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## Gender Caste and Growth Assessment – West Bengal sub-national study

Report to Department for International Development

Amit Mitra

2010

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University of East Anglia

International Development UEA & School of International Development,  
University of East Anglia , Norwich, NR4 7TJ, United Kingdom

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**GENDER CASTE AND GROWTH ASSESSMENT: WEST  
BENGAL SUB-NATIONAL STUDY**

**Amit Mitra**

**New Delhi  
April 2008**

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Amit Mitra

## **Executive Summary**

**West Bengal** is one of the fastest growing states in India after 1993-94. With a successful programme of land reforms (registration of sharecroppers and redistribution of land), the state could reduce the stark poverty visible even to casual observers in the 1970s. The state is held as an example of successful decentralised government.

This study sought to understand the impact of the contemporary growth processes on gender and caste in West Bengal. A specific focus was analysing the causalities and implications of the low female labour force participation rates. The linkage with education was seen as an important aspect in this regard.

To better understand the processes of change in the rural areas, the study relied on qualitative methods, taking leads from the secondary literature and the quantitative analyses carried out at the all-India level. Two districts, Burdwan and Malda were selected in terms of their HDI and GDI ranks. In each district, two village clusters were chosen from a community development block, a high growth one in Burdwan and a low growth one in Malda. The village clusters were chosen in such a way that they reflected both urban influences and remoteness as well as had the maximum representation in terms of social and economic groups that is castes, tribals, Muslims and Christians as well as economic strata. For the caste categories, the study did not confine itself to the administrative categories such as general, OBC and SC but in a particular village chose respondents from each *jati* (such as Brahmin, Aguri, bagdi, Rajbansi and so on).

### ***Key Findings***

The most important finding of this study is that gender equality remains an issue of serious concern in West Bengal. On the face of it, women in West Bengal are projected as being better off than their counterparts say in Bihar but the ground realities present a very different situation.

Women remain subject to the male priorities, prerogatives and choices in almost every sphere: work, education, decision making, participation in governance processes, irrespective of caste and class, in both the regions. Gender discrimination manifests itself through intricate and complex inter-related ways, only some of which are visible through conventional indicators.

At the core of this is the psyche that *meyera porer sampatti* (women are others property) or *biye to ditei hobe* (she will have to be married off). Early marriages prevail, although in the upper castes/classes this is changing. The phenomenon of early marriages is linked to the tremendous value still attached to women's chastity and the need to contain their sexuality within marriage. The prestige and social position of a family, in relation to not only others of the same caste /ethnic group/religion but also in the village still crucially depends on the daughters getting married in good time, that is soon after puberty. While there is now rough gender parity in terms of school enrolment at the primary level, since primary education is deemed necessary by all, the 'need to get her married' was cited as a major reason for withdrawal of girl children at the secondary level. Essentially, education

for girls is deemed a necessity to get her married: even the upper castes/classes often said that unless a girl has passed at least class 12, her marriage prospects are difficult.

Child marriage was a major phenomenon amongst the upper castes/classes of Bengal, often called the “bhadrolok” till the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Today, while there are indications of this changing in the rural areas, with the upper castes/classes sending their daughters for higher education (though the rationale still remains of finding a suitable match), the phenomenon of ‘bhadrolokization’ has permeated to the working castes/classes. It maybe considered a form of Sanskritization. The scramble for grooms and the economic prosperity compared to the 1970s has led to the introduction of dowry even in castes/religions where it was uncommon earlier, and also raised the dowry rates tremendously.

In terms of education, while there is a gender parity at the primary level in the regions chosen for this study, the disparity increases as one goes higher and higher. While marriage is a major reason for withdrawal of girls from secondary schooling, other important factors include poor supply infrastructure. Given the social insecurity and increase in violence against girls and women in the countryside (only some of it is reflected in the official data), it is not unusual to for many parents to withdraw their girl children from school and ultimately get her married off. For both boys and girls, the quality of education is rather low, pointing to the need for greater public investment in education as well as better management of the educational processes.

Female workforce participation has historically been low in West Bengal’s villages. This is partly due to the nature of the agrarian economy and the fact that working as agricultural labourers was seen as the domain of the lower caste women. In fact, unless severely distressed, upper caste men, both amongst the Hindus and Muslims, would not work as agricultural labourers. Today, apart from the phenomenon of bhadralokisation mentioned above, the changing nature of agrarian production has lowered the availability of work for both men and women. The new non-agricultural opportunities that are coming up in the areas that have benefited from the growth processes preclude the inclusion of women. The present day educational levels, quality and type further exclude women from such jobs. This again points to the need for taking a fresh look at the overall education policy and gearing it to the needs of the changing nature of markets due to the changed growth processes.

While women’s participation in the labour force is still rather low on the whole, for the poor there has been some growth especially in the household industry sector. It has to be noted that the definition of “household industry” in the Census is rather broad and is not confined to narrow manufacturing only. Evidence of such industries in the field ranged from embroidery work and weaving jute/fibre mats to rearing poultry and other livestock. For women, domestic/reproductive work remains a priority, both according to themselves and socially. As was often repeated in the field, only poverty necessitates that women work. In the face of shrinking male employment due to the changing structures of the labour market, women are forced to work either as marginal workers or as workers in the household industries. For the men, with the increased mechanisation of agriculture and

also the reduced trends in sharecropping, there has been an increase in the incidence of “marginal workers”. Migration is a major survival strategy for many men. The category of ‘other-workers’ too has increased especially for men. Evidence was found of the rise in the number of petty traders, middle-men and even the numbers of “political workers” who according to the census fall in this category. However, the rise in the female labour force participation has not been due to any overt gender equality but due to poverty and economic necessity.

In terms of decision making, given the kind of narrowing of the spaces for women found in the study, including the inability of women to question their early marriages, many felt that it matters little if their men discuss whether to purchase some household goods or not. While in some instances, probably to ‘keep face’ they said they were consulted, in most cases it was the prerogative of the male. However, increasingly, the decision to send girl children to primary school at least appears to be the domain of women.

It is often perceived that the *bhadrolok* (upper caste and class) ethos acts as a deterrent to gender violence in Bengali society. However, this was not the case the study found. Gender violence is increasing, something that is reflected in the official data too. The increase is also coincident with the period of high growth. It is difficult to say whether this is linked to expanding consumerism, unemployment or simply given that men still perceive and keep to themselves the roles of providers look on women as their subjects? A pointer to this is the feeling across all social groups and regions that a woman should stay at home, homemaking being her primary responsibility, and that withdrawing her from the workforce enhances the social prestige. This is also reflected in the control that men have over women socializing with other women, mixing with other castes, attending SHG or even Panchayati Raj Institution meetings. While in West Bengal castes are not as polarized as in say Uttar Pradesh or Tamil Nadu, and voting does not take place along caste lines, caste feelings and stereotypes remain rather strong when it comes to the women breaking barriers to form bonds of marriage or even getting together to build group solidarity. As such, women are not given much space in the public domain and even when they do, they are denied leadership roles. So ultimately women have two choices. If qualified, they seek ‘safe’ jobs like teaching or as ICDS workers or then build up their images as good homemakers, in the security of their homes. Giving birth to male children adds to this image.

While the health infrastructure is better in the high growth regions and health awareness is high across all castes and classes, a lot more is needed in terms of public investment. The high incidence of anaemia amongst women of all castes is another pointer, however, to continued gender discrimination at home. The silent but effective forms of gender discrimination get manifested also in women being denied property, reflected even in the state practices, which are changing, though slowly.

Finally, due to the impacts of growth, the traditional spaces that women had and the institutions, including the joint family and kin-network, the *para saalish* that protected whatever rights they had are fast getting eroded. Nuclearization of families is on the increase. With the growth of a large body of unemployed, semi-educated youth who take

on themselves the roles of the ‘guardians’ of everything and everyone (locally known as *Dadas*) positing themselves as ‘party workers’ though very often the actual leaders deny their existence, women are forced to take recourse to them to redress their grievances against say violence. The ‘justice’ that is meted out, if at all, depends on the closeness of the errant husband to these youth. Very often the husband himself is a part of this faction.

Essentially then, the women exclusive constraints (occupational segregation, mobility, domestic responsibilities) are getting reinforced due to caste norms being re-invented and also the new informal institutions such as the growth of the *dada* culture. This is aided by the contemporary education systems and the weak enforcement of laws to protect women against violence, including the violence inherent in dowry and child marriages.

Indeed, gender equality has not come about to the desired levels in a situation of growth. This is evident from the Gender Caste Development Index for Indian states calculated for the India-level GCGA. West Bengal shows higher levels of disparity across castes and lower levels of development when gender is taken into account. While it has a rank of 17 for disparity and 14 for development out of 18 Indian states when only caste is taken into account (Table 8.3), the disparity moves up to 16<sup>th</sup> position and development falls to 15<sup>th</sup> position (Table 8.5) when gender is included.

### **Recommendations**

1. West Bengal too, like other states of the country, has suffered from the impacts of a structural adjustment programme, essentially leading to cutbacks in public expenditure. This has critically affected education and health provisioning as well as improving communications. The need for allocating greater public expenditure and increasing the overall social development budget is urgent.
2. New ways need to be found to generate the additional resources. These can come from innovative fiscal measures, building up on say the way many panchayats tax vehicles to maintain roads. In fact, the panchayats should be allowed to mobilize greater resources than at present. Also public-private partnerships can be tried out, but the control and regulation has to be with the people’s institutions.
3. The education policies need to be reworked to promote skill building and create an employable workforce. A special focus has to be on the hitherto excluded, such as the SCs/STs and women from these sections. The skills training needs to be followed up by placements or provisioning of credit for those who prefer to remain self-employed. In fact, in the area of skill-training, there is a lot of scope for public-private partnerships.
4. A renewed attention has to be given to improving the overall quality of education. The responsibility of the primary education delivery may be given to the jurisdiction of the panchayati raj institutions. Where the SSK kinds of programmes are underway, it is important to avoid such systems becoming another means of societal discrimination in school education. Such systems need to be integrated into the wider public education system as soon as possible.

5. Adult literacy and continuing education programmes need to be revived in order to build the skills needed for engaging with the modern sectors of the economy.
6. The low nutrition and health status of women requires urgent attention. This could be through enhancing the quality and quantity of mid-day meals, ensuring food supplements during pregnancy, by allocating higher budgets subject to careful monitoring.
7. Ensuring women's land rights, given the legal provisioning for the same, needs to be prioritized. Giving land rights becomes meaningless unless adequate credit supply and other inputs are also made accessible to women.
8. For the protection of women, the present set of laws is sufficient. More laws and policies are not needed, but effective implementation is. One way is to generate awareness and build up male responsibility. The panchayat system can play a major role in this process, but the involvement of women in top decision making positions has to be simultaneously increased.

## **1. INTRODUCTION**

**West Bengal** has been one of the fastest growing states in India in the period 1993-94 to 2000-01. The aggregate state domestic product (SDP) in 2000-01 was about Rs 17,869 crores in current prices and the per capita SDP was about Rs 16,072. This was a little lower than the national average of Rs 16,707. It however reflects a compound annual growth rate of 7 percent and a per capita growth rate of 5.4 percent over the period 1993-94 to 2000-01 (WBHDR, 2004), against the national average of 5.99 and GDP per capita of 4.29 per cent per annum over the period 1995-2004.

This study seeks to understand the impact of the contemporary growth processes on gender and caste in West Bengal. Some specific areas of interest are the reasons for the low labour force participation rates of women in the state, despite a rapid expansion of education, and its implications for growth and gender equality. An understanding of the newly emergent forms of gender inequality, in the context of class and caste differentiation is attempted, by looking at the constraints and the positive factors in the participation of women of different castes and classes in the growth processes. The analyses seek to enunciate these factors in regional contexts within the state.

## **2: THE GROWTH CONTEXT**

The above growth occurred in the context of the state's adopting structural adjustment policies. West Bengal developed its new economic policy (NEP) in 1994, as against India's NEP formulated in July 1991. These structural adjustment programmes (SAPs) were based on the International Monetary Fund (IMF) directives. The economic reforms seek to liberalize the economy, eradicating various bureaucratic structures and control purportedly stifling growth. In contrast to the development strategies of the previous decades that stressed socialism based self-reliance, the key thrust has been to secure a greater share of the global market in industry, trade and services through increased productivity. Under the previous five year plans, the state played an interventionist role in industrialization through the public sector, which assumed greater power through licensing and other regulatory mechanisms (Ganguly-Scrase, 2003). The new market oriented state ideology and economic reforms in West Bengal, ruled by a coalition of left parties led by the Communist Party of India (CPI(M)) since 1977 has led to major protest movements due to forced displacement of people in recent times. The present government is now vociferous in its attempt to attract both foreign and Indian transnational corporations into the state, leading to often violent protests, like in Nandigram and Singur in 2006-7.

The major impacts on women under the SAP and liberalisation identified in the literature include reduced employment opportunities in the formal sector, inadequate protection in the labour force and the feminisation of poverty (Arora, 1999; Basu, 1996; CWDS, 2000; Dalal, 1995; Dewan, 1999). The trade liberalization policies are seen to have attempted to integrate women into the global economy, particularly through employment in export processing industries and the expansion of export-processing zones. However, women's job security is threatened by the prohibition on unionization and decentralization through subcontracting (Dalal, 1995). On the one hand, it is likely that the unorganized sector will

grow due to the lack of labour legislation, making it attractive for employers to recruit women. On the other hand, in the agro-processing industry, where women work in large numbers, the import of modern technology in firms that are to be taken over by corporations such as Kellogg's, Pepsi, Nestle, and General Foods will reduce employment in low-skilled jobs (Mathew, 1995). Yet there does not seem to be any prospect of women being offered training and technical skills as education now is premised on user-pay principles, which limits the access of poor women. While Dalal (1995) argued that the present policies encourage displaced rural women workers to migrate to overcrowded urban areas, Basu (1996) suggested that moves toward privatization and a market economy will weaken the already inadequate services for rural women.

Others have argued that the globalization processes of market liberalization and the SAPs may have a contradictory impact on women when the cultural terrain is explored (Ganguli-Scrase, 2003). While new forms of inequality result from economic reforms, there may be other opportunities for greater independence. Thus Moghadam (1999), examining the relationships between market liberalization, women's labour and gender ideology, has argued that women's participation in the global economy and national labour force can serve to interrogate and modify gender relationships and ideologies. Omvedt's (1997) analysis seeks to demonstrate that in the light of democratization of gender relationships within the Indian family, the effects of SAPs on women have not been as much of a burden as its opponents claim. Feldman's (1992) study of women workers in export processing enclaves in Bangladesh shows that women from rural middle-strata families were able to increase their employment opportunities, thus challenging the traditional prohibitions on female mobility shaped by Bengali culture and a variant of Islamic doctrine. As argued and demonstrated by Ganguli-Scrase (2003), class-differentials and cultural-specificity are of paramount importance when considering how economic changes have and do shape gender relations and also peoples' responses.

Given the preponderance of the informal sector in India's economy and the fact that more than 92 percent of women are employed in the informal sector, it becomes important to understand the gendered impacts of the changing nature of markets in a situation of high growth led by SAP and liberalization and the quality of opportunities offered (Kantor, 2002). Kantor has shown that it is important to analyse both women exclusive and women intensive constraints in assessing gender inequality in the informal sector. She has argued that the variation in the relevance of "some women-intensive constraints (i.e., access to productive resources and levels of human capital) ...shows that all gender constraints cannot be generalized across all economic activities. In comparison, women exclusive constraints (occupational segregation, mobility and family responsibilities) are generalisable across economic activities." Kantor points to the strong negative influence of cultural norms on women's economic activities.

Building further on this, this study seeks to explore the interaction of women intensive and women exclusive constraints in analyzing the gendered impact of growth in West-Bengal. Also a factor that can be put in the category 'cultural' but needs unpacking, is the concept of caste, something that is often ignored in the literature and that of the locale. Where at all caste is dealt with, it is subsumed under politico-administrative categories

such as 'General,' 'OBC,' 'SC/ST' and so on. But this is different from caste or *jati* as lived categories, with long histories that contribute to cultural specificities. The other factor of paramount importance is the locales and the development (both social and economic) contexts of the gendered interactions. In understanding the impact of growth processes on gender relationships, work and employment, it is important to situate the factors listed above in localized caste dynamics, within the broader national and sub-national contexts. These and other issues shall be discussed in this study.

### **3: THE STUDY METHODOLOGY**

To understand the impact of growth on gender and caste, the present study selected a high growth and a low growth district in West Bengal. These districts were Burdwan and Malda. The Human Development Index (HDI) ranks of these districts formed an important criterion for the choice of the districts. Two villages were selected in each district in such a way that one village was strongly influenced by urbanisation. The villages were in the same block (Galsi-1 in Burdwan and Gajol in Malda) and also gram panchayat. The villages in Burdwan were Khetura (rural) and Galsi (urban), while in Malda these were located in the Hatinda-Changtor cluster (rural) and Bagsoria (urban) In each village, all the castes and communities were covered instead of just taking the administrative categories such as General/OBC/SC/ST and so on. In each community, at least two women were selected for special purpose in-depth interviews. Focus group discussions (FGDs) were conducted with representative women from each community. Some of these women were also selected for detailed case studies. FGDs were also conducted with the men from each community, Additionally, representative employers were interviewed. Key officials were also met with in each district, block and gram panchayat. The secondary literature, such as the State Human Development Report and the Malda District Human Development Report was referred to in the writing of this report. Methodological details, such as the choice of the district or the details of the women interviewed, FGDs and employers met are given in Appendix 1 to this report.

#### **4: SOCIO-ECONOMIC PROFILE OF THE STATE**

A significant part of the state is more backward economically and less advanced in terms of human development. These include large parts of the six northern districts (Darjeeling, Jalpaiguri, Koch Bihar, Malda, Uttar Dinajpur and Dakshin Dinjapur) the western districts (Purulia, Bankura and Birbhum) and the Sunderbans area of the two 24 Parganas districts in the south of the state (WBHDR, 2004:5). Also, there are many pockets of backwardness even in the advanced districts, including Burdwan. These pockets are predominantly inhabited by ST populations.

Till the early 1980s, West Bengal was a food deficit state, dependent upon the central government for a major part of its supply, to be routed through the public distribution system. For a long time, food production remained stagnant and the state did not fully absorb the gains of the Green Revolution. From the early 1980s, there was a significant spurt in agricultural production and now West Bengal is surplus in food grains. There has been some diversification in cultivation, so that along with jute, West Bengal is a major vegetable producer in the country. Tea plantations, despite the general sickness of the industry, continue to be a major foreign exchange earner and occupy a substantial portion of land in North Bengal.

Taking some obvious Human Development Indicators, West Bengal is a middle ranking state in the country. The inequality in consumption was lower in the state than for all-India and for most other states, in both rural and urban areas (the Gini coefficient for rural consumption expenditure in West Bengal was 0.224 compared to the national average of 0.258 and for urban areas it was 0.328 compared to the national average of 0.341)(WBHDR, 2004:8).

Health indicators suggest a very mixed performance. Infant mortality rates are amongst the lowest in India, child mortality rates are also relatively low and life expectancy is higher than the national average. This seems to have occurred despite the relatively less developed conditions of health infrastructure, since the state has lower ratios of health care centres per population as well as higher ratios of population per hospital bed, than the all-India average. Nutrition indicators are rather poor, with higher incidence of anaemia and iron deficiency especially among women and children, than for India as a whole.

West Bengal is cited as a success story of the Panchayati-Raj led decentralised governance through people's participation, especially that of women. The state-led land reforms programme, beginning in the late 1970s, is one of the most successful in the country. But far less has been achieved in tackling gender disparities and discrimination. Gender discrimination has been an ongoing feature of economic and social processes in West Bengal. While it has declined in some respects in the recent past, it remains significant. Literacy and economic empowerment are two areas, among others, that require more focussed attention (Ghosh, 2004, India Together).

Table 1: Some Demographic Indicators

Indicator		Remarks
Population (2001)	82 million	4 <sup>th</sup> rank in India; 7.8 percent of total population
Area	88752 sq km	2.7 percent of country's area
Population density	904 persons/sq km	Highest in country
Rural Population	72 percent	
SC Rural	28.6 percent	
SC Urban	19.9 percent	
ST Rural	5.8 percent	
ST Urban	1.5 percent	
Muslim	28.6 percent	Largest community amongst minorities
Population below poverty line (1999-2000)	31.85 percent	SC, ST & Muslims together account for more than half the population; three of the poorest groups in state. 84 percent of absolutely poor in rural areas compared to 74 percent in country as whole.
Share in value of country's total industrial output	9.8 percent (1980-81); 5 percent (1997-98)	Services sector grew faster than national average between 1980-81 and 1997-98.
Per capita monthly consumption (1999-2000)	Rs 572, national average Rs 591	
Aggregate literacy (2001)	69 percent; all-India 65 percent	
Pukka Houses	Urban-68 percent (71 percent all-India); Rural 16 percent (29 percent all India)	
Safe Drinking water	82 percent (62 percent all India)	
Electricity (1991)	33 percent households(42 all India)	

Source: WBHDR, 2004.

