggery |
| mota | Shia marriage |
| nika | second or subsequent marriages for Muslim women |
| paithoo | marriage |
| palkhi | palanquin |
| panchayat | self-governing institution |
| panibharin | women who fetch water for wages |
| panwallis | betel-leaf sellers |
| parakiya | extra-marital sexual relationship |
| pat | widow remarriage |
| pies | lowest denomination in Indian currency (Re. 0.08) |
| pucca | built of brick |
| pujas | worship; festival |
| punkha | fan |
| pardah | lit. curtain; custom of secluding women |
| rabi | spring crop |
| rarrh | widow; prostitute |
| sadar | district headquarters |
| sadi | marriage |
| sagai | remarriage; engagement |
| sahib | boss; generally referring to British in colonial India |
| samasya | problem |
| samsar | household |

| | | |
|---------------------|---|---|
| xviii | Glossary | |
| sanga (also sangat) | sardar (also sirdar) | sati (also suttee) |
| seer | shakti | sowatin |
| streedhan | sugrihini | sumata |
| swadeshibabu | thana | vaisya |
| | varna | verandah |
| | zamindars | |
| | marriage; widow remarriage | lit. headman, chief; jobber in jute mills |
| | lit. chaste wife; the practice of immo- | lating widows on the funeral pyre of |
| | their dead husband | 0.75 of a kilogram, approximately |
| | power | co-wife |
| | marriage portion of daughter, usually | in form of ornaments |
| | ideal housewife | ideal mother |
| | middle-class nationalist or Congress | activist |
| | police station | commercial caste; prostitute |
| | caste | balcony |
| | landlord | |



Location of jute mills along river Hooghly