V GENDER AND WORK

The Patna-Gaya region was no exception to the general decline of economy under the impact of colonial regime. It had adversely affected the artisan as well as peasant families. It has been pointed out that the decline in returns from labour and crafts led to increasingly wider and more intensive deployment of women and children to procure subsistence. In the present chapter an attempt has been made to investigate the significance of alteration on the employment of women in the Patna-Gaya region.

Patna-Gaya region constituted manufacturing centre along with its predominant engagement in agriculture. In both of them employment of female labour force had became indispensable.

During the agricultural season obviously the demand of labour used to increase tremendously. The cultivation of rice in this region was the mainstay of the economy; therefore, intensive labour service was required which underpinned the importance of labour market. During

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1 Samita Sen, Women and Labour in Late Colonial India, Cambridge, 1999.

2 Alok Sheel, South Bihar Geography and the Agricultural Cycle: Gaya and Shahabad in the Nineteenth Century and Early twentieth Century, IESHR, xxx, 1 January-March, 1993, pp. 85-114.
this period women were employed in large numbers. Women's assistance was required in sowing, transplantation and weeding. This was the period when women were getting wages equal to men employed in ploughing.\(^3\) In normal agricultural seasons women wages were lower than men. While women earned four paisa a man used to get seven paisa - in a day in 1811 - 1812.\(^4\) By 1880s it was reported that these labourers were paid always in kind and they were getting 2 to 2\% seers of coarsest and cheapest grain valued about 1 \(\frac{1}{2}\) anas and women received about half of this rate.\(^5\) Even during the famine of 1874 when women were employed in relief works, the rate of wages for man was 2 anas a day while for a woman it was 1 - 8 paisa only.\(^6\)

In the small landholding families the dependence upon family labour was still higher for agricultural pursuits.\(^7\)

The fine rice which was exported and consumed by the local high castes was mostly freed from the husk without boiling. But the poor people preferred boiled rice. Pounding of the rice was a general

\(^3\) F. Buchanan, p. 558.

\(^4\) Ibid., p. 565.


\(^6\) Collection of papers to scarcity in Bengal for April, 1874, Government of India, Department of Revenue, Agriculture and Commerce, no. vi, Calcutta, 1874, p. 600.

\(^7\) Mitra, p. 172.
household activity and it was invariably performed by the women. Buchanan had rightly observed, the labour falls on the women; but most families in easy circumstances and of rank have slave women.\textsuperscript{8} In the house of small peasants, their women performed the husking operation at home. In this way they took the advantage of paddy-rice price differential.\textsuperscript{9} This rice husking also took place on commercial basis and a good number of women were involved in it. The wives of the artists and tradesmen, those who have no land, entered into this venture. They used to purchase rough rice, and pounded it for the consumption of the travelers and for large towns. Petty traders or 'Beldiya Beparis' in the countryside also used to purchase such rice in rough state. Their wives used to pound such rice with the help of some other hired women.\textsuperscript{10} Three women usually used to work together. In a day they prepared rice worth Rs. 2. Thus each one earned five paisa a day whereas man used to receive 6 paisa for a day.\textsuperscript{11} Rice husking was an important source of

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{8} Buchanan, pp. 494-495.
  \item \textsuperscript{9} Sujata Bose, \textit{Peasant Labour and Colonial Capital: Rural Bengal since 1770}, New Delhi, 1993, p. 100.
  \item \textsuperscript{10} Buchanan, pp. 494-95.
  \item \textsuperscript{11} Ibid.
\end{itemize}
employment for women during nineteenth century. This not only added to the income of the family but the use of 'dhenki' for husking was ideal for preserving the food value of rice grain, especially in thiamine content.13

A good number of women were involved in parching and grinding. Bharbhuna or Chabenafurosh were women involved in parching and used to earn 2 paisas a day besides receiving a little share of grain from each. A few were able to purchase grain, parch it in their houses and retail it in their shops.14 Flour grinding was an important household work. In Patna, flour was prepared in hand mills in which both man and women were employed. It was an excruciatingly tiring job. So the people seldom worked for more than three hours in the early hours of the day. They received 2% to 3 anas for grinding 40 seers of wheat, and two women at the same mill could ground 20 seers of wheat in one morning.15

Women labourers were also required in opium production. In opium season, in the month of March-April at the time of flowering,

12 Mukul Mukherjee, Impact of Modernization on Women's Occupation: A Case Study of Rice Husking in Bengal, ed., Women in Colonial India, Delhi, 1898, p. 185.
13 Ibid.
14 Buchanan, p. 636.
15 Ibid., pp. 636-637.
corolla of the flower used to get fully matured, and women used to detach them from the capsule.\(^{16}\) Extraction of juice from capsule needs skillful hand. This work was usually performed by the peasant and his family.\(^ {17}\)