## 5: LITERACY AND EDUCATION

The literacy rate in West Bengal has always been higher than the all-India average and the state ranks 6<sup>th</sup> among the major states in this regard (WBHDR, 2004:145). However, till the last decade, the improvement in literacy has been relatively slow in the state, especially for women. In the 1980s, the government's efforts through various literacy schemes such as 'total literacy campaigns, 'non-formal education' apart from formal schooling for children to achieve the goal of education for all raised the literacy rate from 48.6 percent in 1981 to 57.7 percent in 1991 to 68.6 percent in 2001. Rural literacy is lower than urban and rural women's literacy remains the lowest.

Table 2: Literacy Rates (%) in West Bengal

	Male	Female
Rural	73.1	53.2
Urban	86.1	75.7
Total	68.6	59.6

Source: Census 2001.

The WBHDR mentions that the largest improvements in literacy between 1991 and 2001 have occurred in the most backward districts, especially amongst women. The table below provides evidence of the changing profile of the literacy rates across districts. Increases in the female literacy rate have been in excess of 20 percent points in Dakshin Dinajpur and Koch Bihar and more than 15 percent points in Jalpaiguri, Murshidabad, Malda, Darjeeling, Nadia and Birbhum. However, a lot remains to be done and certain pockets of illiteracy in particular needs to be addressed (WBHDR 2004:148).

According to the NSS, in 1999-2000, 27 percent households in rural areas and 12 percent of all households in urban areas did not have any literate adult (15 years and above). The proportion of households without any female adult literate was substantially higher, at 51 percent and 31 percent in rural and urban areas of West Bengal respectively. In contrast, the corresponding figures for Kerala were 9 and 10 percent respectively. The literacy status of SC, ST and minority community (Muslims) households is significantly worse than for other households, especially in rural West Bengal. For them, even among the literate population, sizeable proportion (around 17 percent in 1998-99 according to the NFHS-2) was only literate at below primary level.

Even in the urban areas, the literacy situation of SCs and STs is the worst (WBHDR 2004:152-153). However, the absolute levels are not as bad as they are for rural West Bengal, though for a given social category, there are disparities in the educational levels among males and females. The most deprived category – female members of ST households – would require special attention to improve literacy levels. In this case, since remoteness, absence of physical infrastructure and communication facilities are less evident, the required targeted intervention may be simpler to achieve.

**Table 3: Literacy Rates in West Bengal**

District	Aggregate Literacy Rate				Female Literacy Rate		
	Per Capita Income Rank	2001	Rank	% point change over decade	2001	Rank	% point change over decade
Darjeeling	2	72.9	6	14.9	63.9	6	16.1
Jalpaiguri	4	63.6	13	18.5	52.9	12	19.7
Koch Bihar	13	67.2	9	21.4	56.0	10	23.7
Uttar Dinajpur	18	48.6	18	9.3	37.2	17	9.3
Dakshin Dinajpur	12	64.5	11	25.2	55.1	11	27.2
Malda	10	50.7	17	15.1	41.7	16	16.8
Murshidabad	15	55.0	16	16.8	48.3	15	18.7
Birbhum	17	62.2	14	13.6	52.2	13	15.1
Bardhaman	3	71.0	7	9.1	61.9	7	10.4
Kolkata	1	81.3	1	3.7	77.9	1	5.8
Nadia	6	66.6	10	14.1	60.1	8	15.7
N 24 Parganas	11	78.5	2	11.7	72.1	2	14.1
Hugli	5	75.6	4	8.8	67.1	4	10.8
Bankura	7	63.8	12	11.8	49.8	14	13.2
Purulia	16	56.1	15	12.8	37.2	18	13.9
Medinipur	9	75.2	5	5.9	64.6	5	8.0
Haora	8	77.6	3	10.0	70.9	3	13.1
S 24 Parganas	14	70.2	8	15.1	59.7	9	19.1
West Bengal		68.2		11.5	60.2		13.6

Source: WBHDR, 2004:148

There is also some inequality in access to literacy and education across religious groups. The level of illiteracy amongst persons aged 7 years and above in Muslim households (at 46 percent) is uniformly higher as compared to the Hindu households (35 percent). However, Muslims as a group are not more educationally deprived than either STs or SCs, both of which show higher rates of illiteracy in rural West Bengal. Nor is the gender gap among Muslims higher than it is among Hindus, indicating that the general perception that Muslim women are less likely to be educated than their Hindu counterparts is not borne out by the data. In the urban parts of the state, however, the differentials according to religious community are more marked than they are in the rural areas, so Muslims in urban areas tend to be relatively more excluded from literacy/education than Muslims in rural areas. The WBHDR (2004:153) postulates that this could be due to the land reforms (in terms of tenancy registration and redistribution) disproportionately benefiting rural Muslims from landless households, many of whom as a consequence have experienced a general improvement in social conditions including access to education.

## *Gender Gap in Schooling*

The gender gap in schooling and the dropout rates is available from the ASER data.

Table 4: Enrolment and Drop-outs in Schools, West Bengal

	% Children in each age group in different types of schools				% Children in each age group not in school		Total
	Government	Private	Madarsa	EGS	Never Enrolled	Drop Out	
<b>Age : 6-14 ALL</b>	92.2	2.8	0.2	0.4	1.5	2.9	100
<b>Age : 6-10 ALL</b>	94.8	3.3	0.1	0.2	1.0	0.7	100
<b>Age : 11-14 ALL</b>	87.8	2.1	0.3	0.3	2.5	7.0	100
<b>Age : 6-10 BOYS</b>	94.4	3.5	0.1	0.3	1.0	0.7	100
<b>Age : 6-10 GIRLS</b>	95.2	2.9	0.1	0.1	0.9	0.7	100
<b>Age : 11-14 BOYS</b>	88.1	2.0	0.4	0.3	2.3	6.9	100
<b>Age : 11-14 GIRLS</b>	87.4	2.3	0.3	0.2	2.8	7.1	100

**Source:** ASER, 2005, West Bengal

As the above table shows, while girls enrolment is slightly higher than boys at the primary level, what is of significance is the greater rate of dropping out of girls at the secondary level (age group 11-14). This is also the case at the all-India level and discerning the reasons for the same was a special focus in the field. A second interesting finding is the higher number of boys in private schools, especially at the primary level, pointing to an early segregation in terms of access to quality education, or at least the perceptions of it. Finally, the proportion of children, both boys and girls, in madrasas and EGS schools is negligible, belying the stereotype that Muslims prefer madrasa education for their children.

## *The Quality Question*

The ASER gives some very interesting findings on the overall quality of education for children in the age group 7-14 years in rural West Bengal. These are reproduced in Tables 5 and 6 below. Several insights emerge from these tables. First, while there is a common perception that quality of education is better in private schools, this is not necessarily the case, as also evident from other studies like that of the Pratichi Trust for Birbhum district (Pratichi, 2006). Especially at the secondary level, a much higher proportion of private school students do not pick up basic skills of literacy and numeracy as compared to those in government schools (Table 5). However, these private schools are preferred in many places by the upper castes/classes because of their being status symbols and also since they teach “better” English at the primary level, if not imparting education in the English medium instead of the vernacular medium, as in government schools. As has been pointed out in the Pratichi study, the private schools are far more

expensive (Rs 3396 per annum, on the average) than the government schools (Rs 599 per annum) and are out of reach for most.

Table 5: Quality of Education for children in rural West Bengal

<b>Learning</b>				
	% Children who <b>CANNOT</b> read ...		% Children who <b>CANNOT</b> solve numerical written sums of ...	
	Level 1*	Level 2**	Subtraction or Division	Division
<b>Age : 7-14 ALL</b>	22.1	48.5	21.8	51.3
<b>Age : 7-10 ALL</b>	29.5	62.9	29.0	67.5
<b>Age : 11-14 ALL</b>	8.7	22.4	9.0	22.1
<b>Govt : Std II-V</b>	24.8	57.3	24.4	61.6
<b>Pvt : Std II-V</b>	28.2	47.9	35.1	60.5
<b>Govt : Std VI-VIII</b>	1.9	12.8	2.9	12.2
<b>Pvt : Std VI-VIII</b>	2.4	27.6	8.0	41.7

\* Level - 1: Ability to read a small paragraph with short sentences of std 1 level difficulty.  
 \*\*Level - 2: Ability to read a 'story' text with some long sentences of std 2 level difficulty.

Subtraction:  
2 digit subtraction with borrowing.  
 Division:  
3 digit divided by 1 digit.

Table 6: Education for children in West Bengal

<b>Learning curves</b>							Children who <b>CAN</b> read and solve numerical written sums					
Reading							Arithmetic					
% All school children who can read-standardwise							% All school children who can solve written numerical sums - standardwise					
Std	Nothing	Letter	Word	Para-Level I	Story-Level II	Total	Std	Nothing	Number recogn	Subtraction	Division	Total
<b>I</b>	17.2	40.8	24.9	10.3	6.8	100	<b>I</b>	27.2	53.3	12.7	6.9	100
<b>II</b>	4.5	18.9	28.4	34.5	13.7	100	<b>II</b>	11.1	38.4	39.9	10.6	100
<b>III</b>	1.6	8.1	16.5	38.8	35.0	100	<b>III</b>	4.8	21.8	45.9	27.6	100
<b>IV</b>	1.2	3.0	6.6	32.0	57.2	100	<b>IV</b>	2.4	8.4	36.6	52.7	100
<b>V</b>	0.7	1.6	4.9	17.3	75.5	100	<b>V</b>	2.2	7.1	17.0	73.7	100
<b>VI</b>	0.3	0.7	1.8	14.1	83.1	100	<b>VI</b>	0.6	4.1	13.2	82.2	100
<b>VII</b>	0.6	0.2	0.9	9.5	88.8	100	<b>VII</b>	0.4	1.2	6.5	91.8	100
<b>VIII</b>	0.0	0.2	0.4	8.4	91.0	100	<b>VIII</b>	0.0	1.6	8.3	90.1	100
<b>Total</b>	<b>4.3</b>	<b>12.3</b>	<b>13.8</b>	<b>24.6</b>	<b>44.9</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>Total</b>	<b>7.8</b>	<b>21.7</b>	<b>28.0</b>	<b>42.5</b>	<b>100</b>

There is however a sharp improvement in the learning curves from class 5 upwards, with almost 90 per cent of students having literacy and numeracy skills by the time they complete Grade 8 (Table 6). This indicates the importance of compulsory and free education till at least Grade 8, not just primary school, at which stage skills are still fragile. In fact, the low level of educational attainment and the student's sense of failure at the end of primary school is often a cause of dropping out of school or withdrawal from schooling, especially as secondary schools are not always easily accessible. This is also a major cause for parents to invest in private tutors for their children, adding to the expenditure burdens.

Finally, Table 7 shows the existence of considerable regional variations in learning outcomes within the state, with Burdwan in the top 5 districts and Malda in the bottom 5

both in reading and arithmetic outcomes. There is hence a need for special attention to improve the quality of learning outcomes in poor performing districts.

Table 7: Performance in Education of top and bottom five districts

**Performance of top five and bottom five districts in state  
based on % all children Std V**

Reading	% std III to V <b>CANNOT</b> read level-2	Arithmetic	% std III to V <b>CANNOT</b> solve Subtraction
 <b>Top - 5</b>		<b>Top - 5</b>	
Medinipur	18.8	Murshidabad	1.2
Koch Bihar	25.4	Medinipur	8.6
Barddhaman	36.0	Barddhaman	10.7
Uttar Dinajpur	36.4	North 24 Paraganāa	11.3
Bankura	41.0	South 24 Paraganāa	11.9
 <b>Bottom - 5</b>		<b>Bottom - 5</b>	
Murshidabad	97.6	Dakshin Dinajpur*	44.6
Dakshin Dinajpur*	65.1	Bankura	32.4
Maldah	58.7	Uttar Dinajpur	31.4
Hugli	57.1	Hugli	30.4
South 24 Paraganāa	54.9	Maldah	26.1

Before analysing the field situation, it would be relevant to examine some figures relating to overall education from the latest NFHS-3 data.

**Table 8: Education in West Bengal (%)**

Education Level Completed	West Bengal		All-India	
	Women	Men	Women	Men
No education	36.3	22.9	40.6	18.0
<5 years	15.9	16.0	8.0	10.2
5-7 years	17.3	15.8	15.1	16.5
8-9 years	14.9	18.7	14.0	20.6
10-11 years	7.0	10.5	10.4	14.9
12> years	8.6	16.0	12.0	19.7
Total	100.00	100.00	100.00	100.00
Literacy Percentage	58.8	73.9	55.1	78.1

Source: Computed From NFHS-3 pages 61-63.

From Table 8 it can be discerned that in West Bengal,

- There is still a considerable gender gap in the overall literacy levels (15.1 percent women are less literate than men).
- A rough parity exists in the next category; that is, those who have completed less than five years of schooling.
- Interestingly, more women have completed seven years of schooling than men.
- But amongst those who have 8-9 years of schooling, there are more men, pointing once again to the phenomena of girls dropping out for a wide variety of reasons at the secondary level.
- In the next two categories, the gender disparity widens progressively, showing once again a societal gender bias.

But comparisons with the all-India levels show that while the state has made considerable progress at the primary level, it is lagging behind the country when it comes to attainment of education for more than 10 years, both in the case of women and men. The implications for this are discussed in the concluding part of this section.

### **Education: the Field Situation**

Burdwan district (Education Index=0.71) has the distinction of being one of the first in the country to attain hundred percent literacy. Comparatively, the literacy rates are much lower in Malda (Education Index =0.48, the lowest in the state); see table 3 above.

The field study found the school infrastructure, for both boys and girls, in Burdwan's Khetura and Galsi, rather strong. There are both private and public schools and students can easily complete upto their class 12 here. Many students go to Burdwan to study in the colleges for their graduation and some subsequently attend the university too. The area is well connected in terms of transport with the town. Inside Khetura there is a school for the adivasi children, upto the primary level, in the Santal Para. However, the Bompur hamlet has no school and the children have to walk upto 4 kms each way if they wish to attend school.

Bagsorai in Malda is similarly well serviced by the school infrastructure being close to the Block headquarters. There are private and public schools, schools and hostels run by NGOs and missionaries (for Christian children only) in the village. An NGO has recently started running a pre-school facility (see Box 1: The Schools of Bagsorai).

***Box1: The Schools of Bagsorai***

Apart from a Government Primary School, a Government High School (Chandrabati Saha High School), a missionary private school (St. John's), a private High School (Adarshabani), there is a child development centre run by an NGO, Satadal, in Bagsorai. Situated in the heart of the village, the Government Primary School, (Class I –IV), has 142 students (76 girls, 66 boys) enrolled. A villager who was a part time teacher in this school two years ago said that the drop out rate among the girls after class IV is very high. There are 3 teachers all from the Santal Community. One teacher who is on the verge of retirement was absent for the last one month due to her fractured leg. There are 3 classrooms with class II and III sitting together in one room and a deserted toilet in the school. For cooking the midday meal there is a head cook with two assistants. All are tribals. Cooking is under the shade of a tree, making and serving meals during the rains thus difficult. Apart from the infrastructural problem, no other problems or caste prejudices were reported.

When we visited the school we found all the children sitting in one room. The head teacher said that since a bulk of students were absent, the classes had been merged. The two teachers sat outside the classroom and their students got their copies checked by them. But the teachers did not make any correction on their copies. Later when we asked Jayanti, a student of class III, to read from a Bengali newspaper, she could not read a single line. The condition was no better with Smritikana, a class IV student. She could not spell out her friend's name 'Priyanka'; though she could spell her own.

The Child Development Centre run by Satadal (headquarters in Hooghli district), a West Bengal based NGO working for children, opened a year ago. They claimed within this one year they had brought a significant change in the educational scenario of the village. But their claim that all the children of the poor families who cannot have two square meals a day came to the centre is questionable. Later we got to know from other sources in the village that only one child from each poor family was allowed. Atin informed us that the total number of children is 135 among which there are 62 girls and 73 boys. Rupri informed us that when they tried to convince the parents to send their children to the centre, they faced many problems. The parents were afraid that their children might be converted to Christianity and sent abroad. All the members of this centre fought hard and finally succeeded in getting the children to the centre. Now they have the problem of accommodating all the children and are planning to extend it. Mainly students from class I to class IV come here; only one student of class V came. There is no discrimination on religious grounds. The students are trained in singing, dancing, playing guitar and the *tabla*. The centre also provides education to the children. Some children attending other schools are also helped in their studies and homework. The centre provides dresses, shoes, socks, rain coats, tooth brushes and tooth paste, when the children need them. The children are also provided meals once a day. All the faculty members are from neighbouring villages, except the manager who is from the same village (lives just beside the centre) and the accountant who is from Burdwan. The minimum educational requirement of the faculty is Madhyamik (class 10), but from a missionary school.

Villages in the Hatinda-Changtor cluster are not so well serviced. There is a primary school in Saharpur. There are no roads and a bamboo over-bridge across a stream is in a dismal condition. The little children have a tough time attending classes especially during the monsoons.

In Khetura and Galsi (not Bompur) adult literacy campaigns were held in the past though most of the learners cannot recall exactly when. Most of the learners did not retain their

literacy learning in the absence of post literacy and continuing education programmes. Such programmes did not reach the Malda villages chosen for the study.

There are no vocational or technical training facilities in the vicinity of any of the villages in both the districts.

### *Key Findings*

The in-depth interviews, focus group discussions and interviews with key informants revealed a high demand for literacy learning and at least primary education for the children, both boys and girls, even when both the parents are totally illiterate. “It is no use educating girls more than the primary level because ultimately they have the only option of working in the fields. Whatever their educational level, the men too have to work in the fields. So what is the use of getting more education?” says Biti Tudu, a 26 year old Santal agricultural labourer who is illiterate and stays in Bompur, Burdwan.

The study did not find a single child of primary school going age not enrolled in some school or the other. Even in the remote Hatinda cluster, children are enrolled in the schools. There the relatively more affluent parents try to send the children to some school with hostels, run by the NGOs or where the situation permits, they are sent to the wife’s maternal home to study. Whether they attend regularly or what they learn is another matter.

For the upper castes/classes, however, higher education, even for girls, is a must. “My husband and I both decided to provide equal educational facilities to all our three children (two daughters and a son). Then the rest is up to them and how much they want to study. But at least they should complete their graduation. My daughter is doing her BA while my two sons are in class 7 and 4. Sons need to get educated so as to get good jobs and in our community no one will marry an uneducated girl. Nowadays, they ask for at least graduates” says Sujata Chatterjee, 38, Brahmin and a rich householder of Khetura. There are similar cases of elite tribals taking advantage of the reservations to educate their children. Thus Benjamin Hansda, a Santal, of Bagsorai in Malda, who was an MLA in the congress regime in the 1970s, sent his daughter for higher education first to Raigunj and then to study medicine in the North Bengal Medical College in Siliguri.

Amongst the Muslims of Khetura, many girls attend college and University in Burdwan. Those who cannot do so avail of the higher education facilities offered under the Open University system.

In the acquisition of education – enrolment or attending school is not seen as sufficient. Hiring the services of a private tutor who comes home for girls of affluent families or sending the children to the coaching centres run by these “private tutors” is seen as a necessity. Various reasons are cited by parents for this in both the districts but the dominant ones are that 1) in the schools, the teachers don’t teach; 2) We are not literate or educated so we can’t help our children at home and 3) We don’t get the time given the kind of work we do. What is not mentioned is that hiring private tutors is also seen to

enhance the social prestige of the parents. These tutors charge anything between Rs 50 to Rs 200 per student, depending on whether the students study in a group in the teachers' residence or whether the tuitions are given at the pupils' home and the class in which the student is enrolled. In fact this phenomenon of private tutors is now rampant in almost every corner of the State, even in the urban areas. In Khetura or Bagsorai it provides employment to quite a few youth who have done their Masters (Khetura) or BA (Bagsorai).

Thus at least up to the primary level, there is no overt discrimination between boys and girls insofar as school enrolment is concerned. Of course, the girls have to attend to/help their mothers with the domestic chores, including looking after younger siblings.

