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Hidden from the data

Landholding patterns and women's low work participation rates
in West Bengal, India

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Abstract: Compared with most other Indian states, women’s reported work participation rates have historically been low in West Bengal. This trend is more prominent in rural areas. Historians have tried to explain this phenomenon in terms of culture and the ideology of domesticity. While persisting cultural prohibitions must have some explanatory merit, it is difficult to understand how social attitudes have remained significantly unchanged over a long period of time in a state where there is considerable economic distress. The objective of this paper is to understand whether economic factors help to sustain cultural traits, and if so, what those economic factors are. More specifically, it tries to see whether the low visibility of working women in published data can also be explained by factors such as landholding patterns. The paper is based on secondary data.

Key words: women’s work participation rates, agriculture, landholding patterns, West Bengal, India

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1 Introduction

Discussions of women's remunerated work in West Bengal have been dominated by the marginalization thesis. Compared with most other Indian states, women's reported work participation rate has historically been low in this region. This trend is more prominent in rural areas. Historians have tried to explain this phenomenon as a combined outcome of the breakdown of traditional industries due to the partial modernization of the colonial economy, women's exclusion from the emerging modern industries, the emergence of the concept of separate spheres of work, and the cult of domesticity. While sociocultural attitudes towards work must have some explanatory merit, it is difficult to understand how such attitudes have continued to influence women's work behaviour for more than a century in a state characterized by much economic hardship. The continuing low participation of women in waged work, especially in the rural areas of the state, seems all the more problematic when we consider the fact that women's work participation rates are usually high in India's other rice-cultivating regions. Indeed, the other two major rice-cultivating states, Tamil Nadu and the former Andhra Pradesh, have the highest female work participation rates in India. Recent studies have drawn attention to the problem of the invisibility of women's work in official data. This problem, however, applies more or less to every Indian state. This paper explores whether there are some unique economic features—such as specific patterns of landholding, and the experience of failed industrialization in the state—that have continued since colonial times, and which have thus helped to sustain cultural traits. It tries to understand whether homeboundness and domesticity are causes or outcomes of certain material conditions such as the extent of landholding. While the impact of the continuing lack of work opportunities on women's well-being in the state has been discussed elsewhere (Chakravarty 2018; Chakravarty and Chakravarty 2016), in this paper I focus on the question of landholding patterns.

West Bengal, a major rice-cultivating state with similar levels of technology as Tamil Nadu and the former Andhra Pradesh, has historically been characterized by smallholding peasant agriculture. The size of holdings became more fragmented after the land reforms of the 1980s. The partition of India in the middle of the last century, and the war for the liberation of Bangladesh in the early 1970s, changed the demography of West Bengal to a very great extent, and the population pressure on the land increased significantly. Partition also affected the Bengal economy adversely in many other ways. This once industrially advanced region had started to experience decline even before the colonial era ended. The war and independence, along with the dislocations of partition, accelerated the process. Partition severely affected trade links between East and West Bengal. Upon independence, the central government's policies of freight equalization for coal and steel, and its emphasis on import substitution, dealt a further heavy blow to Bengal's industry. This was aggravated by the continued strategy of confrontation with the centre adopted by successive state governments, which prevented West Bengal from lobbying pragmatically for licences and investments. To these obstacles to industrial resurgence were added the emergence of radical trade union movements and the central government policy of stopping investment in the infrastructure sector in the mid-1960s, leading to the decline of West Bengal's engineering industry, and consequently to large-scale unemployment in formal manufacturing in the state. No significant new investments arrived that could absorb the rising workforce, as had happened in some other states such as Tamil Nadu. In Tamil Nadu during the first few decades after independence, textile firms, garment-manufacturing units, and some other industries were set up and started production, even in rural areas away from the large cities (Roy 2013). First the export-oriented garment industry, and later the smaller spinning units, employed younger women in large numbers, perhaps

because employers expected to get cheap and docile labour (Standing 1989).¹ More focused education programmes produced an educated workforce, of which young women comprised a substantial section. But while this was the industrial scenario in post-independence Tamil Nadu, West Bengal experienced a continuous decline in large-scale industry on the one hand, and a complete lack of new industrial opportunities (especially labour-intensive ones) on the other. This resulted in a severe shortage of work opportunities in general, and for women in particular. There soon followed a mass exodus of labour, both male and female, in search of livelihoods, from the overcrowded agricultural sector in the state's rural interior to the dynamic cities of India. However, women out-migrate from West Bengal for work to a much lesser extent than men (Srivastava 2011), and a very substantial number of them continue to earn household subsistence from agriculture. The small family farms that are characteristic of West Bengal agriculture are mostly taken care of by women. Women also engage in household manufacturing and petty trade in considerable numbers. It is possible that women who work on small family farms in the state, probably without remuneration or land ownership titles, remain outside the purview of data collectors. The same may be the case with women engaged in household manufacturing.