Besides assisting in the collection of drug, women were also engaged in the entire process of production. When drug dried, it formed into lumps and was wrapped up with petals of poppy flowers, which was supposed to give opium a delicate aroma. Every cultivator was bound to supply a quantity of petals proportionate to the crude opium collected. Three qualities of wraps were recognized by the government and were paid for at the rate often, seven and five rupees a maund.\(^ {18}\) Usually wife of the cultivator prepared this.\(^ {19}\) But if the cultivator was of high caste then he employed hired labour for this work.\(^ {20}\) Some women used to earn money by preparing these coverings.\(^ {21}\)

Third important economic activity of this region was cotton textile production. An enormous number of women were employed in this


\(^{17}\) Billington, p. 144.

\(^{18}\) Ibid.


\(^{20}\) Billington, p. 143.

\(^{21}\) Buchanan, p. 526.
sector. This industry was organized on domestic basis. A great deal of seed of cotton was removed by women who spun it and it was partly beaten also by women, if this had been performed by hired labourer belonging to Dhuniya caste. Through this exercise a man and woman could earn Rs. 3 to 4 in a month. According to Buchanan spinners were exclusively women. About 330426 women, i.e., one fifth of the total population were employed as spinsters alone and they used to spin only a few hours in the afternoon. On an average estimate the whole value of the thread that each lady used to spin in a year was worth approximately 7 rupees 2 anas and 8 paisas. Thus the annual value created by this activity of women total contributed Rs. 23,67,277. By a similar average calculation the raw material at the retail price, amounted to Rs. 12,86,272 leaving a profit of Rs. 10,81,005 (for the spinners or 3½ rupees each.

Those women who spun fine thread exclusively for the market, could earn much more than those who spun on coarse yarn. Spinning was not considered as degraded work and women from all castes and ranks were involved in it. They were considered as engaged in

\[22\] Ibid., p. 647.
\[23\] Ibid.
'household service' rather than a professional one. Therefore, during eighteenth and early nineteenth century women spinners were not tied by regulation or contract. Bengal government considered that 'There is no class of people who depend upon as a profession. It is generally performed as a subsidiary employment by the female.'

For the women from the poorer section, whose family had not sufficient income, spinning was an important source of subsistence for them. But for the women from the upper castes, due to gradual decline in earnings, the high caste families supplemented the income of family from the earning of women.

R.C. Dutt had pointed out that at the termination of the nineteenth century weaving and spinning were practically dead. But this process had begun earlier. There was a decline in the demand of fine cotton goods which adversely affected the economy of women spinners who were spinning fine cotton thread.

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25 India Office Record, Bengal Commercial and Shipping Consultation, 1789, Range 155, vol. 74, pp. 62-63.
26 Bagchi, p. 508.
27 R.C. Dutt, p. 162.
28 Buchanan, p. 648.
In textile production women were engaged, apart from spinning, in winding the wrap and dyeing. Those women who were employed for winding used to wind 8.5 pons in a month and were valued at 3 ¼ rupees; each pon used to be about 76 s.w. a seer, therefore, 8.5 pons would suggest s.w. 50/100. The 12 s.w. of the Tasar silk wrap was available for 1 rupee. Per month which was worth 4 rupees 31/5 anas. It was estimated that such efforts yielded a profit of 7½ anas to the warp winders. Besides there were other women like 'Butabanwaiya', embroiders who depended on this industry. Their economic condition worsened with the drastic decline witnessed by the textile industry.

Unlike the upper echelons of the society, this is important to notice, the women from artisanal families were bearing the responsibilities of household and along with it also shared the burden of husband's occupation. People from Domra and Bangsphor caste worked with bamboos. Both husband and wife used to earn 6 paisas in a day. 2 paisas were the cost of the bamboos. They work 26 days in a month and earned

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29 Grierson, p. 425.
30 Buchanan, p. 651.
31 Ibid.
33 Sinha, p. 518.
for a family of five, including two workers, Rs. 46 in a year.\textsuperscript{34} Washer man and his wife earned 27 rupees 15 ans in a year. When they were employed at company's factory, in a month they could wash and bleached two bells and could gain 39 rupees in a year.\textsuperscript{35} Women from Agrahari caste were also not living in seclusion and took active part in the business of their husbands.\textsuperscript{36} Women from barber caste used to serve the women of upper caste families and received allowance for every visit.\textsuperscript{37} Chamar's wives generally served as village midwives. She used to receive one ana and 2 \textit{sidhas}\textsuperscript{38} a day for her service.\textsuperscript{39} These women pursued their occupation independently. \textit{Panibharin} were mostly women from the \textit{Kahar} caste. In places where women were to avoid public appearance, and expected to perform most of the household work except fetching water, \textit{Panibharin} were hired. These \textit{Panibharin} received wages at the rate of half an ana and about four seers of grain per house per month for supplying one \textit{ghara} of water daily. By working three hours daily these women could