For the SC/ST and even many of the Muslim girls in both the clusters, the problems begin after they complete the primary level. This is roundabout the age of menarche and social attitudes in the villages still hold that girls of this age should not go out of their homes. Also, as it came up repeatedly in the interviews, a sacred duty of parents is to get their daughters married and if a 'good groom' is found, the child is taken out of school and married off. It is also a fact that the higher a woman is educated, the greater her parents have to pay for her dowry. Finding a suitable match does become a problem. Take the case of Meeta Bagdi:

*Meeta Bagdi (45) lives in Galsi village. She belongs to the Bagdi caste (SC), considered a very low caste in the region. Her husband, Romen (65), who had studied upto class 7, retired from his job in the irrigation department in Durgapur in 2002. She is illiterate. She says, "I got married when I was about 12 years old. My father and father-in-law were friends and they arranged the match. I was born and brought up in Shikarpur village, about 7 kms from Galsi. I have two brothers and a sister. My sister and I are both illiterate. One of my brothers is class 2 pass and the other class 10. But to keep the family tradition of marrying our girls young before they lost their virginity, my father married us off without bothering about our education. Our brothers were given ample scope to exercise their decisions about how much they wanted to study. My mother was illiterate and my father passed class 8. Amongst my husband's siblings, my husband and his elder brother are both class 7 pass. My husband did not want to marry an uneducated girl but since his father and my father were friends he had to agree. I have only one son and two daughters. I wanted my son to study whatever he wanted to and as long as he liked. But unfortunately he gave up his studies after the primary level. My daughters passed class 7 and 4. The younger one was very meritorious but her studies had to be terminated. This was because of my elder daughter. She was not very good in her studies and when her father wanted to get her married I did not object. What we did not know was that she was going to elope even after her marriage was fixed. She had not given us any hints about her affair. When she eloped, I was clueless as to what to do as all the arrangements had been made. To save face, my husband gave the prospective groom our younger daughter." Meeta adds that had her husband been an agricultural labourer like other Bagdis of the village, it might not have been possible for them to educate their children. She adds, "Education enables a girl to understand many things which she would not if she were uneducated like me. As least she would not have to face the extra insults that*

*are heaped on her for being uneducated. But poverty rules out getting education. The dullness of the child and the lack of awareness of the parents too contribute to this”.*

But it is not that the girls do not protest, as is evident from the example of Meera and Mala, twins of Manjula Roy:

*Manjula Roy, 38, a Polley (SC) woman of Hatferaj village in Gajol Block is very proud of her 18 year old twin daughters, Meera and Mala, as they were the first girls to pass the Madhyamik (class 10) exams from their village. The twins are now in class 11; in one of the best schools in the area, the Silchan High School. A private tutor comes to their residence to give them tuitions, as it is considered unsafe for the twins to go outside for the same. Manjula wants the twins to become graduates (BA). She feels that giving a higher education to girls might increase their dowry. But both she and her husband want to make the daughters self dependent so that in future the girls don't blame their parents.*

*The twins are very keen students. When they completed their Madhyamik, their father wanted to get them married. The twins protested as they wanted to continue their studies. So they went on a hunger strike for a week, making their father relent. Meera is interested in studying History and Mala English in the future. Both try to attend every class rather than stay at home. They help their mother with domestic chores like cooking, preparing fodder for the cattle, cleaning and washing. Their two milch cows, yielding about 2 litres of milk a day that is consumed by the men of the family, need tending too. The twins don't go to the market, even to choose their own clothes but accept whatever their father or brothers bring them. `They are big girls and big girls don't go to the market.'*

*Manjula has two sons, Ashok (23) and Sumon (15). Ashok studied till class 12 and Sumon is in class 10. Manjula feels that boys have a greater scope of getting jobs if they pursue a vocational course than just a general line. Her elder son got trained as an LIC agent and is doing well. The younger, very good in studies, usually standing first or second in the class, wants to become a doctor someday.*

Remoteness and the lack of secondary school infrastructure is a major problem in villages in the Hatinda cluster. Attending secondary school 8-10 km away is just not possible for every child, especially in the absence of roads and a transport infrastructure. It is not within the reach of every poor agricultural labourer to send their children to a boarding school.

Poverty and the lack of finances is a very often cited reason for withdrawing children from secondary school, including boys. However, when it comes to making a choice between sons' and daughters' continuity, the axe usually falls on the latter. The general reason cited is that in any case “she is a guest here and will have to go away to her own home while the boys will stay with us.” But this can be couched in politically correct language like the girl was not good in studies and wanted to drop out herself. We did interview some such girls and it emerged that they had to bow to their parental wishes. Another reason often cited by parents is that after a few years, “I found my child did not

even know how to write her /his name properly. They teach nothing in the school. So I withdrew my child.” However, corporal punishment was not cited as a reason for withdrawal in any instance.

Education is seen as a functional necessity for some and not too much is wanted. “Higher education is meaningless to us because our sons have to look after our land. It is enough that they can now deal with the Panchayat and other officials,” said Monika Soren, 35, of Bagsorai. Monica’s two sons (aged 22 and 20) dropped out after failing in the Madhyamik (class 10) exams.

In general, secondary or post secondary education is linked to the notion of getting jobs, more so in the government sector. We came across male MAs who would not mind working as a peon or a sweeper in some bank or government office. For the women, the first preference in terms of jobs is that of a teacher. However, job or no job, her homemaking duties remain a priority. In Khetura, for instance, in many Muslim families, girls who want to go for higher studies are told by their parents “Do you want to become another Rahima?”

*“Look at Rahima. She has done two MAs yet finding a job was such a problem. Now she has just managed to get a para-teachers job. She is almost 30 and still unmarried. Who will marry her now? Who wants to marry such a qualified girl? That is why she is so frustrated and does not talk to anyone in the village nor go to anyone’s house. And look at Asghar. He too has done a MA but though 26, he is yet to find a job. At least his marriage will not be a problem. But what will he do the rest of his life? They don’t have that much land and who cares for agriculturists these days. Anyway, he can’t do agriculture as he doesn’t know anything about it. And he can’t look after his father’s business in paddy as he can’t do that kind of work: it’s too laborious. MAs can’t lift bags of paddy on their heads,” says Abdul Mian, 50, discussing the condition of the village educated youth.”*

Overall, there is a curious and astonishing continuity in the attitudes towards higher education for girls. Education for them is seen as a necessity to “make them vendible” in the marriage market<sup>1</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> Going back in time, in the 1870s, whether in practice or not, a section of the educated urban elite of Bengal recognized the good effects of female education. The demand for educated wives was on the increase, as a contemporary writer pointed out: “The educated young men want to get educated girls as their wives. Why will they not? If you educate your boys, you must educate your girls as well. Soon it will be difficult to get bridegrooms for girls of upper and middle class Hindu families, unless these girls are given some education. These days the relatives of girls look for college-going bridegrooms and the college-going bridegrooms are looking for school-going brides. A marriage between an educated man and an illiterate girl cannot be a happy one, discord and disagreement will naturally be the result of such a marriage.” (Jnaankur, 1875). As a result of this value change, it was becoming increasingly difficult to get an educated and well-placed bridegroom for an unlettered girl. Conservative Hindus, too, were, therefore, constrained to give some education to their daughters. A contemporary author, Radharani Lahiri observed that men and women had distinctly different natures and were destined to play different roles. She therefore suggested: “Of all the subjects that women might learn, housework is the most important. Whatever subjects a women may learn, whatever knowledge she may acquire, she cannot claim any reputation unless she is proficient in housework. She must also learn childcare, because nothing is more important to her than

The overall standards of education are indeed very low. This is especially true in the tribal areas. This fits in with the secondary data reported above. We found many cases where class five students were unable to read the vernacular newspaper headlines and explain the meaning. Even amongst the non-tribal students, the quality was poor, in terms of writing or numeracy skills.

### *Summary of Field Level Findings*

In Table 9 we try to summarise the main findings regarding girls/women's education from the field. We present the level to which it is acceptable to educate girls and the reasons for the same.

The following issues emerge strongly:

- 1) It is only amongst the economically richer STs (some of whom are Christians), that there is no overt discrimination in terms of higher education preferences and choices between girls and boys: we were told that both could study as much as they wanted to, depending on their capabilities. Three things seemed important here: 1) the financial status of the household; 2) the availing of reservations and other facilities given to STs and 3) the fact that among the STs, especially the Santals, there is no dowry. Often a bride price is paid, but the amount is not high.
- 2) Amongst the poorer STs, though there is a general awareness on the need for education, including higher education; lack of finances, remoteness and other supply side factors play a negative role. We could not detect any overt discrimination in terms of stated parental preference for education of girls but the linkages between education and economic and social empowerment were not clearly seen by them.
- 3) For the upper classes of the upper castes, education of women is seen as necessary to get them married. Even higher education (BA/MA) is encouraged like in Burdwan amongst the Brahmins and the Aguris as it is easier finding a suitable groom. However, even in co-ed situations, like in the college or the university, strict watch is kept on the "morals" of the girl so that she "does not elope with someone" or "go astray", as inter-caste or inter-religious marriages are strongly discouraged, even within the same class as they lower the "prestige" and "status" of the girl's family. Thus girls are not allowed to take up subjects like Geography for their BA/MA as it involves going for field work with boys.
- 4) By and large, the first priority is marriage and puberty often means drawing the girl out of school, exceptions and resistances notwithstanding. This is true of the General, OBC, SCs in both the regions, though poor financial status is often attributed as a cause.
- 5) Amongst the Muslims, especially in Burdwan, girls are gradually going in for higher education, sometimes even when the financial condition of the household

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this." (Lahiri, 1875) Even today the dominant attitude remains this. It seems ironical that in a century and a quarter, the attitude has spread from the confines of the Bhadrolok Kolkata to the remote villages like Bagsorai and Hatinda.

- is not very good. But by and large, the premium still is on educating boys, and the most important milestone for girls is to get married, preferably just after puberty.
- 6) Primary education is seen as a must by all classes and castes.

Table 9: Women’s Education: Findings from the field

Category	Rich		Middle		Lower Middle		Poor	
	Burdwan	Malda	Burdwan	Malda	Burdwan	Malda	Burdwan	Malda
<b>General</b>	Higher education (BA) necessary for marriage; Choice of subjects “safe” that is does not involve fieldwork, science technology not important	Primary, at the most secondary. The girl in any case belongs to “someone” else’s home, apprehension that ‘overeducating’ might increase the dowry, finding a groom will be problematic or the girl might run off with someone.	At least Class 12; but priority to boys education, girls education necessary for girls marriage	At least primary, higher level depending on finances, boys a priority, girls education linked to marriage	At least primary, higher level depending on finances, boys a priority, education linked to marriage	At least primary, higher level depending on finances, boys a priority, education linked to marriage	At least primary, higher level depending on finances, boys a priority, girls education linked to marriage	At least primary, higher level depending on finances, boys a priority, girls education linked to marriage
<b>OBC</b>	At least secondary, depending on financial situation, girls marriage a priority	Same as above	At least primary, higher level depending on finances, boys a priority, girls education linked to marriage	At least primary, higher level depending on finances, boys a priority, girls education linked to marriage.	At least primary, higher level depending on finances, boys a priority, girls education linked to marriage.	At least primary, higher level depending on finances, boys a priority, girls education linked to marriage.	At least primary, higher level depending on finances, boys a priority, girls education linked to marriage.	At least primary, higher level depending on finances, boys a priority, girls education linked to marriage.
<b>SC</b>	Primary at most secondary; more importance to boys education and girls marriage	Secondary but boys remain a priority and the other reasons cited above hold	At least primary, higher level depending on finances, boys a priority, no connection seen between education and incomes or empowerment	At least primary, higher level depending on finances, boys a priority, girls education linked to marriage.	At least primary, higher level depending on finances, boys a priority, girls education linked to marriage.	At least primary, higher level depending on finances, boys a priority, girls education linked to marriage.	At least primary, higher level depending on finances, boys a priority, no connection seen between education and incomes or empowerment	At least primary, higher level depending on finances, boys a priority, no connection seen between education and incomes or empowerment

<b>ST</b>	Equal priority to boys and girls, target primary education at least.	At least primary, even in the remote cluster. Equal preference for boys and girls. Amongst Christians, higher education (BA/MA, medicine) not a problem. Marriage not a priority over education.	At least primary, even in the remote cluster.  Equal preference for boys and girls.	At least primary, even in the remote cluster. Equal preference for boys and girls.	At least primary, even in the remote cluster. Equal preference for boys and girls.	At least primary, even in the remote cluster. Equal preference for boys and girls.	At least primary, higher level depending on finances, boys and girls equally prioritised, no connection seen between education and incomes or empowerment	At least primary, higher level depending on finances, boys a priority, no connection seen between education and incomes or empowerment
<b>Muslim</b>	At least class 12 but some doing BA/MA financial reasons cited, marriage and homemaking prioritised.	Cloistered women, at the most primary.	Cloistered women, at the most primary.	Cloistered women, at the most primary.	Cloistered women, at the most primary.	Cloistered women, at the most primary.	Cloistered women, at the most primary.	Cloistered women, at the most primary.

### Summing up

Strong gender biases exist in the overall education system in West Bengal. By and large, in the rural areas, the advances in overall literacy status notwithstanding, marriage remains a strong priority, leading to girls being pulled out of school at the secondary level. It is only in the urban areas like Kolkata or Siliguri that more women go for higher education, but on the whole, the percentage of women who have got more than 12 years of education is far lower than the national average.

Apart from questions of quality, numerous studies (ASER, 2005, Pratiche 2002) have pointed out the poor infrastructure and inadequate equipment in schools, sporadic and irregular attendance of some teachers; lack of accountability of teachers and inadequate school inspection. Indeed, it has been mentioned that the District Inspectorate has such a huge task that it is impossible for it to meet its responsibilities adequately. There are, on an average, 90 schools per sub-inspector (WBHDR, 2004:158). These sub-inspectors are responsible for a large number of other administrative tasks, such as enforcing service and leave rules of teachers. It might be necessary to restructure the organisational set up and administration of schools, to make them amenable to local needs and better delivery.

A clear decline in adult literacy and education provisioning was noticed in the field. We were surprised for instance in Burdwan to find the number of illiterates (71 percent aggregate in 2001) in a district that was declared 100 percent literate not so long ago. Clearly, in the absence of post-literacy and continuing education programmes, literacy

retention has been weak. There is a need to revive adult literacy and continuing education programmes on a priority basis.

There is a need to increase the financial allocations for the education sector. Public expenditure on education grew faster than the SDP during the 1980s till the early 1990s and slowed down thereafter. Consequently, education expenditure as a proportion of SDP increased from about 3 percent in the early 1980s to 4.8 percent in the early 1990s and was around 3.5 percent in the late 1990s. More than 90 percent of the total public expenditure on education is spent through the Education Department. The rest is spent through Social Welfare, Tribal Welfare and the Rural Development Departments.

A very small proportion of the education department's expenditure (less than 1 percent) is spent on capital formation. The plan expenditure of the education department as a percentage of the total plan expenditure of the West Bengal government has remained constant at around 7 to 8 percent during the years 1980-81 to 1993-94 and declined substantially in recent years. Salaries have been the largest single element of the expenditure on elementary education, accounting for about 90 percent of the total during the triennium ending 1999-2000. The next most important items are textbook printing and school construction and repairs, each of which accounted for about 2.1 percent of the expenditure. For mid-day meals, the expenditure incurred was about 1.5 percent. Teachers training got only 0.4 percent and inspection 1.6 percent (WBHDR, 2004:159).

The need for greater public expenditure on education cannot be stressed enough, especially on capital formation, better books, teacher training and inspection. Like in Kerala, education at the primary level could be made the responsibility of the Panchayati Raj Institutions. With the Panchayats in control, the chances of better utilisation of scarce resources would be higher.

As such there is a need to revamp the entire organisational and administrative set up of the educational system. At the post-secondary level, there is a need to offer a large number of vocational courses to develop skills required in the 'modern' sectors of the economy, instead of BAs and MAs if the needs of a growth oriented economy have to be met, so that the growth is inclusive and caters to the needs of all. To break the current attitudes towards girls and women's education, mass campaigns and programmes are needed urgently. The Panchayat Institutions could play a vital role in such initiatives.

## **6: Employment and Work Force Participation**

### ***Employment Trends***

Employment is one of the most significant issues in terms of the living conditions of the people in West Bengal today. "Quite simply, there are not enough jobs for all the people who are willing or forced to work. The rate of employment generation in terms of aggregate main work has been lower than the rate of expansion of the population, and substantially lower than the rate of income growth. As a result, the pattern of job creation

has shifted towards more casual, marginal, part-time and insecure contracts or self-employment.” (WBHDR, 2004: 87).

It would be useful to situate the phenomenon in the national context. According to the WBHDR (loc cit) West Bengal’s experience has been similar to the rest of the country, although slightly better than the all-India average. All over India, since the early 1980s, employment generation has been dismal, with sharp and even startling decreases in the rate of employment generation in both rural and urban areas. For the country as a whole, the collapse in rural employment has been the most marked, with all forms of rural employment (principal as well as subsidiary activities) increasing by less than 0.6 percent per annum during 1993-94 to 1999-2000, that is around one third the rate of growth of the rural population. Most of this poor employment generation was because of the decline in absolute employment in agriculture for India as a whole; non-agricultural employment in the rural areas did not increase fast enough to compensate for this decline. Even in urban areas, aggregate employment grew less than before, although the deceleration was less marked than for rural areas.

In West Bengal, much as in broad all-India trends, employment growth lagged behind output growth. The macroeconomic forces that contributed to the slowdown in employment elsewhere in the country, such as reduced public investment and expenditure on public services, effects of import competition on manufacturing activity, and inadequate flows of bank credit to small producers in all sectors were also operational in West Bengal. However, unlike most of rural India, rural West Bengal did not experience an absolute decline in agricultural employment, which continued to grow albeit at a slower rate (WBHDR, 2000:91).

Table 10 indicates the change in work participation rates between the 1991 and 2001 Census of India<sup>2</sup>.

**Table 10: Employment in West Bengal, 1991-2001(As percent of total population)**

	Rural		Urban	
	1991	2001	1991	2001
Male main workers	51.18	46.00	49.34	50.61
Male marginal workers	0.91	8.33	0.31	3.47
Male non-workers	47.91	45.70	50.36	45.93
Female main workers	8.74	8.87	5.79	8.82
Female marginal workers	4.33	11.83	0.41	2.31
Female non-workers	86.93	79.30	93.79	88.87

**Source:** Census of India, 2001, as cited in WBHDR, 2004: 90)

<sup>2</sup> The Census defines main workers as those whose main activity was participation in economically productive work for 183 days or more in the previous year. Marginal workers are those whose main activity was participation in economically productive work for less than 183 days. While this is a measure of underemployment, obviously it would be an underestimate, since even those with more than 183 days of work could be underemployed

The ratio of main workers to the total male population in rural areas fell quite significantly over the decade. Some of this was because many of them were in education, especially those in the 15-19 years age group. But that is not enough to explain the decline; the inadequacy of productive employment opportunities could be a main factor behind this. The shift from main work to marginal work among rural men suggests that fewer days of employment are generally available and that more secure forms of employment are being replaced by less secure forms. In the urban context too, while the proportion of main workers has sustained, shrinking job opportunities has led the additional labour force to manage with part-time work as marginal workers.

As is evident from the table above, West Bengal has among the lowest recorded rates of female work participation in the country (see Table 12 for inter-state variations). Low participation rates for women have typically been seen as evidence of gender discrimination, not only because they can reflect a resistance to women working outside the home, but more significantly they may reflect under-reporting due to social invisibility and lack of recognition of women's unpaid work. Accordingly, "this has been a problem across India, and especially in northern and eastern parts of the country. However, the difference is that unlike the rest of the country, female work participation rates in West Bengal have been increasing in the recent past according to the Census, both for main and marginal workers. It is not clear how much this is due to better recognition and enumeration of women's work, and how much was actually the real trend. Even in this case, however, by far the more significant increase was in terms of marginal work, that is less than 183 days per year"<sup>3</sup> (WBHDR, 2004:91).

The table below (Table 11) indicates the changes in terms of main occupation, between 1991 and 2001, for men and women separately. The most significant feature in both cases is the relative decline in agricultural work. For male workers, the big shift has been in terms of the decline in the share of cultivators (who have also declined in terms of absolute numbers). This may reflect the increase in the share of landless households, which is reported by the NSS, whereby fewer rural men report themselves as mainly working on their own household plots. By contrast, the proportion of male agricultural labourers has remained broadly stable at around 23 percent. "Other workers" have increased commensurately.<sup>4</sup> This suggests that those who have stopped cultivating have

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<sup>3</sup> It should be noted that the Census definitions and coverage of "economically productive work" are still rather restricted and tend to leave out a range of household related economic activity. The WBHDR postulates that this is one of the reasons why women's work participation as indicated by the Census is so low in West Bengal. The coverage by the NSS is slightly better in this regard but still does not capture the full extent of women's economic contribution in the state (WBHDR, 2004: 91, footnote). This explanation is not entirely convincing as the definition in the Census is for the entire country, so there is the possibility of under-capturing across the nation as a whole and not just West Bengal. Given this, it remains a fact that WB's FLFPR is low, compared to other states.

<sup>4</sup> According to the Census other workers is a residual category: 'All workers, i.e., those who have been engaged in some economic activity during the last one year, but are not cultivators or agricultural labourers or in Household Industry, are 'Other Workers(OW)'. The type of workers that come under this category of 'OW' include all government servants, municipal employees, teachers, factory workers, plantation workers, those engaged in trade, commerce, business, transport banking, mining, construction, political or social work, priests, entertainment artists, etc. In effect, all those workers other than cultivators or agricultural labourers or household industry workers are 'Other Workers'.

not become agricultural labourers; rather they have become self-employed people or engaged in other forms of work. In the field, evidence was found of a plethora of activities falling in this category, especially for males, including petty trade in paddy and other agro-products, construction work and carpentry or just pulling rickshaws.