This paper is mainly based on secondary data. I have used National Sample Survey (NSS) data for employment details, and also for landholding patterns in relevant Indian states. To get an idea of the pattern of labour use in rice cultivation, I have consulted data on the costs of cultivation published by the Ministry of Agriculture. Apart from these major sources, extensive and intensive reviews of secondary literature have also helped me to unravel the myth of the non-working women of West Bengal.

To begin with, I discuss the historically low work participation rate of women in West Bengal as reported in the published data. I then describe the dominant argument that cultural specificity explains this relatively low work participation rate. In sections 3 and 4 I elaborate my argument regarding the economic factors that have helped to perpetuate the culture of domesticity among women in the state for many years. Section 5 concludes.

2 Women's low work participation rates and cultural traits

The incidence of women's paid work in rural India is much higher than in urban areas. While this is also true for rural West Bengal, the state shows the second lowest incidence of female paid work among the 15 major states of India. Interstate variations in rural women's work in India can be explained to a large extent by differences in agricultural work participation. West Bengal is an exception. A predominantly rice-cultivating state with relatively poor mechanization, West Bengal has been the major state with the lowest work participation rate of women in agriculture in rural areas, even in 2009 to 2010 (Chakravarty and Chakravarty 2016) (Table 1).

¹ In the context of East and South-East Asia, Lim (1995) argues that export-oriented production exploits but simultaneously also liberates women. Along the same lines, Amin et al. (1998) note that although women in garment-manufacturing units in Bangladesh work long hours under inhospitable conditions and often for low wages, these opportunities are better than the alternatives they have.

Table 1: Work participation rates of rural women in 15 major states of India for 2009–10, per 1,000, usual status

State	Gender gap in work participation rate	Work participation rate of women	Work participation rate of women in agriculture
India	286	261	794
West Bengal	456	152	424
Andhra Pradesh	155	443	764
Assam	395	158	862
Bihar	416	65	830
Gujarat	265	320	922
Haryana	272	250	814
Karnataka	254	370	807
Kerala	346	218	428
Madhya Pradesh	274	282	878
Maharashtra	180	396	921
Orissa	335	243	762
Punjab	291	240	823
Rajasthan	153	357	728
Tamil Nadu	198	405	724
Uttar Pradesh	330	174	854

Source: Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementations (2009–10).

In rural areas, women are generally engaged in three types of work: waged work and self-employment outside the household; self-employment in cultivation and industries related to the household sector; and various forms of domestic work in and around the household. For cultural reasons, domestic work has not been considered economic activity by the major data-generating systems of India. Unpaid domestic work is often intertwined with and inseparable from self-employment within the household. Women all over India contribute to a large extent to pre- and post-harvest operations at home, but not in the fields. In addition, poor peasant women also often assist their male relatives in the fields. Women in the upper echelons of society usually do not do outdoor work (Duvvuri 1989). While this explains the low work participation rate of women all over India, the cultural bias against women's paid outside work is reported to be particularly strong in West Bengal.

There are very few detailed studies of women's allocation of time among various activities. However, it is generally acknowledged that the working day of a poor woman in India can be anything from 12 to 16 hours. On the basis of a detailed study of time allocation among rural women in Rajasthan and West Bengal, Jain (1985) argued that while women in Rajasthan participated more significantly in visible work such as cutting grass and grazing cattle, women in Bengal worked predominantly at home.

Historians of colonial Bengal have traced the exclusion of women from industrial work, and from paid outside work in general, in the 1920s and 1930s (Sarkar 1989; Sen 1999). They have pointed out the growing social prohibition of women's work outside the home in Bengal in the closing years of the 19th century. The middle-class ideology of glorifying the housewife as against the working woman was quite influential, even among the lower levels of Bengali society (Bandyopadhyay 1990). Devaki Jain (1985) observed that this cultural prohibition was still present in the 1970s. On the basis of a survey of some villages in West Bengal, she observed that even poverty failed to push women to seek outside work to the same extent as in other parts of the country. Her findings indicated that while women in a Bengal village spent three hours cooking per day on average, women in rural Rajasthan spent only about an hour per day cooking. While cultural explanations are important, there must also be some explanatory economic factors that are not in contradiction with cultural factors and have thus sustained the latter over a long period of time. In the next two sections I try to identify the economic reasons for the relatively greater homeboundness of women in West Bengal.