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item Buchanan, p. 622.
\item Ibid., pp. 616-17.
\item Resely, \textit{Caste and Tribes in India}, I, p. 11.
\item Grierson, \textit{Notes on the District of Gaya}, p. 112.
\item Ibid., \textit{Bihar Peasant Life}, p. 356.
\item Grierson, Note..., P. 112.
\end{enumerate}
\end{footnotesize}
earn about 9 anas and about half a *maund* of grain per month.\(^{40}\) There were also women, who observed *purdah* and also earn money through their occupation. They visited the house of elites in the town and sold their products like toys, medicines etc. Most of these women were Muslims and belonged to distressed families. Many of them were excellent in embroidery work and sold their cloths for 60 rupees or 70 rupees.\(^{41}\) Literate women earned through copying.\(^{42}\)

This appears that in the earlier part of the nineteenth century there was a scarcity for domestic female servants except widows and old women.\(^{43}\) There are instances where we find the wages of the young women equal to those of men.\(^{44}\) Therefore in many cases children of the poor were bought by the wealthy for servants.\(^{45}\) Besides them there were female slaves who were frequently employed as domestic servants.\(^{46}\) In the European households women from lower castes, mostly from *Hari*

\(^{40}\) Ibid, p. 114..

\(^{41}\) Azimabadi, pp. 216-17.

\(^{42}\) Ibid.

\(^{43}\) S.N. Sen, p. 81.


\(^{46}\) Martin, p. 125.
caste (a caste of scavengers) were employed as domestic servants.\textsuperscript{47}

A large number of women were engaged in inferior professions. \textit{Mirasin} were women from a distinct caste. They were performers of music on certain occasions. Generally they performed in groups of five or six and earn Rs. 2 to Rs. 10 for an evening performance of singing and dancing.\textsuperscript{48} In such category, there were also some individual performers who earned up to 1000 rupees for three night performance.\textsuperscript{49} Prostitution was an important economic activity. \textit{Khatris} and \textit{Ramzani} women were involved in it. But they augmented their number by purchasing girls from any caste and order. In Patna many prostitute families become quite rich.\textsuperscript{50} Rich people maintained concubines openly. Women from certain professional castes, widows, adulteresses and maid servants were dragged into it.\textsuperscript{51}

This is important to notice that women from the poor strata of the society were very important to supplement their family economy such as

\textsuperscript{47} Hunter, pp. 51-52.
\textsuperscript{48} Buchanan, p. 542.
\textsuperscript{49} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{50} M. Martin, p. 127-28.
cutting of fuel in the jungle and the like.\textsuperscript{52} They further added in the income of the family through marketed their family household works. Besides husking paddy, spinning, they sold cakes of cowdung fuel, a basketful every two or three days in hot weather cost 2 gorakhpuri paisa (a third of an ana). In villages this was worth of 10 anas for a month while in town they could earn up to a rupee in a month.\textsuperscript{53} Grierson estimated that artisans in Gaya derived 44 percent of their earnings from supplementary activities, of which women contributed at least 30 percent.\textsuperscript{54}

Women's works were, not less important than the men. They were involved in those economic activities where they were putting not less amount of physical labour than their male counterparts. But they were discriminated in terms of wages. Female labour was not free from the domination of patriarchal authority. In situations where employer of a bounded labour needed they could also claim the labour of his wife and children.\textsuperscript{55} Unfree labour or Kamiya system was a form of agrestic slavery. While a labourer did not have any property to mortgage then he

\begin{thebibliography}{99}
\bibitem{52} Grierson, Note., p. 121.
\bibitem{53} Buchanan, p. 542.
\bibitem{54} Grierson, Note on the District of Gaya, p. 121.
\bibitem{55} Thorner, Land and Labour, Bombay, 1962, p. 38.
\end{thebibliography}
mortgaged his labour on lease for 99 years.\textsuperscript{56} This property lass group of people did not have any property but they claim labor of their women as their property and it was mortgages.\textsuperscript{57}

Thus we find that women of different status and social hierarchy were engaged in various kinds of crafts and services in the nineteenth century. Most of the time they were supplementing the family income but occasionally some women pursued work independently.

\textsuperscript{56} Gyan Prakash, p. 12.

\textsuperscript{57} Qeyamuddin Ahmad, A Mid-Nineteenth Century Case of a Long term Lease not Settl of Human bening, Indian Historical Review, xv, no. 1-25, July 1988, pp. 276-280.