

Chapter - V

Participation and the role of Women in the Cotton Weaving Industry of Santipur and Phulia.

Like in all other cottage industries women are also deeply involved in weaving. But unlike other industries where women are directly involved in the process from the beginning to the end like beedi, weaving had some exceptions. Since the Vedic period the women were engaged in the loom. Weaving did not mean any occupation of disgrace. a portion in 'Tantu O Tantri' is significant in this respect. That the weaver community had received many accolades in the Aryan society since the pre Vedic period many evidences to its support were found from the Vedic chants. In the above issue 'Bastro Silpo' alias 'Baiswa tantubai Jatir Prachinatwo' were the titles of the articles of which certain things need special mention. During that time in the Aryan society men and women both used to weave and so the women were held high in the society. In Sam Veda we find mention of it with high praises. The respectful saints had instructed to regard them as Devi with great respect. A little probe would reveal the dominance of such following chants in the Vedas,

Om Ja Akrintanayabayan Ja atannata

Jascha Debbya Antanvitohatatasthya |

Tashtawa Debbya Jarosa Sangbay -

Nataushmateedang Paridhatswa basow : ||>||

Om Pari Datwa Datwa Basosaina; sataushe; krinnuto Dirghomaue, |

Satancho Jibo Sarodo : Saccha

Bosuni Charjye Bivrijasi Jiban ||

(-Iti Ahnik Krityamadhritya : Beda Mantram)|

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It meant the "ones who have made the yarns, woven the cloth, made the thread

and completed the border they are the adorable ladies who made one wear clothes till old age. Hey the lucky one, do wear the cloth.”

It is evident from the above comment that since ancient times higher caste women used to weave clothes or else the saints would not have addressed any lower caste women as devi or the respectable lady.² But things started changing gradually and till 19th century, in different areas of Bengal, especially at Santipur, Ranaghat women were barred from touching the loom. But till the time of starting weaving at the loom all work were accomplished by the women from spinning yarns, to preparing mari, dyeing, and nali. The situation grew as if weaving was a matter of disgrace for the women. When women started weaving from the last half of the 19th century and mainly in the 20th century it was seen women of higher caste did not come to this profession. Before that some women used to prepare yarns, do tapestry and most of them were found to be helpless poor women. Primarily it was because of cottage industries and did not require dexterity of any kind. At that age women irrespective of castes were not found to be very keen on entering the profession, which was also not expected too.

Despite all factors, still women had played a major role in establishing the glory of the weaving industry. They had immensely rendered support to the male weavers from the background, tolerated the atrocities of British rule yet had survived and fought back and continued working, and all these deserve special discussion.

From the time prior to 1770 women used to make yarns, do tapestry for livelihood. Where self-reliance is now a priority for women, many years ago in the remote villages of Santipur downtrodden women and widows had created that instance. Though they were not weavers but such effort for self-reliance claims accolades and set praiseworthy model for women of today.

The 'kapash' of Santipur was famous for weaving. Girls between the age of 12-15 years whose palms were very soft would go to the fields in the early hours of the morning and before sun rise and before dew drops dry up and spin the yarn. These yarns would be very fine.³ In the context of textile industry it is mentioned that using indigenous methods the way Santipur females used to spin fine yarns British could never produce such finer variety with all their techniques in the mills. The English had toiled hard, studied, researched, taken samples to places in Europe to understand the technique yet could never realise or learn the procedure to make such finer yarns. All these were a matter of great pride and joy for the people here. Till then the English despite very diligent efforts, could never imitate the quality of the Indian fineness in the yarns.⁴

Fletcher, Resident at Santipur, submitted to the Board of Trade the following account of the spinners' monthly work and gain - suppose a seer of cotton is taken after the seeds have been taken out which is equal to four seer in the gross it will yeild of the different kinds of threads as follows :

Superfine	6 Chittals
Fine	6 Chittals
Middling	8 Chittals
Ordinary	12 Chittals

Spineer's monthly work, net gain

	Quantity in a month sa weight	Selling price per rupee sa weight	Amount of a spinner monthly work	Price of cotton used As. P.	Net monthly profit
Superfine	4" - 8	@ 3"	1-8-0	0-1-8	1-6-4
Fine	5" - 10	@ 4"	1-6-0	0-2-0	1-4-0
Middling	7"	@ 6"	1-2-3	0-2-0	1-0-3
Ordinary	12"	@ 10"	1-3-3	0-2-8	1-0-4

At Santipur initially men and women used to produce clothes from thicker yarns. Dacca used to weave the finer quality. East India Company had established loom for finer quality textile at Santipur kuthi. Two hundred years ago when a weaver from Cuttack had settled at Santipur who had taught other weavers about designed borders in textile. The traders used to sell cotton yarns and weavers used to buy them from retailers. In 1770 due to famine the number of yarn spinners had reduced.⁶

Making designed border and tapestry work were the characteristics of women in the weaving industry. At present, even at the older time the women used to design the border. They used to work on design of the border with silk thread and produce high priced designed border for the sari. These borders involved money as well as the dedication, commitment and love for the work and warmth of the artisan's soul in them. The rich bought those textiles and the poor women used to make them on white or any pastel light shaded cloth and do tapestry of flowers on them. Initially the drawings of flowers, animals, river or plants, moon or the fountains or fan would be marked with charcoal or pencil on the border and then tapestry would be done. Colours used were red, blue, yellow, purple or mostly black.