3 Do economic factors matter? The question of landholding patterns

In rural areas, land is the most important asset. The high incidence of inequality in landholding patterns is a major characteristic of Indian agriculture. A large number of people either are landless or own tiny plots, while only a small number of people control a very large amount of land. However, the ownership of holdings of different sizes varies significantly from state to state. In this section I will try to see whether landholding patterns give any clue to understanding women's work behaviour as depicted in the published data. The NSS is the most important data source for landholding patterns in India. But scholars working in this area have raised several questions regarding the accuracy and reliability of its estimates regarding not only ownership but also the extent of landlessness in India (see among others Krishnaji 2018; Ramkumar 2000; Rawal 2008). Vikas Rawal (2008: 44) points out that 'ownership of landholdings and extent of tenancy have been attributed to under-reporting by land rich households in view of land reform laws. Existence of large holdings results in undermining the potential for implementation of land ceilings in different states'. On the basis of the 59th round (2003 to 2004) of NSS data, Sharma (1994), Chaddha et al. (2004), and Krishnaji (2018) among others noted that only 10 per cent of households did not own any land in the country. However, Rawal (2008) points out that primary data collected from most states suggests a four times higher incidence of landlessness, at about 40 per cent, in terms of operational holdings. The operational holding is the amount of land that is cultivated; it may be partly owned, partly leased through tenancy agreements, or wholly owned.

Rawal (2008) argues that such a high discrepancy between landlessness measured by ownership holdings and landlessness measured by operational holdings is difficult to explain in terms of the incidence of tenancy alone. Data for ownership holdings refers to all types of holding, including homesteads, and it is possible that no production takes place on such land. Operational holdings data, on the contrary, strictly refers to land where production takes place, and it often happens that some crops are grown on homestead land as well. Rawal argues that this might be the major reason behind the discrepancy in incidences of landlessness estimated from ownership versus operational holdings. While having homesteads increases the bargaining power of the agrarian poor (see Krishnaji 1979), what matters from the production point of view is whether one is cultivating one's homestead land or not. Thus, by looking at the unit-level NSS data for 2003 to 2004, Rawal (2008) constructs a new series for the incidence of landlessness in different states, where he considers people who neither possess any land nor cultivate their homesteads (which they might own even if they are recorded as landless). This definition is more meaningful from our point of view, as it is highly likely that women are mostly engaged in the cultivation of homestead plots.

In order to make the analysis simpler, in this paper I concentrate on ownership holdings of land alone. Let us also note that the incidence of tenancy in India has declined significantly over the years, and in the late 1990s it was only 12 per cent in West Bengal (Sharma 2002), a state that experienced notable reforms in tenancy legislation during the late 1970s and early 1980s. Table 2 is constructed by taking some data from the calculations of Rawal (2008) discussed above. It depicts landholding patterns by different size classes for selected states in India.

Table 2: Landholding patterns by different size classes for selected states in India

State	% of households in different landholding categories							
	Landless	Less than 0.4 ha	0.4-1 ha	1-2 ha	2-3 ha	3-5 ha	5-10 ha	More than 10 ha
Tamil Nadu	55.43	21.2	13.65	5.64	2.16	1.3	0.6	0.02
Andhra Pradesh	48.75	16.55	17.72	9.09	4.06	2.63	1.04	0.47
Kerala	36.74	49.52	9.3	3.33	0.44	0.58	0.1	0
West Bengal	34.69	42.71	15.81	5.4	0.97	0.33	0.09	0
Orissa	31.07	32.33	22.69	9.17	2.6	1.26	0.56	0.04
Punjab	29.51	38.66	8.33	9.54	5.79	4.79	2.43	0.95
Haryana	25.96	37.6	13.52	9.85	5.59	4.26	2.8	0.43
Uttar Pradesh	16.31	41.98	22.86	12.42	3.43	2.1	0.81	0.09
Bihar	31.01	42.49	16	7	1.98	1.09	0.29	0.15
India	31.12	29.82	18.97	10.68	4.22	3.06	1.6	0.52

Source: author's compilation based on data from Rawal (2008: 46), with permission.

West Bengal is one of the major rice-cultivating states of India. Women in rural Bengal are thus likely to be mostly associated with rice cultivation. It has been documented that rice cultivation is highly labour-intensive in general, and women's labour-intensive in particular (Agarwal 1985; Mencher and Saradmoni 1982). But I have already pointed out that West Bengal shows one of the lowest work participation rates for women in rural areas, especially in agriculture. In order to understand the possible economic reasons behind this, I focus mainly on the three major rice-cultivating states of India: West Bengal, Tamil Nadu, and the former Andhra Pradesh. The level of technology used in rice cultivation in these three states is quite similar. It has already been pointed out that Tamil Nadu and the former Andhra Pradesh show the highest female work participation rates in rural areas of India. If the cropping patterns and the technology used are more or less the same, is it the organization of production that leads to such different outcomes in terms of women's work participation rates in these states?

