

Conclusion

The foregoing study was an effort to relive and share the pain and struggle of the rural women of Bengal in early nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Women had been pushed into this unfortunate situation by poverty and social circumstances. Decline of traditional social structure and kinship, want of money and space made them destitute in the setup. This break-up had several sides to it. On one hand the traditional pattern of family and social bond in rural area lost its attraction, while on the other when the poor womenfolk stepped outside their village, they experienced a new life which they never thought of.

The unemployment of rural women was not only monitory deprivation but the loss to Bengal's art and heritage was even greater. Women displayed a high degree of skill in arts through their workmanship - technology alone could never match it up. Rural women were generally involved in the peripheral services whereas male workers' skills were in the forefront to be sold in the market; women's skills were thus treated as 'dispensable or least replaceable'.⁶³⁰ Nirmala Banerjee argued that mill made cloth had never totally wiped out Indian indigenous handloom industry; mill machine could never imitate the intricacies of designs, qualities and textures except at great expense. All these were dependent on the sum total of the skills of the weaver's family, the women's contribution was in the preparation of finest of the yarns, where fineness of the yarn was 'a matter of degree, not of kind'⁶³¹ – and hence their contribution to the end of the product was invisible. Technology and economic life had undergone tectonic changes. New dress materials and new process of making resulted in shifting of the technical base from rural India to the urban areas. New occupations replaced the old ones.

⁶³⁰ Nirmala Banerjee, Women's Work and Discrimination, in Devaki Jain (ed.) *Tyranny of the Household*, p-157

Quality and technical impoverishment alienated old occupations. Like others, women also adjusted themselves by shifting the base from their native village to the location of their work. It was saddening to note that the art of spinning the finest of the clothes, revered all over the world, which women nurtured and developed over a long period of time had also perished along with this shifting. Traditionally, "women's tools are generally inferior could also be a carry-over from the low value attached to women's domestic work. Since that work is not correctly valued, both the family and society have seldom diverted any resources for the technological improvement of their tools, like the chula or the broom".⁶³² In hindsight, it was with the help of those traditional tools women fulfilled the demands of the society as well as of their family. In domestic industry, more specifically in agricultural operation they showed an amazing degree of knowledge which had never been recognized only because that did not have any institutional recognition. In their own society they were treated as illiterate poor rural entities with less social status - whereas in reality their position and contribution were much greater than any upper caste house wife who spent their days leisurely doing a few domestic chores, chitchatting with neighbours where the topic of discussion hovered around ornaments, saris and other neighbours in the locality.

The employment of males was almost steady up to 1921, but the employment of females had decreased considerably from 1901 and 1911 levels. The economic depression of 1931 further dampened the employment scenario. The dwindling employment for women lowered their social status. The upper and middle class 'in-purdah' women were not used to step outside their household in search of gainful earning for the family. The most striking feature was that, this custom was adopted by the backward castes and tribes too, who were living nearby the cities. This contributed to some extent in loss of employment for women in general after 1911. For example, the supply of dairy

⁶³² Nirmala Banerjee (ed.), *Changing Industrial Scenario*, p-20

products like milk, butter, curd and cottage cheese got affected, as previously these products were necessarily produced and supplied by the women of *Jadav*, *Gope*, *Ahir* or *Goala* castes. Gradually these castes also restricted their women from doing such work and confined women in kitchen to maintain the 'social prestige' like the upper castes.⁶³³

The Indian women usually enjoyed a lower status in their households - family decisions relating to finances, relationship with others in the community and selection of life partner were all made by the male members and women were rarely consulted. Traditionally society stereotyped a women's primary role as that of a typical housewife. If they were to be employed in a paid job, it was compelling on them to adjust their working hour and household duties and not the other way around. In any case, they could not afford to shun their regular domestic responsibilities. According to surveys conducted at that time, the other critical issues a poor rural woman most often encountered were poor health, malnutrition, repeated childbearing and lack of education. It is imperative that at least now; women must receive the following services: training in income generating activities, easy access to low-interest loans and family planning services to limit childbearing to make their life a bit comfortable and joyful.

If women's participation in economic development can be accounted for, a huge contribution would be found everywhere. There is no doubt that respectful employment of women holds the key to improve their status as well as comfort for the family. Unless and until women receive their proper status in the society starting from grass-roots level they have to bear the burden of discrimination, which in due course of time would affect the society at large from which the men would also not be spared. Women can no longer be treated as marginal or insignificant and their income was as mere

⁶³³ Census Report of India, 1951, Vol.VI, pp-517-521

supplementary. As they stepped outside to work in tandem with men, mingling freely with persons of varied hues, the caste system slowly dropped their guard. Women empowered themselves by establishing their strength and ability. The holistic view towards women will have to undergo a change for the better. And it not only concerns the past - the process must go on and on.

The decrease of female population in rural area was a result of decay of the old pattern of manufacture. Previously, the production system in rural-urban economy was more organic and interdependent. "In the old system there was more of organized life in production, which soon came to be replaced by organized labour in the new pattern".⁶³⁴ Still women changed themselves, because 'women' and 'adjustment' are nothing but synonymous.

⁶³⁴ Ibid, p-414