**Table 11: Occupation of Main workers according to the Census (as percent of total main workers)**

Occupations	Males		Females	
	1991	2001	1991	2001
Cultivators	30.2	20.8	16.2	13.4
Ag. Labourers	22.7	22.6	37.9	32.4
Household Industry	2.8	3.9	11.3	18.0
Other workers	44.3	52.7	34.7	36.2

Source: WBHDR, 2004

For women workers in West Bengal, the share of cultivators and agricultural labourers has declined. In this case, the importance of “household industry” has gone up quite sharply<sup>5</sup>. This, says the WBHDR, is a strong process in the rural areas of the state – West Bengal currently shows one of the highest rates of employment diversification out of agriculture in the whole of India. Evidence was found in the field of women engaging in embroidery (Muslim women) or making jute mats, rearing poultry, goats, pigs and so on. These will be further discussed below.

### ***Rural Employment***

The patterns described above relate to the number of workers in terms of patterns of work over the year. But in highly seasonal economies, such as those in rural West Bengal in particular, this may not be adequate to capture the actual availability of work. Analysing the NSS data by both usual status and daily status, the WBHDR says that the trends are somewhat different from those observed using only the Census data (p. 93-94).<sup>6</sup>

<sup>5</sup> According to the Census, ‘Household Industry relates to production, processing, servicing, repairing or making and selling (but not merely selling) of goods. It does not include professions such as a Pleader, Doctor, Musician, Dancer, Waterman, Astrologer, Dhobi, Barber, etc., or merely trade or business, even if such professions, trade or services are run at home by members of the household. Some of the typical industries that can be conducted on a household industry basis are: Foodstuffs : such as production of flour, milking or dehusking of paddy, grinding of herbs, production of pickles, preservation of meat etc. Beverages: such as manufacture of country liquor, ice cream, soda water etc., Tobacco Products : such as bidi, cigars, Textile cotton, Jute, Wool or Silk, Manufacture of Wood and Wood Products, Paper and Paper Products, Leather and Leather Products, Petroleum and Coal Products : such as making foot wear from torn tyres and other rubber footwear, Chemical and Chemical Products :such as manufacture of toys, paints, colours, matches, fireworks, perfumes, ink etc., Service and Repairing of Transport Equipments : such as cycle, rickshaw, boat or animal driven carts etc.’

<sup>6</sup> The NSS has three ways of capturing employment.

1. The usual status activity, relating to what the person did in the course of the year;
2. The weekly status, which counts a person as employed if she/he was engaged in any economic activity for at least one hour on any day of the week preceding the survey;
3. Daily status, whereby a person is considered employed if a person has worked for four hours or more during the day preceding the survey.

In the 1980s and early 1990s, the positive changes in the countryside brought about by land reforms and increased agricultural output had their impact on generating more rural employment. However, the more recent period since the mid 1990s – which is when the broader macroeconomic processes such as economic liberalization and reduced per-capita government expenditure had their effects across the whole of India – was marked by severe negative effects on employment generation in rural West Bengal. The FLFPR has gone up somewhat but not so much due to gender equality as due to poverty and shrinking male employment opportunities.

**Table 12: Labour Force Participation Rates Across the States**

States	1991						2001					
	Rural			Urban			Rural			Urban		
	Male	Female	Total									
Andhra Pradesh	57.9	42.5	50.3	48.9	11.9	30.8	58.3	43.3	50.9	50.8	13.2	32.3
Assam	49.3	23.3	36.7	50.5	7.5	30.9	49.4	22.1	36.2	52.9	10.6	33.2
Bihar	48.4	12.6	31.3	41.3	4.9	24.5	48	20.2	34.7	41.7	7	25.6
Gujarat	54.9	35.6	45.5	51.1	7.2	30.2	55.5	38.5	47.2	53.9	9.4	33.1
Haryana	48.5	12.6	31.9	48.5	5.1	28.3	50.7	33.9	42.9	49.2	10.6	31.5
Karnataka	56	36.6	46.4	49.8	12.9	32	58.1	39.9	49.1	53.8	16.4	35.7
Kerala	47.9	16.9	32.1	46.8	13	29.6	50.1	16	32.5	50.6	13.6	31.6
Maharashtra	53.2	46	49.7	50.6	11.4	32.3	53.9	43.6	48.9	52.4	12.6	33.8
Madhya Pradesh	53.3	36.1	45.1	46.6	9.7	29.3	53	40.7	47.1	47.4	12	30.6
Orissa	54.7	22.6	38.7	48.4	8.1	29.7	53.2	27.1	40.2	49.1	10	30.6
Punjab	55	4.4	31.2	52.3	4.5	30.1	53.9	23.4	39.5	53.1	10.4	33.5
Rajasthan	50.1	33.3	42	46.6	7.2	28.2	50.7	40.6	45.9	47.4	9.5	29.6
Uttar Pradesh	50.6	12.9	33	46.2	4.7	26.9	47.4	19	33.9	44.6	6.8	26.9
Tamil Nadu	58.3	38.5	48.5	52.8	13.1	33.3	59.1	41.4	50.3	55.8	18.9	37.5
West Bengal	52.1	13.1	33.2	49.6	6.2	29.6	54.1	20.9	37.9	53.7	11.6	33.9

Source: Census, 2001

Historically, West Bengal's FLFPR has been very low compared to other states in the country (Mukherjee, 1995). One major reason for the low work participation rates oft cited in the literature relates to the known imperfections inherent in the censuses and other large scale surveys relating to women's work.<sup>7</sup> However, such biases alone do not

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The differences between the NSS categories are not the same as the differences in the Census definitions of main and marginal workers, which are differentiated in terms of the number of days worked over the year. Rather the usual status is related to the stock of available workers and the current weekly or daily status indicates the flow of jobs available in the economy.

<sup>7</sup> For some of these problems, see Nata Duvuury, "Women in Labour Force: A Discussion of Conceptual and Operational Biases with reference to Recent Indian Estimates," paper presented at the National Workshop on Visibility of Women in Statistics and Indicators, SNDT University, Bombay, 1989 and Devaki Jain and Nirmala Bannerjee eds Tyranny of the Household: Investigative Essays on Women's Work, Part Four (New Delhi, 1985).

explain the relatively low participation of women in the workforce in West Bengal. The explanations in the literature mention several possibilities including the nature of the production processes, especially paddy that could have led to the invisibilisation of women's contribution, the nature of the village economy and now the mechanisation of the processing of paddy to rice. Another reason that finds mention are the value systems: "Regional value systems play a very important role in the domain of women's work anywhere, especially in an underdeveloped economy with a pervasive rural milieu. In the Bengali context popular perception of status tended to be and still tends to be, negatively associated with 'visible' work participation by women, particularly in orthodox rural activity. Orthodox mores denigrated exposure to and contact with non-family males and even certain category of male relatives. Socio-cultural norms therefore discouraged many types of open work participation on the part of women and produced strong motivation – on the part of both sexes – to restrict women's economic activities to household industries as far as possible. As Boserup<sup>8</sup> remarked, the advantages of women's employment in home industries is emphasised not only in Bengal and other parts of India but also in many developing countries of Africa and Latin America." (Mukherjee, 1995: 234-235). However, what seems peculiar to Bengal is the process of being considered a "Bhadrolok" (gentlefolk), its associations with caste and the consideration of paid casual manual work, especially for women as something that is inimical to the process of Bhadrolokisation. This was very much the situation in the field too.

Historically, low literacy rates might have contributed to the low work participation rates. While the general literacy figures have improved over time, the quality and type of education still has an important bearing on workforce participation, both for males and females. As such, education has traditionally been seen as the forte of the "Bhadrolok." Today, despite its universalization in the sense of its spread to all castes and classes, its association with the processes of "bhadrolokization" remains. An oft heard remark in rural Bengal is "*Lekha pora shikhey bhadrolok hobe*" (Education will make you a bhadrolok). The "Bhadrolok" was learned (no matter what the quality or the uses to which it was put) and was identified with a dissociation from manual work of any kind, including in agriculture. Today, acquisition of education is linked with jobs (*chakri*), of a non-manual kind as distinct from *majuri* (wage labour). For women it means a withdrawal from the labour force once the men around them get some education and a job, and step towards 'bhadralokization.' And with some education for them, especially if it be a bit higher from the rest of the village, the question of working as a labourer does not arise.

Most of the traditional livelihoods of Bengal called for participation of women. Thus apart from women engaged in rice processing or yarn spinning, keen observers like Hunter or O' Malley would note that 'Bauri females arrange the betel leaves into bundles before they are taken into market...Kumhar women assist in preparation of earthen pots...Malakar females prepare artificial flowers while Goala and Myra females share to a large extent in the individual pursuits of their caste ... Namasudra and Sheikh women help in gathering and husbanding paddy, among Jaliyas the man catches fish while the woman takes them to the market and sells them.'" (Mukherjee, 1995). Today most of

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<sup>8</sup> Ester Boserup, *Women's Role in Economic Development*, London 1970, p.115.

these traditional occupations have died out due to the processes of growth and modernisation in most places. While the dying out of the traditional occupations has contributed to the reduction of working opportunities for women, the growth of household industries, like rearing livestock or embroidery or even making cow-pat cakes has generated some work.

Furthermore, there were taboos on women of particular castes and ethnic groups taking up certain occupations. Thus Muslim and Santal women will not work in others homes as domestic help. Nor will the Brahmins, unless driven by destitution. Even then, they will not work in the homes of lower caste people or Muslims and generally not within the same village. The Bauris will not be employed as domestic help by upper castes or upper class Muslims. This situation prevails even today in the multi-caste villages of South Bengal.

Income generating activities pursued by women in Bengal can be classified into three main types:

- a) those which were followed by women independently, without reference to the occupations of their male relatives (eg rice husking, fuel gathering, domestic service)
- b) those that were subsidiary to the family occupation of the chief earner/head of the household (eg work connected with textiles and pottery and trade connected with agriculture, fishing, dairy farming and poultry rearing ) and
- c) those in which men and women generally worked together, participation being on an almost equal footing (eg mining, plantation labour, basket weaving, and sometimes work in agriculture).

Female participation rates may be appreciably higher in localities with proportionately large populations of SCs and STs with their distinctive mores and manners of living, where the entire village comprises of SC & ST and not necessarily in multi-caste heterogeneous populations or where the landowners are of upper caste/Muslims. Even in villages where there are only STs and SCs, the women will not work across ethnic lines as domestic help, though they might work as agricultural labour. We found this to be the case even today, something that was recorded as early as 1888 : “Women working as day labourers will almost invariably found to [belong to] Kols, Dhangars and ...Sontals. No women of ordinary cultivator classes in Bengal would work in the fields except under pressure of dire necessity.” [Report on the Conditions of the Lower Classes of People in Bengal (Dufferin Enquiry Report), Calcutta, 1888 para 7].

In general then, though the female work force participation rates have shown some increase over time, both in rural and urban areas, it is much lower than that of men. The little increase in the rural female labour force participation rates (RFLFPR) is perhaps mainly due to their participation in irregular or marginal work, such as making natural fibre mats, petty trade, rearing livestock, brewing country liquor and embroidery. In the case of the poor, especially from the SC/ST communities, the gender gap is narrower. This is illustrated with the data from Malda district (see table below):

**Table 13: Gender Differentials in Labour Force Participation Rates**

Social Category	MLFPR (%)	FLFPR (%)	Gender Gap (% points)
General	78.03	21.68	56.35
SC	66.43	33.57	32.86
ST	55.84	44.15	11.69

Source: DHDR, Malda, 2007:152.

The economic pressure to participate in paid work is higher amongst women in SC/ST communities, leading to higher participation rates. For the men in these communities, the labour force participation rates are lower than the aggregate as being poor and rural they have less access to the work opportunities available to the urban population. Taken together, the gender gap in labour force participation is lower for the SC/ST communities (DHDR, Malda, 2007:152).

In sum then, there is an economic and social explanation for the low female workforce participation. This relates to the nature of the growth processes and their impact on the rural economy. The nature of the growth processes has decimated the traditional avenues of the 'visible' workforce participation by women, albeit of the lower castes/classes, and the new jobs do not allow participation of women or reduce such participation. The increase since 1991 has been primarily due to the growth of household industry. The increased prosperity that has come about due to land reforms and irrigation development that has enhanced agricultural productivity (double and triple cropping) and also increases in literacy has led to an enhancement of the processes of Bhadrolokisation, cloistering women and further withdrawing them from the labour force. This was evident in both the districts.

### **Women and Work: The Field Situation**

*"I got married when I was 17", says Saroma Chatterjee of Khetura village. "My father had arranged my marriage with someone in my childhood. As I was growing up, their financial condition weakened. So my father arranged my marriage to a service holder to secure my future. But my husband (the very man with whom the marriage was arranged previously) and I met at a wedding reception, fell in love and decided to get married against my father's wishes. Saroma, 38, is a Brahmin and a graduate (BA). Her husband inherited a hardware store in the Galsi market nearby and they have 2 acres of arable paddy land. She has two daughters and a son, all of them students. She does not discriminate between the children in terms of education: the eldest daughter, 20, is doing her BA degree. Talking of joining the workforce, she says, "I wanted to do a job, but could not as I succumbed to my in-laws' pressure not to take up any. So I wanted to educate my daughters so that they can get good jobs. Before I got married, I wanted to become a nurse, but my father said that girls from respectable families do not become nurses. After my marriage, my in-laws did not want me to work perhaps because my husband earns enough to maintain the household and also because of our high status: we*

*are bhadroloks. We can't do manual work; we can't work in the fields like the Bagdis and the Bauri women. Nor can we work as domestic help in others' homes. These will lower our social status. Then there is the domestic work burden too: homemaking, bringing up children takes a lot of time. And then where is the respectable work available for women like me? So many women and men who are highly educated do not get jobs."*

*"It is impossible for a woman to join the fishing business as the work is rather labour-intensive. As far as other jobs are concerned, I am not against my daughter-in-law or grand-daughter joining them. However, they should complete their domestic responsibilities like cooking, nurturing children, maintaining the household, cleaning and washing and should take care not to hamper my family status," says Paresh Dhibar, male, 69. Dhibar is one of the biggest fishing businessmen in the area (Khetura), controlling about 20 ponds through either lease or ownership.*

*"Poverty has pushed us to join the labour force. The only time we take a break from working in the fields is during the late stages of pregnancy," says Tulsi Tudu, 26, a female Santal agricultural labourer staying in Bompur, an impoverished adivasi hamlet adjacent to Khetura and Galsi in Burdwan. She adds, "I have to wake up at 3 in the morning to do the domestic work otherwise I can't cope with it. I can't afford to sleep late." She and her husband are both illiterate, have three children, a 12 year old son, a nine year old daughter and a son who is just 2 months old. The older children both go to the government school at Gomai and for their ages are in lower classes (one in class 3 and the other in class 1).*

*Meenu Mudi, 27, a Mudi tribal of Bagsorai village in Malda district says she too joined the labour force due to their poverty. She and her husband both work as agricultural labourers, but her husband gets Rs 60 per day to her Rs 30. She has found additional work as a cook in the mid-day meal scheme in the government primary school. She too says she gets up at 4 in the morning to finish the household chores.*

*"Women don't join the labour force out of pleasure or for amusement. They have to work only when there is a severe monetary crisis. A woman like me has to work to keep the family together. We have about 2 bighas of unirrigated land that is cultivated by my husband but the earnings are not enough. It was worse when my daughters were unmarried. But now that they are married, I don't have to go out for work as an agricultural labourer. I manage with whatever my husband earns," says Manu Mondol, 40, a Rajbanshi (SC) woman of Bhashakandar village in Malda district. Manu is certainly not rich but better off than some of the other women in the village, one of the declared 'backward villages' of the block.*

*"Even today, Muslim women are expected to maintain purdah. It is shameful to go out for work," says Sayeeda Begum, 32, of Rangabhita village, Malda.*

### ***High Premium to Domestic Work***

The first striking commonality across the two districts (Burdwan and Malda), irrespective of the backwardness of the village, is the high premium attached to domestic work and

homemaking. Indeed, irrespective of whether the family is rich or poor, Brahmin or Bauri (SC, considered a very low caste in South Bengal), Hindu, Christian or Muslim, the woman educated or illiterate or highly educated (there is one woman who is a double MA), homemaking and all that goes with it is the exclusive responsibility of the women. As Dhibar put it, something that gets echoed in the numerous focus group interviews with the men in all the four sites, a woman's primary duty is to raise a family, look after the needs of the husband, children, in-laws and all that. Only then should she take up work outside the home, no matter what it maybe. The women too articulate this sentiment. Men, in their own opinions as well as those of the women, are not supposed to cook, clean or wash. "I don't mind helping my wife with such things (meaning domestic work) once in a while, when she is sick, but I can't do it regularly. What will my friends say? And why should I have got married then?" asked Nagen, a Bagsorai youth who is engaged. Women who in the dominant perception of both men and women in these villages "neglect" their "household duties" for work are looked on disdainfully by both men and women across all castes and regions. Thus, the Brahmin women, did not hesitate to express their contempt, albeit veiled when they learnt that two of the women field investigators were married and belonged to the higher castes (in fact one was a Brahmin). Of course, to the villagers, the fact that these investigators were from the "town" where things "were different" and "traditions were breaking down" offered an explanation but the stress was on the women's roles. For the sake of rhetoric, some of the younger women did mention that men too should lend a hand in the domestic responsibilities, but then they quickly pointed out that in their *samaj* such things would not be possible.

### ***Only Poverty Necessitates that Women Work Outside the Home***

The second common perception, across both the districts, is that women should work for remuneration outside the home only if the economic situation of the household so demands it. As Mungli Kisku, 26, a Santal woman of Saharpur in Malda put it, "Although every man wants his wife to stay inside the house, do household chores and not step out, sheer poverty has led them to change their attitudes towards women working outside their homes." Mungli's household has 10 kathas of land so both she and her husband have to work as agricultural labourers. This view is held by both men and women in both the districts. The perception is that economic provisioning is the domain of the men, so women should not work. There are a few exceptions to this of course, but those are in situations where the educational and economic status of the household is higher than the average of the social group in a particular village. It must be pointed out that helping in the family farm is not considered work as it does not bring in additional money. There are situations when the woman is forced to work, but as soon as the economic condition of the household improves, say with a male, either a husband or a son, getting a job or earning otherwise the woman is made to withdraw from the labour force. Thus Lakshmi Murmu (Santal, ST, 28) of Khetura says that when she got married to Mangal 15 years ago she had to work often outside the home as an agricultural labourer. Mangal got a job first as a temporary night guard in Burdwan and then in the General Post Office in Kolkata. Initially he was temporary, earning Rs 800 a month. He became permanent four years ago and now draws Rs 6000-8000 per month including overtime. She says she feels lucky that her husband earns enough so that she does not have to work outside the home. Jyotsna Roy, a Polley (SC) woman aged 38 was married

to Tarani Roy when she was only 13. They have six bighas of land. Jyotsna says that with her husband's income from agriculture they never had to starve but it was not exactly sufficient. He would often work as agricultural labour and when really needed, she too would work on others farms. Of course she would work in their own fields too. But they educated their children and the eldest, Kalyan, finished his higher secondary and got a job as an agent with the Life Insurance Corporation of India. He earns Rs 3000-4000 per month. She says now "her son does not want that his mother work hard outside the home."

### ***Gender Wage Differentials***

In the Burdwan cluster, we did not find any difference in the wages of male and female agricultural labour. Men and women got between Rs 45 to 60 per day, depending on the kind of work and the relationship with the landowner. No food is provided. However, men often complained that they are given heavier tasks like bunding or repairing field boundaries for which they should be given more. Interestingly, a recent study reported a significant gender gap between the earnings of male and female agricultural labour. In 1977-78, when the Left led coalition came to power, the ratio of male/female agricultural earnings ratio was 1.15, in 1983 it came down to 1.01, but in 1987-8 went up to 1.11. By 1993-94 it was 1.15 and in 1999-2000 it was 1.16. Further, West Bengal, apart from Madhya Pradesh, is the only state, the study found, where there is a significant difference between the prescribed minimum wage and that actually paid. The study reported that the minimum wage was Rs 107.99 in 2004 whereas the actual earnings were Rs 84.48 for men and Rs 49.63 for women (Chavan and Bedamatta, 2006)

In the Malda cluster, women get half of what men get; even when the work and the number of hours worked is the same. Men get Rs 40 with lunch and Rs 70 without lunch. Women get at the most Rs. 35 (Rs 30 was the norm) and no lunch either. They are given a lunch break during which time they can rush home and cook if they want to.

### ***Respectable Jobs for Women***

In both the districts, the job (*chakri*, as distinct from *majuri* or wage labour) considered most respectable in the eyes of both men and women is that of a government school teacher. But that requires a high level of education and nowadays, candidates are required to clear a competitive written test and an interview at the state level. That alone is not enough because the jobs are given only when vacancies arise and connections with the CPI(M) helps.