In order to understand the characteristics of production organization in cultivation in these states, I begin by looking at landholding patterns by different size classes. Table 2 tells us that around 55 per cent of households in Tamil Nadu belong to the landless category. In the case of the former Andhra Pradesh, the percentage of landless households is a little less than 50. West Bengal, on the other hand, shows a much smaller proportion of landlessness, at around 35 per cent. Moreover, the percentage of families that fall into the smallest landholding category is more than double for West Bengal compared with Tamil Nadu and Andhra Pradesh. Rawal (2008) calculates Gini coefficients to measure the inequality in landholding patterns in different Indian states. His findings suggest that Tamil Nadu and the former Andhra Pradesh are among the states showing the highest inequality in landholdings. According to this calculation, West Bengal shows a much smaller inequality in land ownership. Researchers have pointed out two distinct patterns in women's workforce participation in relation to the extent of landholding inequality in a region. Women are found to work predominantly as agricultural labourers in a region with high inequality in landholdings, a concentration of land in a few hands, and large numbers of landless poor. On the other hand, women are likely to work as cultivators where there is smallholding peasant farming with much less concentration of land (Jose 1989: 15). Given these observations, it is to be expected that rural women in West Bengal will work on their own small family farms in greater numbers compared with women in the other two states. Similarly, in Tamil Nadu and the former Andhra Pradesh it is likely that women mostly work in other people's fields as agricultural labourers. Incidentally, historical evidence suggests a prevalence of peasant smallholdings and much less inequality in landholding patterns in the Bengal region, even during the colonial era (Bose 1986). I will return to this point in due course. The predominance of family farming and peasant agriculture in West Bengal compared with Tamil Nadu and Andhra Pradesh can also be postulated from cost-of-cultivation data.

Before I enter a discussion of cost-of-cultivation data, it is worth noting one more important point that emerges from Table 2. If we look at the rates of landlessness and smallholding agriculture, we find that they are generally low and high respectively in the eastern Indian states of West Bengal, Bihar, and Orissa, and also in Uttar Pradesh. This is in contrast with Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh, and Karnataka. Women's work participation rates in the eastern states are in general much lower than in the southern states, except in the case of Orissa.

Table 3 reports different components of human labour costs in the cost of cultivation of rice per hectare in the eastern and southern states of India. Let us remember that rice is the most important crop in these regions. We see from Table 3 that not only is the family labour cost component much higher in West Bengal than in Tamil Nadu or the former Andhra Pradesh, but the picture is also similar in all eastern Indian states. This again indicates that in the east in general, and in West Bengal in particular, rice cultivation is dominated by smallholding family farms, where the occurrence of women's hidden labour is much more likely than in situations where women predominantly work in other people's fields as hired labour. I have reported women's work participation rates alongside this data for each year, in order to make clear my point. Women's work participation rates are much higher in states where the family labour cost in cultivation is relatively lower. There are two clear outliers that need some explanation: Kerala and Orissa. In Kerala, for a very long period of time, even tiny plot holders often did not cultivate their own land (Krishnaji 1979). Also, the cropping pattern in Kerala is very different: the main agricultural crops are cash crops such as coconut, jackfruit, tapioca, banana, coffee, cashew nuts, and different kinds of spice. While the first few are often cultivated in and around the household, they hardly require any intensive labour, unlike cereals, especially rice. In Orissa, the major agricultural crop is rice. Moreover, according to Tables 2 and 3, small-farm agriculture is likely to be quite prevalent Orissa, but women's participation is much higher in Orissa compared with the rest of the eastern region. How can one solve this puzzle? Table 4 provides some interesting insights to this end.

Table 3: Percentage share of family labour cost in rice cultivation in selected states in India

State	Total cost of human labour (INR/ha)	% of family labour cost in total human labour cost	Rural female work participation (usual status, per 1,000, 2004-05)
Andhra Pradesh	8587.78	31.91	483
Tamil Nadu	9144.44	30.25	461
Karnataka	9673.93	30.46	459
Kerala	14741.78	14.35	256
West Bengal	9346.30	54.48	178
Orissa	7093.98	49.47	322
Bihar	5429.04	38.08	138
Uttar Pradesh	5912.77	57.29	240

Source: author's compilation based on data from Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementations (2004-05a, 2004-05b).

Table 4: Percentages of Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes in eastern and southern states of India

State	% of ST population	% of SC population
Andhra Pradesh	6.6	16.2
Tamil Nadu	1.0	19.0
Karnataka	6.6	16.2
Kerala	1.1	9.8
Orissa	22.1	16.5
Bihar	0.9	15.7
Uttar Pradesh	0.1	21.1
West Bengal	5.5	23.0

Notes: SC: Scheduled Castes; ST: Scheduled Tribes.

Source: author's compilation based on data from 2001 Indian population census.

According to Table 4, the highest percentage of the Scheduled Tribe population among all the eastern and southern Indian states is in Orissa. Indeed, the percentage of the Tribal population is between five and 20 times greater in Orissa (22 per cent) than in Andhra Pradesh (6.6 per cent), West Bengal (5.5 per cent), or Uttar Pradesh (0.1 per cent). It has been documented by several researchers that Tribal women's work participation rate is much higher than that of women in general in India. Historians have traced how upper-caste ideologies of gender and work percolated downwards to some intermediary castes and influenced women's work behaviour (Bandyopadhyay 1990); but there is hardly any research that shows an influence on women's work patterns among India's Tribal populations, who are often the poorest. Therefore, the significantly larger presence of the Tribal population in Orissa is probably the reason behind the visibly much higher work participation rate of women in the state compared with other eastern states.