Different stitches were used to bring out the optimum effect like run, double run, slant or tercha stitch, bakheya, leak, chatai, pati, banspata, jotil, button hole, chain, cross, darling (like ripu stitches in run) etc. Thus we get the aesthetic aspects of the women in the textile industry.⁷

So it can be inferred that the women made remarkable contributions in the weaving industry. It was not just the primary means of livelihood for them it had also been a part and parcel of their life. Due to the famine in 1770 many thread cutters or katuni had died. Thus the deaths of weavers and thread spinners had direct effect over price. Consequently the weaving industry at Santipur

faced yawning crisis.

As the weavers were trying hard to get over with the crisis of the famine the atrocities of the East India Company were increasing. We had already discussed the protests held in the remote villages of Bengal. In this situation it is important to discuss how the large section of women whose livelihood and life was inseparably involved with the industry was affected.

In 1813 when loads of cloths were imported from Manchester at reasonable prices it had adversely affected the textile industry of Santipur. In the words of poet Nabin Chandra Sen- "Santipurer Tantusakal Manchesterer Koley Agune Nirban Laav". In 1818 when the kuthi was shut down the women became unemployed.⁸

In 1825, the import of foreign yarns caused harm to the weaving industry at Santipur. In this regard the letter of a thread spinner is significant. The letter was published in 'Samachar Darpan'. There is a mention of this letter in 'Tantu O Tantri' and it follows :

"Piercing the decades of cover a despondent woman is telling a tale of pain for hearing - hundred years back the paper was found in Bengal on 22nd Pous, 1234 Bangabdo, when the letter was published. Searching the old priceless heaps of paper Sri Brajendranath Bandopadhyay had discovered this letter and made us all grateful. He had published the letter in 'Baisakher Varatbarso - Samachar Darpan' - In The Article Sekaler Katha. The letter was signed off as the sad story of anonymous thread spinner of Santipur. But nobody could give her the answer.

"Respected Sri Editor,

When I was 22 years (5.5 Ganda) old I had become widow and had three daughters. My husband did not leave any fortune to maintain the family of father and mother in law and three daughters. Selling my ornaments I had

performed the last rites for him. We were starving to death almost when god's grace showed me the path to save the family. I had started spinning charka-producing threads after completing my daily family chores. I used to work till 2pm cutting katna complete one tolla of thread before bath. After cooking and lunch would sit again to prepare aina thread of another tolla. Then I used to sell these threads to the weavers 3 tolla for Re 1 and 1.5 tolla per 1 Re for aina thread that was promptly paid. Gradually the work flourished and gaining experience my skill improved and soon I had Rs 140 to marry off my daughter and later married off other daughters as well. I did all that had to be done for my daughters and to maintain relationships with their in-laws. Later my father in law passed away and had spent Rs 220 for it with loans taken from the weavers and had settled it within one and half year. Meanwhile things changed and my other in law and myself were in financial crisis. Threads were not selling well despite all efforts and we suffered for reasons unknown. Then we heard that imported foreign threads were engulfing our market. Threads were better than one made by me and were priced Rs $\frac{3}{4}$ per Seer. I was frustrated completely. I understood the English had more unfortunates than me that is why threads that did not sell well in their market were sent to our country for sale. It was sold at cheap rate causing harm to us. The qualities were not good enough and clothes made out of it did not last long. I am requesting the thread spinners of England to consider my letter and whether it was ethically correct to send such threads to our country. (Short form of the translation of the original letter in Bengali)

Written by a sad thread spinner woman. Santipur.”

From the above letter we come to know how the helpless women of Santipur had earned their living from spinning the charka, do tapestry and played vital role in the weaving industry. Dewan Kartikeyo Chandra Roy had mentioned in his “Khitish Bangshabalicharit”, “Previously foreign threads were not imported

into the country. The women used to spin the threads and prepare and these threads were used for weaving all textile. There were many instruments for cutting the threads takra and charka. The first would be used for finer threads and later for thicker variety. This work helped a lot in daily living.”¹⁰

Acharya Prafulla Chandra Roy had written about an appeal in his autobiography in support of Colebrook’s degradation of charka and grievances of the poor that how imported English threads had affected the Indian industry badly. The depressed widow had mistaken the threads to be of cheap variety what she could not understand was that the yarns were made in steam run mills.¹¹

It is remarkable and a great instance in the labour’s world that the men of the weaver community had fought back all problems with determination to keep their industry alive. This could not be compared with the women involved in the industry at large as they were still in the dark and the light of knowledge did not reach them. But still the women of weaver community were self-reliant. They strived hard to keep their self-reliance intact and fought for the survival of the industry. This was much beyond expectation from the women of the superstitious tradition oriented society of the 18th century.