The second most preferred job is that of a para-teacher, who gets about Rs 1000 per month. Apart from qualifications, party connections are important in this too. Take the case of Rahima in Khetura. She has done two MAs. After trying several years for a job (and she continued with her studies meanwhile) she has got a job as a para-teacher. She rues that it is only for three years but says something is better than nothing.

And for those who have some basic education (upto primary level) the most preferred job is that of an ICDS worker (Anganwadi worker) at Rs 1000 per month. Party connections are again important.

### ***Decline of Traditional Non-Farm Work for Women***

Even in the early 1990s, as emerged from discussions with key informants, in the Burdwan cluster, there were several non-farm work avenues for women especially of the lower castes. The work included providing services to the clients. These were caste specific and also depended on the caste standing of the service provider to the client. Thus Kamar women (Karmakar now, ironsmiths) whose water was accepted by the upper castes, would have their fixed clients where they would go at regular intervals or on demand to make *muri* (puffed rice), *chire* (beaten paddy) or *khoi* (popped paddy). Typically, they would be remunerated in rice or paddy and also get some of the products they made. Sometimes, when needed, these women would also parboil paddy and de-husk it. Napit (barber) women would have their fixed clients for applying *alta* (red paint) on the feet of upper caste women or cut their nails. The kumhar (potter) women would supply pots. The kamar women would fetch water too. Of course, all these services were between the Hindus. The Muslims were excluded from such services. The Bagdi and Bauri women often worked in others homes as domestic help.

Today in multi-caste villages like Khetura or Galsi, muri-making has virtually stopped. Only in a few Muslim households is it made during festivities. With the coming of rice mills and muri mills, virtually no one makes it at home. In fact, eating muri as a snack too is on the decline, with the entry of “chowmein” and “maggi noodles.” Even bread, though of dubious quality is easily available. When needed, it is bought from the bazaar. The Napit women do not provide their traditional services nor do the Kamar women. Beauty parlours have come up and *alta* is no longer in fashion. The survey did not come across a single traditional birth attendant in the Burdwan cluster as people prefer to go to nursing homes and hospitals. In the Bagsorai cluster, the research team came across one such person, though even there the ‘modernisation’ of birth services is fast coming in (See Box 2: The Dai of Bagsorai)

For the Muslim women, the main occupational opportunity is in embroidering (*kantha* work) in Khetura village. But only the poorest of the Muslim women do this work: its laborious, has to be done on time despite all the domestic work for a contractor. It is highly exploitative too: for embroidering a sari, a worker is paid about Rs 800-1000 and it takes almost a month to finish one. The same sari sells in Kolkata for about Rs 4500. However, as Jaheda Begum, a *kantha* worker herself who also sub-contracts, puts it, “Where do we have the contacts and the resources to do what the contractor does? We know it’s exploitative but something is better than nothing.” In many villages of Burdwan, the *kantha* industry is spreading, but is confined to the muslim women only. The terms and conditions are highly exploitative, but the women have no choice as they do not have the necessary capital not the marketing and other entrepreneurial skills. The lady contractor who engages the Khetura women apparently has her work spread out in 9-10 villages in two blocks of the district. She is also a trainer for embroidery work in various Block level programmes and uses the same to meet and select the most skilled women. Her response was that the village women do not have the necessary capital or the marketing skills and that it was not an easy job.

## BOX 2: The Dai of Bagsorai

In Bagsorai village, modernity in the idiom of growth and development has been slowly making its way. Yet, most women mention *dais* as their regular birth attendants. Shukhi Mudi, a 70 year old adivasi, is one of the three or four *dais* who live in Bagsorai. Shukhi's mother, sister and paternal aunt had all been traditional birth attendants. Shukhi, married at 12, entered this profession in her early twenties, watching and learning from these women. Thus, it has been fifty long years of service but she is still going strong at her age.

Shukhi says she caters to women not only of her own caste but also to those residing in the *para*. There are three more *dais* in this village, one of whom has been trained in the hospital, yet all of them use traditional methods. For instance, the *arandhi* leaf is still the most important pain alleviative. Post-delivery, the leaves are folded and placed on the stomach and then hot compress is applied. The women are encouraged to continue their regular chores up to an advanced stage of pregnancy. This is believed to exercise the muscles and keep them flexible as it facilitates an easier delivery. Upon birth, the umbilical cord these days is cut with a sterilized blade. The new mother is put on a diet of ginger and *chire* to soak out the excess water in the body. As per tradition, she is then confined to a small room, *antur ghor*, for five days. During this time the *dai* attends to the mother and child all the time. A ritual of brushing the mother's breasts with twigs accompanied by incantations to ward off any evil-eye is performed before she starts breast-feeding. According to the dictates of tradition, after the lapse of five days the woman is to wear *loha* (bangles made of iron). She is then fit to re-enter the household. The *dai* for her part gets Rs. 150 from the *deshiyas* and Rs. 100 from the *mudis*.

In this brief narration of the stages of childbirth, Shukhi shows awareness of elementary hygiene. For instance, the fact that the blade is sterilized with boiled water reveals Shukhi's engagement with contemporary knowledge of what constitutes effective sterilization. It is not as though the concept of sterilization was unknown traditionally, but now less effective sterilization methods have been discarded in favour of proven effectual ones. Secondly, the five days of confinement were earlier prolonged for twenty one days. This change is indicative of a turn in the psyche of the people. She is even given a separate room (*antur ghor*) instead of being allocated the cowshed as in olden times. Shukhi also claimed that there is no differentiation made in the payment for delivering a male child. This, if true, would be another important social change. One of the most important transformations perhaps has been Shukhi's reluctance to deal with emergency situations. She is prompt in sending the patient to the hospital. This is symptomatic of an increasing dependence on modern medical knowledge as more reliable in matters of life and death.

Of Shukhi's three sons, only one survives. One drowned at the age of four. The other died of jaundice at the age of six. Shukhi's younger daughter was born a dwarf. She is not married and lives with Shukhi. The elder daughter is married. She visits Shukhi often. Shukhi's husband passed away 17 years ago. He left her with a tiny plot of land. She had to employ two labourers to reap the wheat harvest this year – it cost her Rs. 210 each. They were never really well off but the condition is worse now. The house is spartan and dusty. The mother and daughter subsist on the money they make out of selling *pat* (jute). This year she sold 50 kgs in the Gajole market. Extra money comes from selling *chullu* (home brewed liquor) at the rate of Rs. 16 a bottle. Shukhi sells 8 bottles a day. Being a *dai* is not sufficient to eke a living. It is only twice or thrice a year that she is needed as a *dai*.

Another attractive occupation is brewing country liquor, sold at Rs 16 a bottle (retail) or Rs 12 a bottle wholesale. The returns (leaving out the labour) are high: it costs about Rs 1-2 to make a bottle (650 ml) of country liquor. Sometimes, in the non-tribal areas, bribes have to be paid to the excise and the police department but that is not so frequent.

In the Malda villages, which are not exactly multi-caste in the Burdwan sense (the settlement pattern being more of dispersed clusters of the same caste/ethnic groups, the traditional occupations like *muri* making or the services of the barber women were never there. The households are mostly SCs and STs and they make their own *muri* when needed but prefer to purchase from the market. Some Rajbanshi and Polley women still make jute carpets, but mostly when they get an 'order' to do so. The Santal and the Mudi tribes do not have traditional occupations for their women.

### ***Growth of Modern Non-Farm Jobs***

In Burdwan, well known in the country for the adoption of HYV agriculture even in the 1970s, mechanisation of agriculture has come to stay. Not only are tractors used (not a single household could be found that uses a plough), irrigation pumpsets too have become common. The traditional dugout is no longer in vogue. Of course, no women drive tractors. Even weeding and threshing, that generated substantial employment for women of the lower castes and the adivasis, is under threat as mechanical threshers have come in and also weedicides are increasingly being used. Substantial employment is generated in paddy cultivation in transplanting, threshing and for a few days in weeding still. The bigger and even the middle farmers prefer to employ migrant labour from Santal Parganas in Jharkhand, leaving the local labour to migrate to other villages, foraging for the scant labour that is available.

Several rice mills have come up in the Galsi-Khetura area. They all employ women, but not the locals, preferring again migrant workers from Jharkhand.

There are two beauty parlours in Galsi bazaar, but one of them is on the verge of being shut down. The thriving one is owned by a Brahmin woman whose employees include scheduled caste women. But she can employ only three women as the demand is not that high. A woman opened a seamstress' shop and has several employees including Muslims.

Essentially, the nature of the expansion or the growth processes excludes women from participating in it. This is perhaps best reflected in the response of a petrol pump owner in Gajol (the block headquarters), to the question as to what he thinks of employing women: "Tell me how many petrol pumps in Kolkata employ women?" To the best of the researcher's knowledge, there is not a single one. Even the national capital has only one such petrol pump.

In Gajol, a brick kiln owner employs some women but says that he does so on humanitarian grounds and that men work better. A jute businessman (buying jute, sorting and packing into bales and loading them for transportation) was puzzled when asked about the prospects of employing women: "Look this is not a bank. It's a jute *araat* (wholesale depot). It is hard work. Even the Bengalis cannot do it. I get labour from the Bihar border as those men can work harder." His labour *sardar* nods in acquiescence.

The expansion of the national highway adjacent to Galsi has led to the opening of new opportunities in the form of refurbished dhabas (eateries). Debika Roy, 48, an Aguri woman (Aguris are general castes in this district and numerically quite dominant in the

region, traditionally agriculturists and businessmen) owns a share of the Roy Hotel next to the highway. (The earnings are not shared on a monthly or daily basis, but each brother has a fixed number of months per year when all the earnings accrue to them. Debika has about four months in the year). Her husband and his brothers started this dhaba many years ago, but after she was widowed a couple of years back she comes and sits in the dhaba. Since alcohol is served, the business is thriving. The dhaba has nearly 15 employees, but not a single woman. Debika says, “Its bad enough I have to come and sit here during my *pala* (share). Employing women as cooks and waiters? It’s out of the question. Who will ensure their safety?”

### ***State Efforts to Generate Women’s Employment***

The State has made efforts to provide employment for women. These include formation of SHGs (some women but not all have benefited from it in both the clusters). The employment is of two forms: traditional, that is getting credit to buy poultry, goats or pigs, rearing and selling them and quasi-modern in the form of giving SHGs the tasks of providing mid-day meals in the government schools. However, this benefits only a few.

The other effort seen was to start mini-businesses through SHGs but these suffer from typical male and bureaucratic short-sightedness. Thus in Darbarpur village, between Galsi and Khetura, the panchayat has started three mini-rice mills. In these mills, the women are supposed to buy paddy, parboil it, de-husk it and sell the rice. The land has been acquired on lease from the owners and the paddy floor cemented at a considerable cost. The owners complain that they are yet to be paid the entire amount due to them. The women don’t use the same. They say no one consulted them and the drying yards are inconveniently located. Inspection revealed that it would not be possible to use the boiling chambers as they are too high and don’t even have steps and the chances of women falling into them are high. There are allegations about the connivance of the landowners with the panchayat officials. But even if these anomalies were not there, it is doubtful whether the ventures would have been viable and sustainable due to the very nature of the contemporary trends in the paddy rice trade. There are several large, sophisticated rice mills in the area. The middlemen who supply paddy to the rice mills operate with an initial capital of at least Rs 5 lakhs, providing advance credit to the farmers, getting the paddy and holding it for sale to the mills when the prices are high. The mills too do not pay them on time. Smaller players ultimately get thrown out of the system in no time. Under these circumstances, a group of 20 women, with an initial capital of at the most Rs 30,000 do not have much of a chance in the market.

In the Malda cluster, we could not find any evidence of such efforts.

The other State effort is that of 100 days employment under the NREGA schemes. However, there is a lot of favouritism along party lines in the selection of the families, even when the household concerned belongs to the CPM. As a Santal worker in Khetura put it, “It’s not that I don’t support the CPM. But from my household, they will get only two votes. Why should I be given an employment card, when the same can be given to a family with six voters?” Even in the selection of BPL (Below Poverty Line) cardholders the same logic seems to prevail. This is true in both the districts. Further, we could not

find a single family that had got 100 days of employment till now. In Malda, for instance, only 60.84 percent of the households that had demanded employment were given the same till October 2007 (<http://nrega.nic.in/stateRep/web/WBnrega.htm>). From the local sources we learnt that it was not possible to provide 100 days of employment since two persons had been given employment from a household. Of the 92642 individuals demanding employment, 73706 (79.56 percent) had been given the same. The NREGA website does not provide the data according to gender. Burdwan was not included in the list of districts in the first phase.

### ***Migration***

In a situation of shrinking work opportunities, one of the options available to the poorer people is to migrate. This is true especially for the poorer SC, ST and Muslim men. The study found migration takes several forms.

Migration for agricultural labour especially for work related to paddy transplanting, weeding and harvesting. Migration could be to surrounding villages and districts. Depending on the availability of work and the individual household situation, both men and women migrate. However, rarely do women migrate by themselves. This is true especially of the ST populations. Thus, almost every Santal family in Khetura and Bompur have migrated at some point or the other to Hooghly district during paddy sowing and harvesting. Some of the families seek work in neighbouring villages like Darbarpur. In the Hatinda cluster in Malda, many families migrate to Murshidabad, Burdwan and Hooghly districts during the paddy season.

Migration as masons and carpenter, a phenomenon restricted to males only. This was found in the Burdwan cluster of villages amongst the poorer Muslim households.

Migration as construction workers, road and telecom-transmission tower builders to almost all over the country. This is restricted to males amongst STs and sometimes SCs once or twice a year. Evidence of this came mainly from the Hatinda cluster and also a few cases in Burdwan from the FGDs.

Migration as domestic help, especially amongst STs, to far off places like Delhi, Kolkata, Jamshedpur and so on. Amongst the SCs, sometimes entire households were found to have migrated to Delhi, staying in the slums. Neighbours said they had migrated some time ago and the women worked as domestic help while the men plied cycle rickshaws or took up other casual work depending on availability.

### **Summary of Women's Employment Situation in the Field**

In the table below, an attempt is made to summarise women's employment availability in the field, across castes, in the two districts.

**Table 14: Employment Opportunities by Caste**

Category	Employment Availability/Opportunities	
	Burdwan	Malda
<b>General</b>	No manual work; for educated (BA) para teachers; ICDS workers (min. qualification Class 10 pass) depending on vacancies and party connections; Entrepreneurship (beauty parlour, tailoring shop for one or two rich women) singing and drawing classes for one or two; private tuitions for one or two.	No manual work; no other work as education status very low (no one passed class 10)
<b>OBC</b>	No manual work; no other 'employment' opportunities; educational status low	Not many OBCs in the sample villages; but no manual work
<b>SC</b>	Agricultural labour (often with men in contract to finish a job kind of work as distinct from daily wage labour); domestic help for upper castes for some castes (Bauris are not employed as domestic help); brewing local liquor; migration with men; making and selling cowpat cakes for fuel; going to town to beg (older women); cook & helper for mid-day meal schemes for some SHG members; NREGA work for some.; poultry rearing, goat keeping.	Agricultural labour (often with men in contract to finish a job kind of work as distinct from daily wage labour); selling small amounts of jute; jute mat making; brewing local liquor; migration with men; making and selling cowpat cakes for fuel; cook & helper for mid-day meal schemes for some SHG members; poultry rearing, goat keeping; practising traditional medicine (for some).
<b>ST (Non-Christian)</b>	Agricultural labour (often outside the village, with men, in contract to finish a job kind of work; as distinct from daily wage labour), poultry rearing, goat and pig keeping, NREGA work for some.	Agricultural labour; jute mat making, migration (often with men, sometimes as domestic workers to towns), poultry and goat rearing, local liquor brewing, local birth attendants, practising traditional medicine
<b>ST (Christian)</b>	No Christian STs in sample	Teaching/nursing/ taking up private service sector jobs in towns depending on family and level of education; politics.
<b>Muslim</b>	Para teachers/ICDS workers (depending on educational qualifications); kantha embroidery work for poor uneducated women; poultry & goat rearing.	None, strict purdah.

It has to be noted that

- 1) Reproductive work is the domain of women and is considered to be her prime duty or occupation, irrespective of the caste, class or region or whether she is working for remuneration. Both men and women feel that the first duty of a woman is towards her home.
- 2) All the work (in the sense of working for wages), be it as teachers or beauty parlour owners or agricultural day labourers comes secondary to the above.
- 3) Irrespective of whether the women are working or not, they do help a lot in men's productive work, be it in the form of maintaining accounts of the farm (for the rich, upper caste farmers in Burdwan) or ensuring that the chicken get adequate water and are not attacked by dogs or cats in cases where the men have a poultry farm in the Malda villages.
- 4) Traditional village services have just about died out. Only in the Malda cluster do some *dais* remain. However, it has to be noted that these services were not provided by the upper caste women previously.

- 5) For the upper castes, working as manual labourers is simply out of the question. In fact even upper caste men cannot do so. Even if the women or for that matter the men were to seek such employment (say a Brahmin male or female were to look for work as an agricultural hand) they would not be employed. In general, there is a strong preference not to employ people from the same village, especially women. Further, it is not strictly speaking a free market: employment is given on the basis of reputation (re-inforced by caste stereotypes) as well as relationships between the employer and the employee over many years.
- 6) As the economic prosperity of a particular household increases, it seeks to establish its superiority in the social hierarchy by claiming a “bhadrolok” status. Women’s working, especially in manual jobs, is looked down upon in general and is associated with poverty and economic necessity and against the norms of being considered a bhadrolok family. There were several instances where as the family moved up the economic ladder, the women were pulled out of the labour force. From “chotoloks” they had become “bhadraloks,” re-inforcing the women exclusive constraints (occupational segregation, mobility, domestic responsibilities) due to caste norms being re-invented.

*Conclusion:*

On the whole, while women’s participation in the labour force is still rather low, for the poor there has been some growth especially in the household industry sector. It has to be noted that the definition of “household industry” in the Census is rather broad and is not confined to narrow manufacturing only. Evidence of such industries in the field ranged from embroidery work and weaving jute/fibre mats to rearing poultry and other livestock. For women, domestic/reproductive work remains a priority, both according to themselves and socially. As was often repeated in the field, only poverty necessitates that women work, and in the face of shrinking male employment due to the changing structures of the labour market, women are forced to work either as marginal workers or as workers in the household industries. For the men, with the increased mechanisation of agriculture (in Khetura for instance the present study did not find a single household that still uses a plough) and also the reduced trends in sharecropping, there has been an increase in the incidence of “marginal workers”. Migration is a major survival strategy for many men. The category of ‘other-workers’ has increased especially for men. Evidence was found of the rise in the number of petty traders, middle-men and even the numbers of “political workers” who according to the census fall in this category. However, the rise in the female labour force participation has not been due to any overt gender equality but due to poverty and economic necessity. A higher FLFPR therefore has not necessarily meant lessening of gender discrimination or gender equality.

## **7: Health Care and Fertility**

### ***Demographic Profile of West Bengal***

West Bengal's population density is nearly thrice that of the Indian average. There has been a great concentration of population over the centuries in the alluvial lands of the Gangetic plains of West Bengal. Historical and socio-economic factors have determined the present very high density of population of the state. Apart from internal migration from the neighbouring states such as Bihar, Orissa and Uttar Pradesh to Kolkata, Haora and other industrial areas of the state, partition in 1947 led to an almost continuous stream of migrants into the state from across the Indo-Bangladesh borders. The phenomenal growth of population in some of the northern districts such as Koch Bihar and West Dinajpur and also in the Southern districts of Nadia and 24 Parganas in the first 40 years after Independence gives an indication of the enormity of migration. The density of population consequently increased sharply in a number of areas of the State. With a population density of 904 persons per sq km in 2001 West Bengal is currently the most densely populated state in the country.

The WBHDR (2004:10) cautions: "Greater population pressure inevitably puts more pressure on basic infrastructure as well as on the provision of health and education services. The extremely high population density obviously affects per capita resource allocation, so whatever West Bengal has achieved has been in spite of this critical negative factor of having the highest population density in the entire region. The variation across districts in this regard also needs to be borne in mind when considering inter-district differences in human development indicators."

While Malda and Burdwan are both close to the average, with population densities of 881 and 985 respectively, Malda has seen a much higher population growth of 2.5 per cent per annum during the 1991-2001 period when compared to Burdwan (1.4 per cent). This of course has implications for service provision, the employment situation and per capita growth.

Sex ratios are often considered a good proxy for gender equality in a society. The sex ratio in West Bengal has historically been worse for women than the national average, but it has shown greater improvement in the recent period so that it is now at 934 females for 1000 males just above the national average of 933. The sex ratio for the age group 0-6 years, which showed rapid decline at the all-India level recently, does not follow a similar trend in West Bengal, where it was 963 in 2001 compared to 927 for all-India. Interestingly, a so-called backward district such as Malda has a much better sex ratio (948) as compared to a more progressive Burdwan (921), clearly pointing to the negative effects of 'prosperity' on gender equality and women's very survival (Agnihotri, 2000).