Another eastern Indian state, Bihar, also deserves some attention. The proportion of the family labour cost in the total cost of labour in Bihar is almost the same as in the southern states (apart from Kerala). But in terms of its landholding pattern, Bihar resembles the other eastern states. Moreover, the female work participation rate in Bihar is the lowest in the rural areas of India. While the landholding pattern and the low reported work participation rate of women can be explained by my hypothesis, the low involvement of family labour in cultivation is contradictory. To gain some clues for understanding the Bihar case, let us look at the landholding pattern a little more closely. According to the Gini coefficients calculated by Rawal (2008), Bihar's inequality of landholding is the highest among the eastern states, followed by West Bengal. But since we know that the Gini coefficient gives only a general idea of inequality and summarizes the information, I will now look at a more sensitive measure of inequality.

Table 5: Aspects of inequality in landholding

State	Share of land by top 5% of households	Share of land by bottom 50% of households	Inequality in landholding (ratio of top 5% to bottom 50%)
Andhra Pradesh	29.57	0.24	123.21
Tamil Nadu	48.64	0.00	Undefined
Karnataka	35.43	2.47	14.34
Kerala	53.97	0.27	199.89
Bihar	39.16	5.97	6.56
Uttar Pradesh	31.88	8.20	3.89
Orissa	33.33	6.34	5.26
West Bengal	33.15	7.18	4.62

Source: author's calculations based on data from Rawal (2008: 46), with permission.

In Table 5 I have reported the percentage share of land held by the top five per cent of households and the percentage share of land held by the bottom 50 per cent of households for the eastern and southern states of India, calculated from data reported in Rawal (2008). A different measure of inequality has then been calculated by taking the ratio between the percentage of land held by the top five per cent and the percentage of land held by the bottom 50 per cent of households. Not only does Bihar show the highest land share held by the top five per cent of households in the eastern region, but it is also quite close to the southern states in this regard. Moreover, the lowest percentage share of land is held by the bottom 50 per cent of households in Bihar compared with the other east Indian states. Further, Table 2 shows that relatively more significant landholdings persist in the highest landholding category of 10 hectares and above in this state. These pieces of information about the landholding pattern in Bihar tell us that the possibility of demand for agricultural labour is certainly much higher in Bihar compared with other eastern states. Indeed, Table 1 shows that while women's work participation rate in rural Bihar is abysmally low, most of them work in agriculture alone. At the same time, the prevalence of smallholdings might not have led women to participate in waged labour as much as complete landlessness does in the southern

Indian states. It may also be the case that many of the large landholders in Bihar also have tied labour. In such cases, even though the whole family works for the landlord, it is highly unlikely that the work of the woman and children will be reported separately. But without a focused primary survey, it is not possible to be certain on this point.

On the whole, the above discussion indicates a clear positive relationship between the prevalence of peasant smallholdings with relatively low inequality in landholdings, a higher share of family labour in rice cultivation, and low female work participation rates in the reported data. Indeed, the positive relationship is even more prominent when we consider the opposite case: the existence of a higher inequality in landholdings along with a low share of family labour in cultivation and high female work participation rates in rice cultivation. In the first case, women’s low work participation rate may well be explained by the under-reporting of women’s labour in subsistence agriculture, where the organization of production is dominated by smallholding agriculture cultivated mainly by family labour. In the next section I will try to see how far my argument can be substantiated historically.

4 What was the land distribution pattern during the period before land reform in West Bengal?

On the basis of both primary and secondary data sources, Bardhan and Mookherjee (2010) showed a distinct increase in the share of relatively small landholdings, and a decline in the share of large holdings above five acres, after the ceiling redistribution reform organized by leftists in West Bengal (Table 6). Many other commentators on land reform in West Bengal have suggested its notable success in reducing inequalities in landholding. They have also noted that after the ceiling redistribution reform, the average size of landholdings fell to a significant extent (Harriss 1993; Sengupta and Gazdar 1996). I argue that this prevalence of small landholdings on the one hand, and the relatively less unequal pattern of landholding on the other, have led to lower demand for and supply of agricultural labourers—especially women, who are likely to be more involved in the cultivation of small plots owned by peasant households. This has possibly led to the lower reported work participation rates of rural Bengali women. But women in Bengal have historically been reported as working less than women in many other parts of India. It is therefore important to take a close look at the land distribution pattern in pre-land reform Bengal.

Table 6: Land distribution data for West Bengal, various sources

Source	Year	2.5 acres, % land	2.5- 5 acres, % land	5 acres or more, % land
West Bengal Agricultural Census	1980	28	32	39
	1995	43	39	27
NSS data	1981	29	29	42
	1991	40	31	29
Indirect Survey	1978	28	28	43
	1998	46	28	26

Notes: NSS data pertains to operational holdings. Indirect Survey pertains to cultivable non-patta land owned.

