Preface and Acknowledgements

My first tentative steps into the world of ‘women and work’ were taken as a social work student. As part of my field work, I was placed with a women’s organization—Stree Mukti Sanghathana— who worked towards organizing women belonging to the mahar and mang (untouchable communities who followed B.R. Ambedkar into Buddhism) community. The communities’ chief livelihood was rag picking. Working with these women, I witnessed their abject poverty, exploitation and grim despair but saw as well the joy and laughter that surrounded their lives. These low-caste, working-class women engaged in menial labour were not only passive victims of gender, class and caste exploitation. They humanised the categories and theories I had learnt in the classrooms in manners both unexpected and stimulating. Many of my doubts and questions began to crystallize later, when I first ‘interned’ and then worked with an organization of rural, landless, women labourers— Shramjivee Mahila Samity— in West Bengal. I was working and living with activists who fought to establish minimum wages for agricultural labour, eight-hour working day, equal pay for equal work, campaign for right to food and right to work as well as struggle against gender based violence— domestic violence, dowry deaths, rape and trafficking. I learnt once again, through the experience of the women we were working with, how indeed gender and class intersected. How being women and being landless agricultural labourers were not incidental connections but intertwined inextricably in their lives. I felt I needed to address anew the question of women and work: How did work impinge on women’s lives but also what happened to work when women did it?

As I was faced with more and more questions, I had fewer answers. This led me to search out spaces that would allow me to participate in knowledge production; I decided to return to the academy. The journey has been and continues to be both promising and fulfilling.
I would like to take this opportunity to thank Professor Samita Sen, without whose supervision this thesis would have never seen the light of the day. I would also like to thank Professors Kingshuk Chatterjee and Anjali Dave, who were the first teachers to open my mind to social questions. I am greatly indebted to Shramajivee Mahila Samity and, particularly, Anuradha(di) Talwar, who showed me a whole new world.

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And finally, my deepest gratitude for all those women who have spared time to share their lives with me, who have inspired me with their optimism and hope, and have taught me the value of laughter, even in the face of serious concerns.
Map 1: Map of West Bengal. www.mapsofindia.com