Despite these differences in population densities, growth rates and sex ratios, overall West Bengal has been successful in bringing down both birth rates and death rates with one of the most rapid decline in birth rate in India. As table 15 shows, the decline in birth rate has been nearly double that of the all-India average over the period 1990-2001, while

the decline in the death rate has been one and a half times that of the national average. Infant mortality too declined at a marginally more rapid rate than of all India.

**Table 15: Vital Rates of India and West Bengal (per thousand)**

Year	Birth Rate		Death Rate		Infant Mortality Rate		Life Expectancy	
	India	West Bengal	India	West Bengal	India	West Bengal	India	West Bengal
1990	30.2	28.2	9.7	8.4	80	63	-	-
1996	27.5	22.8	9.0	7.8	72	55	-	-
2000	25.8	20.7	8.5	7.0	68	51	-	-
2001	25.4	20.5	8.4	6.8	66	51	65	67

Source: WBHDR, 2004

The improvement in the crude birth rate in West Bengal has been more rapid than the national average. In terms of relative ranking, West Bengal now has the 7<sup>th</sup> rank among the major Indian states for the crude birth rate as well as the total fertility rate, as indicated in the Table 16.

**Table 16: Crude Birth Rate and Total Fertility Rate**

Indicator	West Bengal (India)	Highest among Major States	Lowest among Major States	Rank Among Major States	Rank Among All States
CBR	22.7 (26.2)	33.0(UP)	17.9(Kerala)	7	9
CDR	8.3(9.7)	12.9(Orissa)	6.0(Kerala)	2	8
TFR	2.49 (3.07)	4.31(UP)	2.07(Kerala)	7	9
NMR	31.9(43.4)	54.9(MP)	13.86(Kerala)	3	7
IMR	48.7(67.6)	86.7(UP)	16.3(Kerala)	3	11

CBR=Crude Birth Rate; CDR=Crude Death Rate; TFR=Total Fertility Rate; NMR=Neonatal Mortality Rate; IMR= Infant Mortality Rate

Source: WBHDR, 2004:120.

The crude death rate in West Bengal is much less compared to the Indian average, indicating that the health system is more supportive in preventing death. It has also improved more rapidly in the recent past than the all-India figures. The state ranks 3<sup>rd</sup> in India with respect to infant mortality rates. But further policy interventions are needed to control fertility and birth, since there is considerable scope for improvement even in these indicators: the state has the second highest proportion of teenage (15-19) marriages and pregnancies in the country (25 percent, NFHS-3).

Life expectancy in West Bengal is well above the national average, and the state is one of the better performing ones in this regard, even in increases over time. Interestingly female life expectancy is consistently higher than males across districts. However, there are some districts with life expectancy well below average that need special attention, such as Malda, Koch Bihar, Birbhum and Murshidabad, all of which have life expectancy below 60 years. In terms of the districts selected for this study, Malda is at last position

with 55 for females and 54 for males and Burdwan lies amongst the top few with 71 and 68 respectively.

### ***Nutritional Status***

Despite improvements in death rates and life expectancy, according to the WBHDR (2004:125), the average level of nutrition in the state, especially of women, is relatively low, significantly worse than the national average. Citing a survey conducted by the National Nutrition Monitoring Bureau, the WBHDR (2004:125) states that West Bengal ranked 8<sup>th</sup> among 9 states in important variables such as chronic energy deficiency among women. In terms of Body Mass Index (BMI) of women the state ranks as low as 24<sup>th</sup> among 25 states of the NFHS-2 survey. In case of anaemia (moderate and severe) too, West Bengal ranks as low as 19<sup>th</sup> in the NFHS-2 survey. Rural women are worse off in this regard. This indicates the need for immediate target oriented intervention strategies to be planned.

However, the malnutrition among children is lower than the national average, and severe malnutrition is also low, suggesting that distribution is better than many other states. In terms of the nutritional status of children below 3 years West Bengal ranks 6<sup>th</sup> among the major states. But the overall anaemia status of children is very poor as the state ranks 19<sup>th</sup> among 25 states. The proportion of children with anaemia (78 percent) is higher compared to the Indian average of 74 percent.

However, as the WBHDR (2004:133) notes, the public health system in West Bengal has been undermined by recent global and macroeconomic processes which have effectively reduced the ability of the state government to ensure access of the people to safe, timely and effective health care. Both preventive and curative dimensions of health care have been affected by the fiscal constraint upon the state government, which has reduced its ability to make much needed health expenditure. Public health systems have been badly hit by a massive shortage in funds required for current expenditure, in the provision of medicines and material required for surgical operations and basic medical interventions, and even in the inadequate number of staff available to fulfil the necessary duties involved in health service delivery, apart from the absence of capital expenditure. The growing reliance on private curative health care, even by poorer people, indicates the inability of the state system to cope with the requirements and points to the disturbing possibility that in future even more people will be denied health care because of the inability to pay.

### ***The Field Situation***

For the upper castes and the rich, medical treatment is not a problem in the Burdwan cluster. The area is well serviced by private practitioners and when necessary the villagers, if they can afford it, go to Burdwan or Kolkata for treatment. Thus Sandhya Chatterjee's electrician husband, Tapan, 50, had a bad fall at work 10 years ago. For the last five years he is completely paralysed and cannot work anymore. Recently, Sandhya took him to a private clinic in Kolkata for treatment and spent about Rs 15,000. Apart from their land they have no other income. Sometimes her parents and brothers help her financially. Karabi Bannerjee owns a beauty parlour and her husband has several shops in

the bazaar at Galsi. Their average monthly income is Rs 20,000 and they have land too. She welcomes privatisation of health delivery as it provides her better treatment options and she can choose the best available. People like Shyamoli Roy, 48, one of the richer housewives of Galsi, whose husband owns a brickfield opines that the PHC is woefully inadequate for their needs, “The services are rather poor. Such institutions are meant for the *Chotoloks* (the wage labourers). Not for us.”

But the toiling masses find the government health provisioning pretty good. Many are full of praise for the “*Didimonis*” (nurses) and the health workers. Tulsi Tudu, 26, a Santal (ST) agricultural labourer of Bompur and mother of three children says that she delivered her first two children with the help of the local midwife who was not even trained, though she sterilised the knife to cut the umbilical cord. The third child was delivered at the government hospital in Burdwan in July 2007. She took admission there urged by the local health centre workers as she was very anaemic. It turned out to be a rather complicated delivery case. Tulsi feels grateful to the health centre workers for saving the life of her baby and hers too. She says she learnt a lot about menstrual hygiene during her stay at the hospital. However, some of the Santal men did point out that they have to face a lot of discrimination even in the government clinics as they are illiterate and poor. One labourer said, “The government doctors tell us that the medicine is out of stock so we will have to purchase the same from the market. How can we afford to do so? The private doctors ask us to deposit the fees first, even before they examine us.”

The area is well serviced by the pulse polio programme. Health centre workers regularly visit the women, including the poorer SC/ST hamlets. However, due to poverty, many of the Santal, Bauri, Bagdi and Ruidas children were seen to be rather malnourished, but not acutely. Many women looked to be very anaemic, but this is not restricted to the working women only. Some Muslim and Brahmin housewives too seemed to suffer from anaemia.

The situation seemed bad in Khetura’s Bauri Para and in the Santal hamlet Bompur. The researchers found that the children in both the places who are not yet of school going age, were eating just a handful of puffed rice and a glass of black tea for breakfast. They typically have a proper meal around 2.30 or 3 in the afternoon when their mothers come back from work and cook some rice, on lucky days a little vegetable alongside. Dal is too expensive to be had regularly, leave alone fish. It is not that the women are not aware of what needs to be done or the importance of nutritious food. Sona Bauri, 22, and the mother of two children aged 5 and 3, told a researcher, “I know that I should give my children milk, regular meals and fish. But what is the use of such knowledge when I can’t afford rice sometimes?” In such a context, the provisioning of mid-day meals, irrespective of the teaching-learning experiences in the schools, comes as a welcome boon to the poor. This is all the more true in the lean months.

The health centre workers regularly visit the area (at least once in two weeks) to give advice, distribute adequate tablets to pregnant women, arrange for immunisation of children at the PHC. There is a preference still for giving birth at home, with the help of the local *dai*; though it is gradually changing, thanks to these health workers. Yet a lot more can be done in terms of general health awareness and hygiene. While the Santal

para in Khetura as well as Bompur are strikingly clean, this cannot be said of the other hamlets. The Bauri women say they are aware of using tooth-paste and a tooth brush but these are usually provided for the men. The women make do with ash from the hearth. While aware of the benefits of sanitary napkins, as revealed in the FGDs, the Bauri women feel it is too expensive. They manage with cloth and admit it is unhygienic to do so. The Santal women are better in this respect: they regularly wash the cloth and discard them after a month or two. The upper castes and classes, especially the younger women all use sanitary napkins, including the latest brands, due to the TV commercials. Breast feeding is very prevalent in all classes and castes, but barring a few exceptions, the colostrum is thrown away. The exceptions are those where the child was delivered in the hospital in Burdwan.

Birth-control measures, temporary and permanent, are quite prevalent. Women of the poorer households regularly use contraceptive pills given free by the health centre. Amongst the Santal, some men have undergone vasectomy. The women do not prefer permanent measures like tubectomy or ligation as they feel it will weaken their reproductive powers or make them so weak that they would not be able to perform their domestic work as well as labour in the fields. In terms of numbers, most women, irrespective of their caste or class, echoed what Karabi, the beauty parlour owner had to say, "These days, it's more important to bring up a child well, give a good education so that as an adult she/he can do well in the world. But to do that it needs money. So we decided not to have any more children after our son was born." That son is now doing his masters in Burdwan University. Karabi did not answer whether they would have had another child if the first born were a daughter instead. But even then, the preference amongst many women is to have just two children.

It became very clear that the choice of the number of children to have depends on the male members; that is, the husband. The son preference remains very strong. Asha Pramanik of Khetura, a housewife, had daughters, in quick succession. She says she tried to persuade her husband to stop after the first two were born but to no avail. Her husband would taunt her raising the issue as to who would cremate them without a son. Today Asha is maligned by all her relatives for having given birth to four daughters. Her husband asks her who will pay the dowry and other marriage expenses, she or her father?

Compared to Asha, Tulsi Tudu (Santal, ST) is very poor, an agricultural labourer. She is 26 but already has three children, a 12 year old son followed by a 9 year old daughter and finally a son born just in July. The Santals don't have a system of dowry so a puzzled researcher asked Tulsi why they went in for another child when they were so poor and her health not so good. Tulsi replied, "Do you think I or women like me have much of a choice or say in these matters? He wanted a child and that was that. I had to stop taking the pills. If I did not listen he would throw me out and get another woman."

Bagsorai villagers (Gajol Block, Malda district) say that their lives have improved ever since an NGO, World Vision of India, started a health centre in the village about a year ago. There is no qualified physician there but some trained staff. A Polley (SC) woman pointed out that the primary health care of their children is well taken care of and they do

not have to rush to the PHC at the block headquarters two km away. “It would be a problem at times, especially at night if someone needed treatment. Now at least something is there in the village itself” she said. Of course, if the free check up and medicines at the NGO run centre does not work, the villagers visit the PHC or the private doctors in Gajol, according to their means. When necessary, people even go to Malda town, which is about 30 km away and well connected.

As such Bagsorai is well provided for in terms of health care. The village rich go to the private doctors and to clinics in Malda, Raigunj or even Siliguri or Kolkata.

However, in the remote cluster of villages chosen for this study, which is the Changtor area, health care remains a big problem. The cluster is not well connected at all. The nearest PHC is at Gajol, about 10 km away. The lack of a proper road and the poverty of the villagers add to the problem. There are some quacks in Godan (about 2 km away) but they provide only temporary relief. In the FGDs with the Rajbansi (SC) and Santal (ST) women of this cluster (Bhashakandor-Changtor, Saharpur) the villagers complained how they were neglected by all. One woman, Namita, vociferously pointed out, “No pulse polio workers visit us. No health worker ever comes here.” One has to walk to Agumpur to get primary treatment. “How can a woman in advanced stages of pregnancy walk that distance to get her check ups done? Isn’t it a torture for us?” It was mentioned that no post-natal care is provided in the hospitals.

Belief in witchcraft is rather strong in this area. Disease, it is held, is caused by evil spells cast by others or being possessed by Phoksins (amongst the Polley, Mudi and Desia) while the Santals hold that Dains are the cause of everything that is bad. Usually, the Phoksins and Dains are women and they are trained by older witches. For ordination, they have to ‘eat’ someone, usually a close relative’s child. When there are no such children, those of neighbours do and finally cattle suffice. Eating hear means casting spells to cause fatal diseases. Naturally, argued a respondent, “We take recourse to the exorcists and their remedies. After taking such treatment, they start looking for a doctor. Without the exorcist and his *jal para* (a form of treatment) no allopath or homeopath can do anything to cure us from the magic of the Phoksin.” Sumona, a Santal girl who grew up in Malda and got married into Saharpur just a few months ago says that all these things happen because there are no doctors and the people have to take recourse to something. What Sumona refused to believe is that even in Bagsorai, it is held by many that witches do exist and are the root cause of all evil and disease. This includes some educated people like school teachers too.

But in many respects, it seemed that the women in Malda were more aware of day to day hygiene than those in Burdwan. The houses are cleaner and the women by and large know the importance of proper nutrition, including the value of feeding the newborn the colostrum. Menstrual hygiene too is better: though cloth is used, it is washed and disposed off regularly.

In terms of fertility, the preference is for at the most two children. Only a few of the younger couples had more than two children, even if both were daughters. The usual

answer was, “it is difficult to provide for more than two children these days” However, in an FGD, it was very sharply pointed out that though men seek more children, especially sons, “it is the daughters who look after their aged parents.” Men often say that they need sons to look after them in their old age. The women gave many examples from the villages to prove their point.

The study found that there is still a strong preference to marry off daughters at a very young age, in their teens. In fact 23 of the 38 married women interviewed had been married by the time they were 15. Incidentally, the NFHS-3 shows that the proportion of women aged 15-19 who have begun childbearing is highest in Jharkhand (28 percent), West Bengal (25 percent), and Bihar (25 percent) amongst all the Indian states. This preference for child marriages of girls cuts across all classes and castes, though of late there is some change noticeable amongst the upper castes and classes.

## **8: Participation**

### ***In SHGs***

*Kaushalya Sarkar, 27, a poor Desia (general caste) illiterate homemaker of Malda’s Bagsarai village was appointed the leader of a self-help group formed by the Block Development office sometime ago. But the group disbanded. Kaushalya says it could have helped them all. She says, “The group dissolved as I could not give enough time in the meetings or organising the women. My husband did not approve. He would get very angry and sometimes even beat me if I got a bit late. Finally I withdrew and the group too disbanded.”*

*Preeti Bauri, 24, scheduled caste woman of Khetura who is essentially a homemaker says her husband is the Krishak Sabha Pradhan but disapproves of her being visible in the public sphere. So she does not attend any meetings but her husband has to attend them.*

*Pratima Das, 35, of the Chutor (carpenter) caste (OBC) explaining why she is not a member of any SHG and also why she does not attend Gram Sabha meetings, says, “The women of this household are allowed to meet people only if the men allow. So when the representatives from any SHG or NGO wants to visit our household, the men of the family first interview them and then if they are satisfied, we are allowed to talk to them. So far we have not met anyone from SHGs.”*

On the face of it, West Bengal is lauded for its decentralised governance structures through the Panchayati Raj institutions. It was one of the first states in the country to introduce one-third reservation of seats for women in the Panchayati Raj institutions. The government is taking active steps to consolidate these gains and is also pushing hard to form SHGs to economically empower the women.

But in the field, we found a totally different picture. It is not that SHGs don’t exist at all nor is it that Gram Sabha meetings are not held. What we were trying to find out was the extent of women’s participation in them and also the degree of their political involvement.

Yet membership in SHGs is really wanting in both the districts. While there is a male Panchayat Pradhan in Galsi, there is a female panchayat member too. She told us that she was not very keen but her father-in-law and husband made her stand for the elections. However they control her movements and she is not allowed to move freely to the households nor attend all the meetings. Perhaps this causes some problems in the formation of the SHGs. Typically, it was observed that the functioning/participation of women in SHGs or even the political processes was dependent totally on being allowed to do so by the men in their households, more often than not the husbands. Thus, the Majra Gram Panchayat in Malda (in which all the villages chosen for the study are situated) has a female Panchayat Pradhan, a Santal. However, in the remote locale of the GP chosen for the study, the villagers complained that she was rarely seen, while her husband would come sometimes to village like Saharpur (comprising Santal households only) have a few drinks and leave. These remote villages have no SHGs as no one ever tried to form any over there. The women are rather keen to have them.

**Table 17: Membership of SHGs**

DISTRICT			Membership of SHG		Total
			yes	No	
<b>Burdwan</b>	SOCIAL CAT	GEN	0	6	6
		OBC	0	4	4
		MUSLIM	2	1	3
		ST	1	2	3
		SC	1	2	3
		<b>Total</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>15</b>	<b>19</b>
<b>Malda</b>	SOCIAL CAT	GEN	1	5	6
		MUSLIM	0	2	2
		ST	3	4	7
		SC	1	5	6
		<b>Total</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>16</b>	<b>21</b>

Source: field survey

In the Bompur hamlet, people know what SHGs are, but no one has ever tried to organise them. Also the women feel that even if they are formed, perhaps they will not be able to join them as their meagre hand to mouth existence rules out regular savings. The other interesting thing to note is that the poor, who would stand to gain the most from the formation of SHGs, have benefited the least from the same. Table 18 shows this, aggregating across both the districts. Out of the total of 9 women who are members of the SHGs, only 4 are poor.

However, there are some success stories too. In Bagsorai, one group of 10 members took a loan of Rs 15000 (Rs 5000 subsidy) and bought pigs and poultry to rear them for sale. Another group has taken a loan of a similar amount and have collectively invested the same in the fisheries business. The best example of women's mobilisation comes from Bagsorai in Malda. The members suspected the group leader of fraudulent practices so

now instead of giving her the monthly instalment they themselves go and deposit it in the State Bank of India in Gajole, about 3 kms away.

Table 18: Membership of SHGs according to Economic Categories

		Membership of SHG		Total
		yes	No	
<b>ECO CAT</b>	RICH	1	10	11
	MIDDLE CLASS	3	9	12
	LOWER MIDDLE CLASS	1	5	6
	POOR	4	7	11
	<b>Total</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>31</b>	<b>40</b>

Source: field survey

### ***In Gram Sabha and Other Meetings***

*“I have to join the processions in the village taken out by the party (CPM). My husband too attends them. Do I have a choice? My husband insists I go. Secondly, he too has no choice as the leaders insist we come” says Sona Bagdi, 35, of Khetura.*

*“I don’t have any interest in such things. And even if I had, I don’t think our samaj will take my attending meetings and talking there too nicely” says Swapna Chatterjee, a Brahman woman of Galsi.*

*“We don’t even get to hear about such things as Gram Sabha meetings. Maybe the men do. I don’t know,” says Mangala Roy, of Changtor village in Malda.*

*“My husband and father-in-law regularly attend the meetings. Where do we women have the time? Who cares if we do or not?” says Nipu Roy of Hafteraj.*

*“No one bothers about telling us about meetings or that we should attend them. They come when they need labour or votes. Will attending meetings solve our problems? Will forming SHGs get us out of poverty?” asks Rinki Murmu of Bompur.*

It is really interesting that apart from two women (a Muslim woman in Khetura who was an adult literacy campaign volunteer) and another in Bagsorai, none of the women attend the gram sabha meetings. These two women also go with their men. The Muslim woman is a middle class one and the other a rich woman of the village. The 8 SHG members of course attend the group meetings regularly.

In spite of the much publicised participation of women in the Panchayati Raj Institutions in West Bengal, women in decision making positions is rather low compared to other states. This is revealed in the following table from a 2002 study (Raman, 2002).

**Table 19: Women in Decision Making Positions in PRIs**

State	% Women as GP Chairpersons	% Women as PS Chairpersons	% Women as ZP Chairpersons
Andhra Pradesh	--	33.76	30.00
Himachal Pradesh	36.62	31.94	33.33
Karnataka	33.33	33.71	35.00
Madhya Pradesh	38.66	26.80	37.78
Manipur	33.13	--	50.00
Uttar Pradesh	33.81	41.29	30.26
West Bengal	4.62	3.00	0.00
<b>INDIA</b>	40.10	33.75	32.28

Source: Raman 2002

GP=Gram Panchayat; PS=Panchayat Samiti; ZP= Zilla Parishad.

In West Bengal, elected women representatives comprised 35.5 percent in the GPs, 35.1 percent of the PS and 34.0 percent of the ZPs, fulfilling mandatory constitutional quotas. Interestingly, not a single woman headed the Zilla Parishads.

### ***Intra-Household Bargaining***

*“Why do you ask such questions? Don’t you know what the reality is? You are married yourself. You may claim that your husband discusses with you and then a decision is taken jointly. But that is not the truth. At best he may consult you or inform you,”* asks Subhadra Karmakar of Khetura to the married investigator on the question of intra-household decision making.