Source: Bardhan and Mookherjee (2010: 1579). Reproduced with permission.

Discussing the probable reasons behind the relatively successful implementation of land reform policies in West Bengal, Sengupta and Gazdar (1996) point out that West Bengal not only had a very large number of landless labourers and tenants, but also had much less inequality in landholding among the landed. The Lorenz curves they draw for landholding patterns in West Bengal and India as a whole on the basis of data from the early 1970s show this quite clearly. It

also needs to be pointed out that the high incidence of landlessness they find in the state is to do with post-partition migration from neighbouring Bangladesh, especially during the 1971 war of liberation, when the in-migration was dominated by the poorest people (Chakravarty and Chakravarty 2016; Chatterji 2007). Sengupta and Gazdar (1996) also note that large landholders such as those found in northern and southern parts of India are hardly seen in West Bengal. Table 7 reports some data on landholding patterns in different parts of India in the early 1950s that go a long way to support Sengupta and Gazdar’s findings about landholding patterns in West Bengal immediately after independence.

Table 7: Landholding patterns and inequalities in eastern and southern states of India, 1953

State	% of large holdings	% of small + marginal holdings	Ratio of large holdings and small + marginal holdings
Uttar Pradesh	47.60	46.77	1.02
Bihar	44.13	49.24	0.89
Orissa	45.08	47.21	0.95
West Bengal	34.74	50.18	0.69
Andhra Pradesh	43.65	32.91	1.32
Madras	50.23	43.40	1.15

Source: author’s calculations based on data from Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementations (1958).

In the mid-1950s, the NSS issued a report on household ownership and land possession in rural areas of India. The report gives state-level data on the basis of livelihood classes: cultivating owners of large holdings; cultivating owners of smaller holdings; non-cultivating owners or purely rent receivers; non-owning cultivators or mainly sharecroppers; and others, who may own some land but do agricultural or non-agricultural jobs for their livelihoods. The last group includes agricultural labourers, among others. It is noted that there are some overlaps between these livelihood classes. Therefore, to avoid confusion, the classification is made on the basis of the household’s main livelihood source. Agricultural labourers and other non-agricultural occupation holders do not earn their main livelihoods from cultivation, but if they have a small plot of land they may grow some food or cash crops on it for a supplementary income. Given the cultural constraints operating on women, it is highly likely that the women in such households take on the major responsibility for these small patches of land.

In order to get an idea of the land distribution pattern from this data set, I have reported the percentages of large holdings, and I have grouped the percentages of smaller holdings with the holdings of ‘others’, which includes agricultural labourers. This livelihood class of ‘others’ is likely to include the major owners of marginal holdings, given their high share in the number of households and their low share in landholdings. I have not considered the two livelihood classes directly related to the practice of sharecropping and rent-receiving, as generally the percentage of landholding by these two classes is much lower than for the other three landholding categories.²

‘Large landholdings’ in the six states considered in Table 7 refers to 10 acres and above; ‘smaller holdings’ consists of land below 10 acres. I have tried to get some idea of the incidence of inequality in landholdings from this limited data set by taking the ratios between large holdings and smaller plus marginal holdings, as presented in Table 7. These ratios clearly indicate that in the early 1950s, landholding inequality was the lowest in West Bengal, and in most other eastern Indian states it was much less than in the two southern states reported in Table 7. For Andhra Pradesh and Madras the value of the ratio is 1.32 (the highest) and 1.15 respectively. On the other hand, it is only 0.69

² However, in some cases the percentage of landholding by these two classes is not negligible—for example, in West Bengal in the case of sharecropping.

for West Bengal, which is half that for Andhra Pradesh. Uttar Pradesh is the only state in the eastern region that shows a value of more than one (1.02) for the incidence of inequality. This is probably because the only successful effort at land reform—the abolition of the zamindari system—had not been implemented in these areas during the early 1950s. However, to be certain, one needs to take a closer look at the policy implementation issues in different states related to land reforms. The above-mentioned NSS report also notes a relatively higher incidence of households in the category of ‘other’ (i.e. agricultural labourers) in southern states compared with eastern states, especially West Bengal. These findings corroborate that the prevalence of small and marginal landholdings was a major characteristic of the land distribution pattern in eastern states in general and West Bengal in particular immediately after independence.

In his seminal work on the land structure of colonial Bengal, Sugato Bose (1986) argues that it was only in northern Bengal that landlords or *jotders* (the regional name for those who own land) with large landholdings and significant power over villagers were found. These landlords or *jotders* were almost absent from most other parts of Bengal. The *jotders* in eastern and western Bengal were very different from the *jotders* in the north. In village settlements in the other parts of Bengal, the *bhadralok* (the elite, consisting of the Hindu upper castes, and aristocratic and learned Muslims, who eschewed manual labour) often inhabited the central part of the village, surrounded by the *chashbis* or peasants. Unlike the gentry in northern India, the upper-caste gentry in eastern Bengal did not engage in direct cultivation. Instead, they lived on rents, and also on moneylending. The *chashbis* or peasants held cultivable lands or *jot*, owned implements for cultivation, and also had solid titles to their homesteads. The latter were known as *grihasthi*. As a result of population pressure, small peasants with tiny plots of land merged with the landless category, especially after the 1920s.