*“If my father-in-law or husband decides something, I have to obey. They decide everything but finally take my consent. I have to approve. They know better than me as I have no knowledge of the world outside”* says Kaushalya Sarkar, of Bagsorai.

*“What voice do I have? What choice do I have? I was married off when I was just 12, I am illiterate but my brothers went to school and completed class 10”* says Radha, 38, of Khetura.

In the study, the respondents were asked about their participation in decision making within the household. The issues were divided into 1) Women entering the labour market 2) Purchase of household assets 3) Investment in the education of children and the choice of the kind of school/ schooling vs. marriage 4) Access to health care and treatment 5) Marriage of children 6) Dealing with local government functionaries. The respondents were also asked whether there was any change in the processes of participation in the last decade, the factors supporting such participation and the barriers to the same.

The views that emerged, cutting across all castes, classes and locales, was really interesting.

- 1) There was an initial astonishment that one could even ask such a question, given that decision making was the prerogative of the men, be it fathers, brothers, fathers-in law, husbands, sons at various stages of the life cycle.

- 2) In so far as purchasing of household assets (especially consumer durables) some women said they had some say, but the initial and final decision was taken by the men.
- 3) When it came to girls' education, at least up to the primary level, the women did have a say, though they conceded that this was geared to finding a good groom.
- 4) In matters related to the marriage of children, the dominant opinion was that of the men, especially the age at which the marriage was to take place. However, some women said that they had some say in the choice of the groom especially when it came to matching the qualities of the groom and the dowry demanded. Of course there was a caveat: when it was noticed that the investigators were writing these things down, they would ask that it be written that the decisions were taken jointly.
- 5) In terms of the changes in the absolute powers of men to decide, the age of the woman in question has some influence. Also her position in society, measured in terms of the number of male children she has given birth to also make a contribution to this process.
- 6) The major facilitating factors come about in an interesting way in some cases. These typify bargaining in the true sense of the term, on a day to day basis. Several issues are raised together, in many the woman gives in but holds on to the major ones. Public embarrassment too is often used. Thus in one instance in Bagsorai, we found a woman tell us loudly about her husband's drinking so as to wrest from him the agreement not to marry off their daughter immediately but to allow her to continue for some more time in college.
- 7) We tried to compute whether the married women in our sample had any choice in the matter of their marriage and if marriage interrupted their studies. This is presented below

**Table 20: Free Choice in Marriage**

		<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percent</b>	<b>Valid Percent</b>	<b>Cumulative Percent</b>
<b>Valid</b>	NO	34	85.0	85.0	85.0
	YES	4	10.0	10.0	95.0
	not applicable	2	5.0	5.0	100.0
	<b>Total</b>	<b>40</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>100.0</b>	

Source: field survey

Only in four cases did the women have any choice or say in their marriage or the choice of the groom. Of the two 'not applicable' cases one is still unmarried though old by village standards (35) and the other is still studying. But does a free choice in marriage or "love marriage" as it is popularly known, really emancipate a woman? Does it make her free? *Bithika Karmakar of Bagsorai, a 25 year old housewife got married to Bijoy 11 years ago. She had never been to school but Bijoy had completed class 8. It was a love marriage. She was a Muslim, of the Tanti caste, orphaned at an early age, growing up in her grandmother's house when she met Bijoy. Today Bijoy works as a casual driver in Gajole while she is a homemaker. They have two daughters, 9 and 4, and a son who is just about 8 months old. Bithika joined an SHG formed by the local NGO but her*

husband did not like her attending meetings so she stopped. She does not mix with the neighbours too as Bijoy does not approve. He wanted a son, so she had to comply against her wishes. Nor does he let her use any contraceptives.

- 8) Girls' education can be stopped if a suitable groom is found. This gets societal approval, including of the women. A woman in Khetura, whose studies were stopped on finding a suitable match, said that she wanted to continue her studies but had to give in to her parental wishes. In any case, she would have to marry someday. However, it is not that there are no cases of resistance. But they are rare.

**Table 21: Study Interrupted for Marriage**

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	yes	15	37.5	37.5	37.5
	no	5	12.5	12.5	50.0
	never went to school	18	45.0	45.0	95.0
	not applicable	2	5.0	5.0	100.0
	Total	40	100.0	100.0	

Source: field survey

- 9) Dowry is on the increase, in both the districts, except amongst the STs like the Santals. Even those castes like the Bauri or the Bagdis that did not have a dowry, or paid a bride price, now have to pay to get their daughters married. This is true even amongst the Muslims. The amount varies according to the caste/class of the households and the qualifications of the would be spouses as well as the 'status of the family' but we found that even amongst the poorest agricultural labourers, an expenditure of Rs 40000 for a daughters wedding is not uncommon. For the upper castes/classes, the amount goes up to even Rs 10,00,000 at times. Given the spread of the knowledge of the laws against dowry demands, no one demands it directly; rather the dowry is given as necessary 'gifts.' Neither the parents of the groom or the bride have any say in this as apparently it is decided by the 'samaj' (society). This, in the views of many women and men leads to a low premium on daughters.

### **9: Violence against Women**

A report placed by the Home Minister in the State Assembly in the late 1990s showed that though there was a decline in crimes on the whole in West Bengal, crimes against women increased from 3947 in 1990 to 7489 in 1998. In 2005, 11887 crimes against women were registered according to the National Crimes Record Bureau (NRCB). This is in spite of the fact that, according to the NRCB a sizeable number of crimes against women go unreported due to the social stigma attached to them (Sanhita, 2002).

According to a report published in 2002 with the support of UNIFEM (Sanhita, 2002), the bulk of the crimes reported against women in West Bengal in 1999<sup>9</sup> were those of cruelty by husbands and relatives (55 percent), followed by molestation at 17 percent, and rape and kidnapping and abduction at 12 percent each. Cruelty by husbands and relatives at the all India level, however, formed only 36 percent of the total crimes against women and cases of molestation and sexual harassment are much more important at the national level.

It is interesting to look at the analyses in the above study of crimes against women in the districts. The district wise data of crimes against women showed that South 24 Parganas had the highest reportage of crimes against women at 938 for the year 1999 and was much ahead of the other districts. In fact, 70 percent of the crimes against women occurred in the south Bengal districts of North and South 24 Parganas, Medinipur, Bardhaman, Hugli, Haora and Nadia, along with Kolkata. These are also incidentally the more prosperous and high growth districts of the state. The northern and western parts of the state, on the other hand, showed smaller incidence of crimes against women. The contrast between Malda at 188 and Burdwan at 566 is stark (Table 22).

**Table 22: Crimes against Women**

<i>District</i>	<i>Crime Rate (per lakh of population) (%)</i>	<i>Incidence of Crime</i>	<i>Rank</i>
S 24 Parganas	16.4	938	1
Dakshin Dinajpur	14.3	171	15
Nadia	13.0	499	7
Koch Bihar	12.2	265	10
Hugli	12.1	528	5
Kolkata	11.6	509	6
N 24Parganas	10.6	772	2
Uttar Dinajpur	10.4	200	13
Birbhum	10.0	256	11
Jalpaiguri	9.6	270	9
Bardhaman	9.4	566	4
Medinipur	8.8	734	3
Murshidabad	7.7	363	8
Malda	7.1	188	14
Purulia	6.7	171	17
Darjiling	6.6	86	18
Bankura	6.1	170	16
Haora	5.7	213	12

Source: Sanhita, 2002

In terms of kinds of crime, North and South 24 Parganas and Medinipur reported very high numbers of crimes associated with domestic violence – cruelty by husbands and

<sup>9</sup> Unfortunately, more recent studies of this kind are not available.

relatives and dowry deaths. Kolkata, on the other hand, showed high reportage and crime rates for molestation and sexual harassment (sexual harassment does not mean harassment in the workplace alone here, but sexual harassment every where). In cases of kidnapping and abduction, Kolkata, Medinipur and South 24 Parganas showed high incidence. The highest number of rapes was reported in North and South 24 Parganas.

Amongst the various crimes against women, it was in the case of dowry deaths and cruelty by husband and relatives that the growth was the most in West Bengal. In 1999 - 2000, the Legislative Assembly's Estimates Committee for Police Matters reported that in the preceding eight years, reports of dowry deaths and cruelty by husband and relatives had increased a great deal, especially in village areas. The Committee felt this was a result of greater awareness of rights amongst women (Sanhita, 2002).

According to the DHDR-Malda (2007:157), a 2006 study on the dimensions that child marriage, dowry related offences and trafficking of women and children have assumed in the six North Bengal districts [Koch Bihar, Jalpaiguri, Darjeeling, Uttar and Dakshin Dinajpur and Malda] undertaken by the Centre for Women's Studies at North Bengal University sheds considerable light on the critical crime situations that confront women in Malda district. Recent crime records reveal that the bulk of crimes against women pertain either to marital offences relating to cruelty and torture by their spouses or in-laws (under section 498A IPC) and cruelty, torture and abetment to suicide (under 498A/306 IPC); or to crimes against the women's person such as rape offences (under 376 IPC), criminal assaults to outrage modesty (254 IPC) and the kidnapping/forced marriage or procurement of minor girls (63/366/366A IPC). Although the number of such cases registered by the district police varies from year to year, the highest number of cases every year are registered under sections 498A and 306 (cruelty, torture and abetment to suicide), pointing to the insecure situations that many women face in their marital homes. The arrest record also shows that the highest numbers of arrests each year are made against police cases in this category.

On the other hand, trafficking seems highly underreported compared to the ground situation that emerges from reports by NGOs. The DHDR-Malda, states that several border districts of northern Bengal form a conduit through which women from eastern Nepal and Indian states like Assam are channelled into the flesh trade or into work bondage at locations far from their homes. It cites the 2006 study in saying that the trafficking networks also draw victims from women living in these districts, including from Malda. Of course, not all women who fall prey to traffickers get into the flesh trade. Several women victims, reports the DHDR-Malda leave their homes willingly on the promise of decent work but then are forced to work in coercive environments at brick kilns, stone quarries and the like, where they are enslaved without adequate monetary compensation and also frequently subjected to extreme physical and sexual abuse. Women from Malda have also been trafficked to northern states like Haryana and Rajasthan, to be sold as brides to widowers and other aged spouses.

The study did not directly deal with the issue of violence. However, very often the issue was raised by the women themselves. Sometimes it was an outlet, sometimes it was a

form of resistance, with perhaps the idea that since it was being written down, the husband would be deterred for sometime out of a fear that some action might be taken against him Thus Jaheda of Khetura started by saying that her husband was a very nice man and loved her and encouraged her working. But at the same time, when her little daughter started saying that her father beats her mother, Jaheda did not discourage her. Since there were other women present, perhaps apprehending that she might be reported, she said, “How can I vituperate him? He is my husband. Men do beat sometimes. It’s their nature.”

The other opinion that came across, even in some of the FGDs was that women should be beaten if they commit some fault, like not looking after the children or the household. Alcohol too was held responsible in a major way.

We present below a case study of a woman who had to deal with violence (in Box 3).

**Box 3: A victim of Violence**

Suchitra, a tribal girl, was married at the age of 16. Her parents arranged the match. She used to live near Malda town with her husband. Suchitra is now 23 and has a four year old son. She also has a brother who is appearing for his Madhyamik this year. Three months ago she ran away from her marital home and has been living with Amir since then. She claims that her previous husband would routinely beat her; sometimes she would bleed profusely. He was an alcoholic. Amir was a friend of his and decided to ‘save’ Suchitra from her fate. They eloped and she now resides with his family in Bagsorai. She says that there are now no problems with her present mother-in-law but the latter had fussed at first. Interestingly her mother-in-law had demanded a divorce. She has filed the papers in the Malda court for a legal separation from her ex-husband. Only then will she marry Amir, her present partner. Suchitra’s son lives with her father in another village. Although she explains it is because of an indescribable bond between the grandfather and grandson, one suspects that the Mudi family is reluctant to feed another mouth as Amir is currently unemployed or maybe they will not accept someone else’s child as one of their own. The family does not sell its produce from the land; it is used for direct consumption. The two sons run the household. The elder son repairs cycles and the youngest is in Kerala as a construction laborer. Suchitra’s husband is unemployed. Suchitra and her elder sister-in-law, Saraswati, claim that their husbands do not drink or resort to physical assault.

Suchitra complains of headaches, dizziness and frequent fainting. Her blood pressure seems to be low. She has been undergoing extreme emotional duress in the last few months because of her new alliance with Amir. She has lost her appetite and skips meals regularly. He husband often rebukes her for neglecting her health. Suchitra is recovering but says that the emotional stress is not assuaged even when there is less tension in the household now. Separation from her son may be a significant cause for her trauma. She is not part of any centre or samiti unlike her sister-in-law. Suchitra says that she used to be a regular at the samitis but now is quite tired. She has little clue as to what goes on in the centre for women nearby and is not keen on joining anytime soon.

It is not that the women are not aware of their gender rights. Reporting the results of a survey of 300 women in the district, the DHDR-Malda (2007:166) states, “The survey results also provided strong evidence of a change in the attitudes of rural women towards

their gender rights. Most respondents were already sensitised about violations of women's personal rights that take place in marital and other situations and many were adequately informed about channels for redress. Among Muslim women for instance, 93.6 percent were well informed about their rights to reclaim *meher* in the event of breakdown of marriage, as sanctioned by Muslim personal law. No incidents of polygamy had occurred within the personal experience of the Muslim respondents, even though the practice is supported under Shariat law. Only two Muslim respondents had separated from their spouses. Among Hindu women too, a large number (89.2 percent) knew about their marital rights and the steps for legal redress against domestic violence. The study showed that peer support received from other rural women and women's groups had a noteworthy impact on the incidence of violence against women."

However, being aware of one's rights and the power to actualise them are two different issues. In this context the SHGs can play crucial roles, by providing economic empowerment and also the necessary peer pressure.

### **10: Land Reforms, Property Relations and Women**

A discussion on Gender Caste and Growth, especially in the context of West Bengal necessitates looking into the property relations. West Bengal is noted for its land reforms (registering sharecroppers and also redistribution of land). Moreover, the current laws entail women a share in the paternal property even after marriage.

In the field, we did not find much evidence of women having property titles in their names, even in the upper castes /classes in both the districts. In the FGDs, the issue of women's rights to property often came up. The responses were typically the following:

- 1) From the men: we have to give so much for the marriage and dowry, so how can we give land on top of that?
- 2) From the women: we know we have the right to property but we gave it up voluntarily to our brothers; and we know so little about property matters so its best that it be in our husband's name.

However, in Khetura, several cases were found where men had property registered in the name of their spouse, but the latter did not know the details, even if she knew that she had some land. We were told that this was done to evade the land ceiling laws. An interesting case study that reveals the attitudes towards property and women emerged from Khetura. Prasun, a Hindu, eloped with Tasleema, a Muslim girl some time back. Tasleema's father has a substantial amount of land. He had betrothed Tasleema to his brother's son to keep the property within the family. A search party was sent after Tasleema and Prasun and they were brought back to the village. It is not known whether they actually married. Tasleema's mother allegedly told the neighbours that even if her daughter came back pregnant, she would ensure that she get a divorce as so much land cannot go out of the family.

As such, the land reforms programme in West Bengal ignored the issue of women's right to property in its peak period. Joint pattas (titles) only started in the mid-1990s; prior to

that when most of the land was redistributed pattas were granted only to the head of the household, typically a male. Though some cases of pattas being granted singly to women did occur, the incidence of joint pattas and single pattas to women remained very low. Joint pattas account for less than 10 percent of the total while pattas in the name of women as single holders account for less than 6 percent of the total (WBHDR, 2004:35).

Another trend in recent times has been the rapid increase in landlessness among rural households, something that affects both men and women, despite the continuing process of vested land distribution. NSS data indicates that the proportion of landless rural households in West Bengal increased from 39.6 percent in 1987-88 to 41.6 percent in 1993-94 to as much as 49.8 percent in 1999-2000 (WBHDR, 2004:39). The WBHDR mentions that this occurred along with a substantial diversification of rural employment to non-agricultural activities, but the direction is not clear. However, it may be the case that for small and marginal farmers, the rising input prices and stagnant crop prices, the reduced access to institutional credit and other agricultural extension services, as well as the increased mechanization of agriculture, holding on to land is no longer a viable option.

Furthermore, a study found that on an average, 13 percent of the pattadars who had got land had lost it by 2001 (WBHDR, 2004:40). The figure for Burdwan was 11.93 percent and for Malda it was 10.41 percent. It must be noted that on an average the amount of land redistributed was rather small (1/5<sup>th</sup> of a bigha, 1acre=3 bighas average). The unviability of such small holdings in the face of rising costs and low returns as a reason is paramount, this is coupled with the institutional lack of credit. Thus, in Burdwan, in 1999, only 40 percent of the pattadars were involved with the cooperative credit system. The agricultural extension services too are weak, despite the involvement of panchayats: another study found that only 13 percent of the pattadars had received the prescribed minikit of inputs and in general there is a lack of access to comprehensive extension services for cultivation and other related activities such as livestock rearing and fish farming (WBHDR, 2004:42). It must be kept in mind that most of the pattadars who have lost/alienated their land holdings are from the SC/ST communities.

In our study, there were several instances of pattadars alienating their land to meet the dowry and marriage expenses of their daughters, especially in Burdwan. However, it was not clear whether the alienation was permanent or in the form of a long lease.

## **11: CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

**West Bengal**, has been one of the fastest growing states in the country from the period 1993-94. With a successful programme of land reforms (registration of sharecroppers and redistribution of land), the state has been able to reduce the stark poverty visible even to casual observers in the 1970s. The state is held as an example of successful decentralised government.

In this study an attempt was made to understand the impact of the contemporary growth processes on gender and caste in West Bengal. A specific area of interest was analysing the causalities and implications of low labour force participation rates of women in West Bengal. An attempt was made to understand the processes that lead to new forms of gender inequality, in the context of class and caste differentiation, by examining the constraints and the positive factors in the participation of women of different castes and classes in the growth processes. The analyses sought to enunciate these factors in sub-regional contexts within the state.

To better understand the processes of change in rural West Bengal, the study relied on qualitative methods, taking leads from the secondary literature and the quantitative analyses carried out at the all-India level. Two districts, Burdwan and Malda were selected in terms of their HDI and GDI ranks. In each district, two village clusters were chosen from a community development block, a high growth one in Burdwan and a low growth one in Malda. The village clusters were chosen in such a way that they reflected both urban influences and remoteness as well as had the maximum representation in terms of social and economic groups that is castes, tribals, Muslims and Christians as well as economic strata. For the caste categories, the study did not confine itself to the administrative categories such as general, OBC and SC but in a particular village chose respondents from each *jati* (such as Brahmin, Aguri, bagdi, Rajbansi and so on). This was to get a better understanding of the village dynamics, as *jati* and not administrative categorisations are the lived realities of the people and do shape relations in the village. Sometimes, like in the remote cluster in Malda, when it was found that a village comprised members of a single caste/ethnic grouping, typically descended from a common ancestor, an adjacent village was taken to get the representation. In any case, it was found that typically a cluster of villages in these areas have a lot of interdependence and inter-linkages in terms of labour, markets and also in the shaping of mores and norms.

### ***Key Findings***

The most important finding of this study is that gender equality remains an issue of serious concern in West Bengal. On the face of it, women in West Bengal are projected as being better off than their counterparts say in Bihar but the ground realities present a very different situation.

Women remain subject to the male priorities, prerogatives and choices in almost every sphere: work, education, decision making, participation in governance processes, irrespective of caste and class, in both the regions. Gender discrimination manifests itself through intricate and complex inter-related ways, only some of which are visible through conventional indicators.

At the core of this is the psyche that *meyera porer sampatti* (women are others property) or *biye to ditei hobe* (she will have to be married off). Early marriages prevail, although in the upper castes/classes this is changing. The phenomenon of early marriages is linked to the tremendous value still attached to women's chastity and the need to contain their sexuality within marriage. The prestige and social position of a family, in relation to not

only others of the same caste /ethnic group/religion but also in the village still crucially depends on the daughters getting married in good time, that is soon after puberty. While there is now rough gender parity in terms of school enrolment at the primary level, since primary education is deemed necessary by all, the 'need to get her married' was cited as a major reason for withdrawal of girl children at the secondary level. This is not to imply that there are no other reasons for such withdrawals. Essentially, education for girls is deemed a necessity to get her married: even the upper castes/classes often said that unless a girl has passed at least class 12, her marriage prospects are difficult. And women who get highly educated do find getting married problematic. Spinsters and their families face tremendous social opprobrium. Within the family too brothers do not like the idea of feeding a dependent sister, looking upon her as an 'unwanted guest'.

Interestingly, child marriage was a major phenomenon amongst the upper castes/classes of Bengal, often called the "bhadrolok" till the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Today, while there are indications of this changing in the rural areas, with the upper castes/classes sending their daughters for higher education (though the rationale still remains of finding a suitable match), the phenomenon of 'bhadrolokization' has permeated to the working castes/classes. It maybe considered a form of Sanskritization. The scramble for grooms and the economic prosperity compared to the 1970s has led to the introduction of dowry even in castes/religions where it was uncommon earlier, and also raised the dowry rates tremendously.