In western Bengal, while there was a large number of peasant family farms, landlords often participated in the direct cultivation of the land they owned as their personal demesne or *kbash*. Apart from the large number of *chashbis*, consisting of Mahishya, Sadgop, and Aguri castes, there was a distinct category of landless agricultural labourers from low Hindu castes such as Bagdis and Bauris, and also from aboriginal Tribes such as Santhals. In western Bengal we see a certain discontinuity between peasants and the agricultural proletariat, determined by the pre-existing social structure.

However, it can safely be said that the small peasant family farm was the typical agricultural work unit in Bengal. These agricultural units were relatively homogeneous, especially in eastern Bengal and to a lesser extent in western Bengal, and in striking contrast with the large landholding concentration in northern Bengal mentioned above. In northern India, the village community was characterized by the presence of a large landholder, a dominant peasant who usually cultivated land with family labour, and tied labour. This landlord also had the ‘right to collect the tribute, sink wells, [and] plant trees on subordinate cultivator-held land’ (Bose 1986: 20). While in eastern Bengal there were hardly any such village-controlling landlords, a few did exist in western Bengal who had surplus land and enjoyed some of the same economic and political clout as landlords in northern India. But on the whole, in early 20th-century rural Bengal, most landholdings were small and broadly similar below a set of rent receivers, who were proprietors of land in legal terms only.

But of course, the predominance in cultivation of peasant smallholders, compared with the demesne labour or *kbamar* sector, was greater in the east compared with western and central Bengal. The peasant cultivators of eastern Bengal were certainly not wholly undifferentiated in terms of landholdings. Table 8 shows the distribution of land held by families, in different acreage categories, in eastern and western regions of Bengal province in the 1930s.

Table 8: Distribution of areas held by households

District	% of land held by families in different acreage categories					
	Less than 2 acres	2-3 acres	3-4 acres	4-5 acres	5-10 acres	Above 10 acres
East Bengal	55.9	11.1	8.5	6.1	11	4.9
West Bengal	37.8	11.0	9.0	8.0	18.7	9.2

Source: Bose (1986: 26). Reproduced with permission.

Sugato Bose (1986) compiled the data in Table 8 from a survey conducted in the late 1930s by the Land Revenue Commission in an attempt to discover the landholding patterns in the Bengal region. It indicates that about 84 per cent of agriculturist families in eastern Bengal held less than five acres of land. The percentage of families holding five to 10 acres was around 11, and about five per cent held more than 10 acres. This clearly indicates the predominance of smallholding agriculturists in the eastern part of the state. The story of western and central Bengal was not exactly the same, although the predominance of smallholding peasants also cannot be denied in these areas. As a consequence of high grain prices during the closing decades of the 19th century, a process of differentiation started in western Bengal, leading to the emergence of a small group of rich peasants.

Sugato Bose (1986) observes that the insights one gains from relationships between real social categories are in fact more revealing than statistics built around imperfect legal categories. Since the scale of inequality was relatively small, and large amounts of surplus landholding were rare, exploitative class relations as such did not arise among the peasantry in eastern Bengal. As mentioned above, the village-controlling landholders that were common in northern Bengal, and in other parts of both northern and southern India, were hardly found in eastern Bengal.

Sharecropping was quite prevalent in eastern Bengal. Usually, small peasants or *rayots* sharecropped the land of zamindars or larger *rayots* to increase their income, as their own land would be too small to provide for subsistence. It was pointed out time and again by land settlement officers in various districts of eastern Bengal that sharecroppers could not be regarded as a class in themselves. In some cases they constituted the landless proletariat, and in other cases they constituted *rayots* or peasants with some land of their own. In 1916, Jack wrote that landless labour was unknown in the district of Faridpur in eastern Bengal, and rarely heard of in other parts of the province. However, large numbers of smallholding cultivators worked as hired labour at harvest time. This rare incidence of waged labour in eastern Bengal is clearly revealed in Table 9.

Table 9: Agricultural populations: landlords, tenants, and labourers (%)

Agricultural population	East Bengal	West and central Bengal
Landlord	4.52	4.72
Tenant	86.75	71.44
Labourer	8.73	23.84

Source: Bose (1986: 31). Reproduced with permission.

Landless labour was less unknown in western Bengal. Only a few districts of the province had no significant reserve of landless agricultural labour. In these districts, cultivation was mostly done by family labour, and in times of need neighbours would help each other by providing extra labour. As the landholdings were typically small, cultivation could easily be managed in this way. However, much of western Bengal was characterized by old settlements, high rents, uncertain harvests, and demographic arrest (a consequence of malaria epidemics until the 1920s). In these areas, low-caste Bauris and Bagdis and Tribal people supplied agricultural labour, often as sharecroppers without occupancy rights, tied labourers, and farm servants. These labourers might perhaps own a patch

of garden or even little agricultural land, 'yet essentially they constituted a distinct landless element' (Bose 1986: 29). Table 9 gives a clear indication of the details described.

The above analysis shows that the Bengal region was characterized for a long period by smallholding peasant agriculture. In such agricultural activities, the role of peasant women is undeniably extremely important, as cultivation is completely dependent on family labour. When a peasant family undertakes sharecropping, the woman of the household is also highly likely to work in the field along with her husband. At the same time, when the husband is reported as a worker, the wife remains unacknowledged by the data-generating agencies—a situation that has continued for decades. I conclude this section by taking a quick look at the landholding patterns that prevailed in southern India during the colonial and precolonial eras.

One significant feature of landholding patterns in all of southern India was the *mirasdari* system, which differed significantly from the structure of landholding prevalent in the Bengal region. The *mirasdari* system was a communal system of landholding, especially in Brahmin settlements on the irrigated Tamil plains, and also in some parts of Telugu. The landholdings in these villages were considered in terms of shares in total landholdings. Apart from the right to cultivate their own shares of land, the shareholders played an important role in the management of village lands. They claimed the rents from lands leased out, and the profits from orchards, forests, tanks, and other commonly owned properties, according to their shares. Dharma Kumar (1982: 210) notes that 'these shares had been mortgaged gifted bought and sold for centuries'. Consequently, by the 18th century the landholding shares became highly unequal in size. There were a few large landholders in every village, who were known as landlords or dominant cultivators. Often these large landholders were from the same caste. In Tamil areas they were usually from the Vellalar or Brahmin castes, and they were frequently related.³ These dominant landlords controlled almost every aspect of village life.

While in many cases *mirasdars* acted collectively, cultivation was always taken up individually. As Brahmins were forbidden to touch the plough, they had to depend on others to work in the fields. Some large non-Brahmin landlords also depended on others to cultivate their fields. It was not difficult to find large numbers of small landholders whose land was insufficient for subsistence. There were others who had no land but only a pair of bullocks and a plough, and still others who had nothing at all to sell but their labour power. These land-poor and landless people worked for the landed on various terms. Sharecropping was one major form of production organization. The landless also worked as day labourers, often under servitude. Slavery of various sorts was also quite prevalent in all parts of pre-colonial and colonial southern India.

Clearly, the coexistence of *mirasdars* and land-poor or landless people in the villages of Tamil Nadu and Andhra Pradesh indicates significant inequalities in these regions' landholding patterns. Therefore the dominant form of organization of agricultural production in these areas is unlikely to have been smallholding peasant cultivation, in which family labour plays the most important role. On the contrary, the land structure suggests the prevalence of a production structure dominated by hired labour, in which women and men both work as different kinds of agricultural labourer. Dharma Kumar (1975) argued that the landholding pattern in the Madras Presidency had long been quite unequal. In the absence of any kind of land redistribution reform in the region, there has been no reason for this inequality to decrease in recent years.

³ In the south there was no rule of village exogamy, unlike in northern India.

5 Conclusion

Historians have argued that women's low work participation rate in Bengal has much to do with the stringent cultural practices of domesticity in the region. In this paper I have tried to argue that a cultural practice can be continue for centuries only if it is not in contradiction with economic factors. The prevalence of smallholding agriculture over the centuries has helped to perpetuate family farming for subsistence in this region. Women of different ages are likely to play an important role in family farming, alongside the domestic work that is considered their primary responsibility. Although women have worked all along, they mostly work in their own fields, and they have continued to be reported as 'economically inactive' and as non-workers in data-generating processes. The landholding pattern in West Bengal, and to a lesser extent in other eastern Indian states, is such that the demand for and supply of women's hired labour remain comparatively low compared with the southern region.

It is worth considering the case of Bangladesh in this context. Bangladesh was part of the Bengal region until 1947. It shared the cultural milieu and social practices of the region for a long time, and women's work participation rates in Bangladesh were even lower than in West Bengal until the early 1980s. In the late 1970s and early 1980s, Bangladesh experienced the major advent of the garment-manufacturing industry as a result of changes in the international order of trade. Consequently, a significant demand for women's labour was generated by this industry, following ideas received from East Asian countries. The labour market participation of Bangladeshi women increased almost overnight. If cultural practices are so strong, how did this happen?

Unfortunately, nothing of this sort has occurred to challenge age-old cultural practices in present-day West Bengal, or in any of the eastern Indian states. Poor women in West Bengal and eastern India work as much as those in any other part of India or South Asia. It is simply that the nature of their work is such that they often remain outside official enumeration processes.

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