In terms of education, while there is a gender parity at the primary level in the regions chosen for this study, the disparity increases as one goes higher and higher. While marriage is a major reason for withdrawal of girls from secondary schooling, other important factors include poor supply infrastructure. Given the social insecurity and increase in violence against girls and women in the countryside (only some of it is reflected in the official data), it is not unusual to for many parents to withdraw their girl children from school and ultimately get her married off. Of course, for both boys and girls, the quality of education is rather low, pointing to the need for greater public investment in education.

Female workforce participation has historically been low in West Bengal's villages. This is partly due to the nature of the agrarian economy and the fact that working as agricultural labourers was seen as the domain of the lower caste women. In fact, unless severely distressed, upper caste men, both amongst the Hindus and Muslims, would not work as agricultural labourers. Today, apart from the phenomenon of bhadralokisation mentioned above, the changing nature of agrarian production has lowered the availability of work for both men and women. The new non-agricultural opportunities that are coming up in the areas that have benefited from the growth processes preclude the inclusion of women. The present day educational levels, quality and type further exclude women from such jobs. This again points to the need for taking a fresh look at the overall education policy and gearing it to the needs of the changing nature of markets due to the changed growth processes, on the one hand, and providing support to women to engage in a range of traditional and non-traditional activities, on the other.

In terms of decision making, given the kind of narrowing of the spaces for women found in the study, including the inability of women to question their early marriages, many felt that it matters little if their men discuss whether to purchase some household goods or not. While in some instances, probably to 'keep face' they said they were consulted, in most cases it was the prerogative of the male. However, increasingly, the decision to send girl children to primary school at least appears to be the domain of women.

It is often perceived that the *bhadrolok* ethos acts as a deterrent to gender violence in Bengali society. However, this was not the case the study found. Gender violence is increasing, something that is reflected in the official data too. The increase is also coincident with the period of high growth. It is difficult to say whether this is linked to expanding consumerism, unemployment or simply that men still perceive and keep to themselves the roles of providers. A pointer to this is the feeling across all social groups and regions that a woman should stay at home, homemaking being her primary responsibility, and that in cloistering her or withdrawing her from the workforce enhances the social prestige. This is also reflected in the control that men have over women socializing with other women, mixing with other castes, attending SHG or even Panchayati Raj Institution meetings. While in West Bengal castes are not as polarized as in say Uttar Pradesh or Tamil Nadu, and voting does not take place along caste lines, caste feelings and stereotypes remain rather strong when it comes to the women breaking barriers to form bonds of marriage or even getting together to build group solidarity<sup>10</sup>. The men and women too adhere to these stereotypes and invoke them when necessary. As such, women are not given much space in the public domain and even when they do, they are denied leadership roles. So ultimately women have two choices. If qualified, they seek 'safe' jobs like teaching or as ICDS workers or build up their images as good homemakers, in the security of their homes. Giving birth to male children adds to this image.

In terms of health, while the health infrastructure is better in the high growth regions and health awareness is rather high across all castes and classes, a lot more is needed in terms of public investment. The high incidence of anaemia amongst women of all castes is another pointer, however, to continued gender discrimination at home.

The silent but effective forms of gender discrimination get manifested in women being denied property, something that is reflected even in the state practices, and making women accept and perhaps internalize the justification of the denial. The state practices are changing somewhat but the pace has to be accelerated.

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<sup>10</sup> In public discourses, both written and spoken, the Bengali *bhadrolok* do not speak of castes nowadays. This permeates to the village level. However, segregation along caste lines still remains strong for women. An example is the reconstruction of the dynamics of the Hindu cremation ground in Galsi village. Galsi was and still is to a certain extent a Brahmin dominant village. The Sarpanch too is a Brahmin whose ancestors were the zamindars. Once upon a time, in the crematorium, there were two pyres, one for the Brahmins and another for the SCs. Sometime ago, a common pyre was built using technologies to save wood. Today it stands unused, right in the middle of the crematorium. A Brahmin leader said that they did not have any problems with it, but the "women objected to being cremated with the *chotoloks* so we do not use it. And since we don't, how can the others?"

Finally, due to the impacts of growth, the traditional spaces that women had and the institutions, including the joint family and kin-network, the *para saalish* that protected whatever rights they had are fast getting eroded. Nuclearization of families is on the increase. With the growth of a large body of unemployed, semi-educated youth who take on themselves the roles of the ‘guardians’ of everything and everyone (locally known as *Dadas*) positing themselves as ‘party workers’ though very often the actual leaders deny their existence, women are forced to take recourse to them to redress their grievances against say violence. The ‘justice’ that is meted out, if at all, depends on the closeness of the errant husband to these youth. Very often the husband himself is a part of this faction.

Essentially, then the women exclusive constraints (occupational segregation, mobility, domestic responsibilities) are getting reinforced due to caste norms being re-invented and also the new informal institutions such as the growth of the *dada* culture. This is aided by the contemporary education systems and the weak enforcement of laws to protect women against violence, including the violence inherent in dowry and child marriages.

### **Recommendations**

1. West Bengal too, like other states of the country, has suffered from the impacts of a structural adjustment programme, essentially leading to cutbacks in public expenditure. This has critically affected education and health provisioning as well as improving communications. The need for allocating greater public expenditure and increasing the overall social development budget is urgent.
2. New and innovative ways need to be found to generate the additional resources. These can come from innovative fiscal measures, building up on say the way many panchayats tax vehicles to maintain roads. In fact, the panchayats should be allowed to mobilize greater resources than at present. Also public-private partnerships can be tried out, but the control and regulation has to be with the people’s institutions.
3. The education policies need to be reworked to promote skill building and create an employable workforce. A special focus has to be on the hitherto excluded, such as the SCs/STs and women from these sections. The skills training needs to be followed up by placements or provisioning of credit for those who prefer to remain self-employed. In fact, in the area of skill-training, there is a lot of scope for public-private partnerships.
4. A renewed attention has to be given on improving the overall quality of education and learning outcomes, ensuring universal education for all children till at least grade 8. The responsibility of the primary education delivery may be given to the jurisdiction of the panchayati raj institutions. Where the SSK kinds of programmes are underway, it is important to avoid such systems becoming another means of societal discrimination in school education. Such systems need to be integrated into the wider public education system as soon as possible. Adult literacy and continuing education programmes too need to be revived.

5. The low nutrition and health status of women too will require urgent attention. This could be through enhancing the quality and quantity of mid-day meals, by ensuring higher budgetary allocations and more monitoring.
6. Ensuring women's land rights, given the legal provisioning for the same, needs to be prioritized. Giving land rights becomes meaningless unless adequate credit supply is ensured and other support services made accessible to women.
7. For the protection of women, the present set of laws is sufficient. More laws and policies are not needed. Effective implementation is needed. One way is to generate awareness and build up male responsibility. The panchayat system can play a major role in this process, but the involvement of women in top decision making positions has to be increased.

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## Appendix 1:

### **THE STUDY METHODOLOGY**

#### *1: Choice of the State*

With its State Domestic Product (SDP) growing annually at compound rate of 7 percent and per capita 5.4 percent in the period 1993-94 to 2000-01, it is one of the states with the fastest growth rates in the country. This provided a primary rationale in the choice of West Bengal for this study. High growth rates apart, the success of the land reform measures, the proclaimed decentralised approach to development through people's participation on the one hand and the high levels of gender discrimination evidenced for instance by one of the lowest female work-force participation rates in the country were other important considerations for selecting the state. The final factor in making the choice was that it is a state where DFID is working and intends to continue to do so in the future.

#### *2: Choice of the Districts, Blocks, Villages and Respondents*

In the conceptualization stages of the study, it was decided that two districts would be chosen in each state selected for the sub-national study. One district would be a high growth one, with a representative distribution of populations (General, OBC, SC and ST and also a representation of minorities in terms of religion). Within the high growth district, a high growth development block would be selected and within the low growth district a block that is backward would be taken up for the study. In each block, two villages would be selected, one close to the block headquarters, to get an urban representation and the other somewhat at a distance. Logistical factors would determine the ultimate choice of the villages, given the time constraints.

For West Bengal, relatively good data is available for the districts in terms of the district domestic products as well as the other indices of the overall performance. Moreover, it is a state where a comprehensive human development report has been published.

Using the data from the WBHDR, two districts, Burdwan (currently spelt as Bardhaman) and Malda (spelt as Maldah now) were selected for the study. Malda has the lowest HDI rank in the state. Its gender development index (GDI) is the lowest too. Burdwan ranks towards the top (5<sup>th</sup>) in the state in terms of HDI and 7<sup>th</sup> in terms of GDI (cf. tables 1 & 2).

Table 1: Human Development Indices by District

	Health Index	Income Index	Education Index	HDI	HDI Rank
Darjeeling	0.73	0.49	0.72	0.65	4
Jalpaiguri	0.61	0.38	0.60	0.53	10
Koch Bihar	0.50	0.41	0.65	0.52	11
Dinajpur	0.62	0.39	0.53	0.51	13
Malda	0.49	0.36	0.48	0.44	17
Murshidabad	0.57	0.29	0.52	0.46	15
Birbhum	0.53	0.27	0.61	0.47	14
Bardhaman	0.74	0.47	0.71	0.64	5
Nadia	0.65	0.41	0.66	0.57	9
Kolkata	0.82	0.73	0.80	0.78	1
N 24 Parganas	0.72	0.49	0.76	0.66	3
Hugli	0.77	0.46	0.67	0.63	6
Bankura	0.67	0.26	0.62	0.52	11
Purulia	0.61	0.18	0.55	0.45	16
Medinipur	0.68	0.45	0.74	0.62	7
Haora	0.77	0.53	0.75	0.68	2
S 24 Parganas	0.71	0.40	0.68	0.60	8
West Bengal	0.70	0.43	0.69	0.61	

Source: WBHDR, 2004: 13

Table 2: Gender Development Indices by District

	Health Index	Income Index	Education Index	GDI	GDI Rank
Darjeeling	0.731	0.356	0.714	0.600	2
Jalpaiguri	0.614	0.281	0.581	0.492	11
Koch Bihar	0.497	0.287	0.628	0.471	13
Dinajpur	0.616	0.291	0.527	0.478	12
Malda	0.491	0.291	0.465	0.416	17
Murshidabad	0.566	0.176	0.527	0.423	16
Birbhum	0.533	0.178	0.595	0.435	14
Bardhaman	0.740	0.270	0.669	0.560	7
Nadia	0.649	0.215	0.653	0.506	9
Kolkata	0.824	0.320	0.783	0.642	1
N 24 Parganas	0.721	0.219	0.752	0.564	6
Hugli	0.764	0.259	0.720	0.581	3
Bankura	0.662	0.215	0.605	0.494	10
Purulia	0.606	0.161	0.506	0.424	15
Medinipur	0.683	0.323	0.728	0.578	4
Haora	0.773	0.194	0.742	0.570	5
S 24 Parganas	0.705	0.192	0.666	0.521	8
West Bengal	0.697	0.270	0.681	0.549	

Source: WBHDR, 2004: 14.

It maybe asked why districts that rank higher than Burdwan were not chosen for this study. This was primarily due to the fact that Kolkata is an urban metropolis and Haora too falls in this urban conglomerate. Darjeeling's growth rate is primarily due to the tea industry and the other characteristics sought, that is the representative-ness of the various social and religious categories would are not found in the plantations. Moreover, the difficulty of the terrain ruled out its selection. Hugli and Medinipur were considered but finally rejected as the surcharged atmosphere in these two districts due to the protests against the acquisition of land for industrial purposes ( in Singur and Nandigram) made the prospects of a field based survey daunting, more so due to the limitations of time. Also, historically, Burdwan has had one of the highest rates of growth of the district domestic product. In 2003-04, Burdwan, with a District Domestic Product of Rs 19233.73 crores in terms of current prices, ranked 3<sup>rd</sup> in the state, after Kolkata and Medinipur. An additional factor considered was that it was the second district in the country to be declared 100 percent literate.

In Burdwan, Galsi-2 development block was chosen as it emerged after discussions with key officials that it was one of the fastest growing blocks in the district and it satisfied the other criteria too of the study. In Malda, Gajole block was chosen, it being one of the backward ones of the district. Other backward blocks were inaccessible during the study period due to the monsoonal flooding.

In Galsi, two villages were taken up for the study. One was Khetura, about 2 km from the block headquarters and the other was Galsi itself. The region has seen tremendous prosperity in the recent years, accentuated by the development of the Galsi bazaar after the widening of the national highway. The Galsi village is the Gram Panchayat (GP) headquarters too.

In Gajole, the village Bagsorai in the Majra GP was chosen as the one closest to the Block headquarters. Gajole is gradually expanding as an urban locale. In terms of remote villages, the study chose some in the Changtor-Bhashakandor-Hatinda- area. The reason for this was that Bagsorai has a Christian population too which other villages in the GP did not have. The remote villages, all adjacent to each other spatially, have households descended from a common ancestor and thus belong to the same caste/ethnic group. Thus Bhashakandor-Changtor is a Rajbansi (SC) village, while Saharpur is a totally Santal (ST) village. These villages are also some of the most backward villages in the district as per official records.

### *3 Techniques of Data Collection*

At the very outset, it must be mentioned that this was a qualitative study carried out to get a better understanding of the processes of the impact of growth and women's participation in such processes. Leads from quantitative analyses were isolated and their ramifications in the lives of the women were sought to be understood. In order to do this the following methods were relied on;

- 1) Discussions and interviews with key informants and officials
- 2) Focus group discussions with both men and women
- 3) Special purpose interviews with women
- 4) Interviews with employers
- 5) Case Histories and Case Studies
- 6) Observations

Caste was taken as a social category that is lived in the villages. So it was sought to obtain special purpose interviews with representatives of each caste (*jati*) and not just in terms of the administrative categories such as SC/ST/OBC. Thus in the Burdwan villages, we interviewed and had FGDs with Bagdis and Bauris though both belong to the SC category. Similarly, where possible, FGDs were held with men and women of each caste/religious category and not just in terms of the administrative categories.

In terms of numbers then,

- 40 women (20 in each district) were chosen for the special purpose interviews.
- 4 men were chosen for the in-depth interviews as they represented some very interesting cases
- 15 FGDs were conducted in Burdwan district. On an average, there were 6 persons in each FGD
- 13 FGDs were conducted in Malda district. On an average, there were 5 persons in each FGD

- At least 10 employers were interviewed in each district. These included agriculturists who employ labour even if infrequently.
- 4-5 case studies were developed in each district to understand better the processes at work

A few additional issues need mentioning here. While the selection of the respondents within a caste/ethnic/religious group was done at random, holding FGDs, especially the male ones did pose many problems in Burdwan. This was partly due to the busy agricultural season and also to the suspicion generated because of the tense atmosphere created by incidents at Singur and Nandigram.

In Malda too, the suspicion was there but it was of a different nature. There talking to the women, without the men interfering, was a major problem. It was variously thought that we were probably women traffickers or agents of the rival political party (Congress in case of CPM supporters and CPM in case of Congress supporters) and so on. The panchayat officials were not cooperative and refused to even discuss issues, leave alone secondary data. In this context, it would be relevant to mention the appropriateness of focus group discussions under conditions of high differentiation along political lines, even when the group in question is socially and economically homogenous. This applies equally to women as to men. The other issue relates to making women talk about the relationships with the men in their lives. In the West Bengal context, it is deemed improper for women to criticize their fathers, brothers or husbands. Very often it was found that the women would suddenly stop speaking on the apprehension that their men would get to hear about what they said from the others in the group, something that might have adverse consequences for them later on. The same very often applied to men (as well as women) when it came to discussing developmental issues as development delivery follows political lines in West Bengal.

Another issue that arose while conducting the FGDs was the issues that were sought to be focussed on as inherent from the formats prepared earlier. A focus of the FGD formats was on the employers and employment opportunities, in fact preferential rankings of the employers was sought to be done so as to identify them for inclusion in the sample. While such efforts might look very neat on paper, they often become academic exercises that do not yield much in the field situation. In the field, it was realised very early on that it was not possible to do such rankings as implicit in them was the issue of free choice: the potential employees could freely choose their employers. It turned out that this choice was not existent in either of the districts. Even within the same set of skills (or unskills) we found the existence of linkages developed over time between the employers and their employees, preferences along caste and religious lines and so on. Ultimately, it was decided to abandon the prior formats and the ranking exercises and new sets of issues relevant to the study, like the social, political and economic lives, the development scenarios, the perceptions of work, health and nutrition, education of children and so on were focussed on. We also allowed the groups to discuss any other issue they felt relevant.

In Burdwan as well as Malda, speaking to employers posed the biggest problem as it was repeatedly alleged that we were from the income tax department.

We followed a saturative approach; that is, when information on a particular aspect had been covered sufficiently, we did not try to get more information on that subject. This enabled us to save time. Further, when a woman felt harassed or embarrassed to answer a particular question, like say those relating to decision making, we did not pursue the issue any further.

At any one time, there were four women and one male master's degree holders working as investigators in this study. They were trained before starting the work as well as in the field, especially in methods of listening to people living in poverty. The senior researcher was present at all times in the field.

### *5: Details of the Sample for the Study*

#### **BURDWAN**

##### FGDs

##### *Khetura*

##### Women

- 1) Muslim Students
- 2) Muslim Kantha Stitching (embroidery) workers (Poor)
- 3) Brahmin (General Category)
- 4) Ruidas (SC) (poor)
- 5) Bauri (SC) (poor)
- 6) Santal (ST) (poor)

##### Men

- 1) Muslim small farmers
- 2) Santal (ST) men (poor)
- 3) Bauri (SC men) (poor)
- 4) Ruidas (SC men) (poor)

##### *Galsi*

##### Women

- 1) Brahmin Rich
- 2) Brahmin Poor
- 3) Santal (poor)
- 4) Napit & Sunri (OBC) (middle class)
- 5) Muslim (Poor)
- 6) Bagdi (Poor)

## Men

- 1) Bagdi (poor)
- 2) Santal
- 3) Mixed group (Brahmins, Muslims and Bagdis, mostly poor, one or two rich traders/ agriculturists)

## Bompur

- 1) Santal men (poor)
- 2) Santal women (poor)

## Employers

- 1) Muslim paddy dealer (male), middle scale
- 2) Brahmin agriculturist's wife, middle agriculturist, she deals with the remuneration of the labour, terms and conditions and so on.
- 3) Embroidery contractor –trader, general caste, has a large number of women engaged in piece work in various villages including Khetura
- 4) Steel Furniture Muslim male, small scale
- 5) Carpenter, muslim male, small scale
- 6) Puffed rice factory, muslim, male, small scale
- 7) Mini Rice Mill, Muslim, male
- 8) Hotelier (Dhaba), female, general, middle scale dhaba
- 9) Mason, muslim, male, engages a few helper depending on needs
- 10) Tailor, general, female, small shop employing four –six women in Galsi bazar
- 11) Brahmin beauty parlour owner, female, three employees
- 12) Fisherman with large number of ponds, Male, SC, one of the biggest fishing businessmen in the region
- 13) Grille factory, muslim, male, small scale
- 14) Cell phone franchisee cum shop, male, general, one of the biggest franchisees in the district, 6-8 employees, depending on requirements and season
- 15) Hero Honda showroom, male, muslim, four employees
- 16) Muslim male agriculturist, middle farmer, employs labour to carry out agricultural tasks
- 17) Muslim male poultry business, small, one employee.

## **MALDA**

### FGDs

#### BagSORAI

## Women

1. Santal non Christian (ST), middle class
2. Mudi (ST), middle class

3. Desia (General), rich
4. Polley (SC), poor
5. Santal Christian (ST), rich
6. Ghosh (General), rich
7. Karmakar (General), middle class
8. Santal School girls (mixed economic category)

#### Men

1. Santal non Christian (ST), middle class
2. Santal Christian (ST); rich
3. Mudi (ST), middle class
4. Desia (General), poor
5. Polley (SC), poor
6. Mixed group (Mudi, Desia, Polley)

#### Bhashakandor-Changtor Cluster

#### Women

1. Rajbanshi middle class
2. Rajsbanshi poor
3. Santal middle class

#### Men

1. Rajbanshi middle class
2. Santal middle class
3. Santal poor

#### Employers

1. Petrol Pump, ST (Christian), male
2. Brick Kiln Owner, OBC, male
3. Jute Depot, Muslim, male
4. Dhaba (eatery), General Caste, male
5. Milk products (household industry), General Caste, male
6. Poultry farm owner, ST, male
7. Agriculturists (one each from General, SC, ST) in each cluster, all small/marginal farmers
8. Petty shopkeeper, SC, male
9. Sweet-shop owner, General caste, male.

The table below gives the characteristics of the 40 women interviewed across the 2 districts.

**Characteristics of the Women Interviewed in the 2 Districts**

		DISTRICT		Total
		Burdwan	Malda	
SOCIAL CAT	GEN	6	6	12
	OBC	4	0	4
	MUSLIM	3	2	5
	ST	3	7	10
	SC	3	6	9
Total		19	21	40

Source: field survey