Next comes the de-industrialization process in 1833 and through crest and trough the beginning of different empowering movements in the last half of 19th century. Handloom industry started picking up slowly. The swadeshi movement and later Gandhiji ‘s Charka movement had inspired the women to engage in weaving again. Women started running charka and spinning threads. In the Swadeshi Movement the women did not lag behind the men. They started spinning threads in charka and making dhoti, gamcha, sari etc at home. But still there was scarcity of thread in the market compared to the demand.

During the Swadeshi Movement when both men and women were fighting hard to empower and actively participate in the movement, the swadeshi leader’s

boycott of goods prepared from imported yarns had shocked the weavers.¹² The weaver community started holding protests and meeting expressing their grievances towards such action. Bholanath Pramanik wrote in their favour "most of the people at Santipur earned their living through weaving and widows in particular were dependent upon it.

They would prepare yarns and do tapestry helping in completing the textile that are used by the people at large."¹³

The men and women of Santipur used to use imported threads and weave clothes that the congress had boycotted. This had led to the weavers misery as there was scarcity of indigenous threads as well. Hence Bholanath Pramanik Banikantha pleaded before the congress to reconsider and withdraw the boycott and see that good quality threads are produced in our country in adequate amounts that would encourage all to use indigenous threads.¹⁴

Later at the call of Gandhiji and charka movement the weavers of Santipur had responded adopting the native yarns discarding the imported variety. They were truly committed towards swadeshi movement and empowerment and had created burning instance of dedication.

The women of the weaver community of Santipur had come forward in different social reform movements. They had stressed upon women's education and financial independence. Such awareness, though absent in the 18th century but in the later half of 19th century and mostly in the 20th century they had realised it deeply. The women promoted admission of girls in the weaving school. They also had championed the cause of setting up women's association. But there were still many obstacles that had prevented the progress of the women at that time.

There are many professions where the wages of men and women differ. But Santipur and Phulia were exceptions and had no such demarcation. Loom was

based in individual's house. And the women participated in all activities and question of separate wages did not occur. Wages were determined on the basis of quality of clothes. Wages were cloth-piece based. Irrespective of the time taken wages were settled on the basis of number cloth made and delivered. So men or woman was not the factor for determining wages.¹⁵

This does not affect the wages anyway. For designing the cloth the rates are done in similar fashion. Rates for Nali, mari are low and generally done by unfit men or women. Many women are working in the cooperatives and they earn equal wages as the men. Husband and wife together work at many places and earn bonus of Rs 3500.¹⁵ (Santipur Kuthirpara Samabay Samity).

In 1947, the Partition of India had rendered a different dimension to the progress of women in the weaver community. Many people had migrated from east Bengal into Nabadwip, Samudragarh, Santipur and Phulia. The women in these regions needed to be self-reliant all the more. Initially the women were engaged in thread spinning and tapestry but later they took up weaving as well. At the outset women of higher caste did not come forward as weaving was then still considered profession of lesser grace. The women never moved out to weave in the beginning. But later they would move out with instruments and weave the exclusive stole for export. The cooperatives played key roles in this and had paid definite price for it.

The wages were maximum of Rs 30. At present in some parts of Phulia and Santipur women weave textiles. Primarily for need of money the entire family participate in it. The women of the household work for 8hours and prepare the sari with plain or designed border. The women would finish her daily household work and then weave. They used to use their leisure in weaving. Though the women do not get any separate earning but they do it for the family earning and their contribution remain significant. At present the women do not weave much

as they lack in dexterity. They generally weave plain cloth. There is no use of jacquard design in their weaving. The males are educated and trained and are skilled. They are also physically strong and are fast at work with both their legs and arms moving as and when required. Like in designing jacquards coordinated movement of arms and legs are necessary.

During post independence period many more women joined in the profession of weaving. This requires special mention of one quality of the women weavers of Phulia. At present Phulia exports stole which are considered fashion status in countries abroad. The spinning of threads and braiding is done exclusively by the women. They work on it at cooperatives, arangs and also from home. For braiding of stole she would get Rs 2.5 for every two edges and for doing the edge with several braids she would earn Rs 4/5. A woman can earn Rs 3000/3500 per month from this. Wages are paid piece based. For the convenience of the men and women the cooperatives start after 1 pm.¹⁷

Another noticeable feature of the weaving industry of Santipur and Phulia is absence of any union. One union had come up in Phulia and weavers connected to it had stopped working. Mostly looms are home based. Many weavers have come down from Dinajpur, Coochbehar and none has any union. There is no story of exploitation here as work and wages are directly related and more one works he would earn more.¹⁸

Initially though weaving was prestigious for women but in the middle it had stopped and later women began to participate in preparing the accessories and basics of weaving and less into direct weaving. They used to earn living through various handloom related works. They had participated and supported the men in different movements including the swadeshi movement. They actively participated in charka movement. At present more and more women are taking part in the weaving industry. Nowadays not just lower and middle class even

the upper middle class women are taking up weaving as profession. The vision is widening and this is another aspect of women's emancipation and awareness. The participation of women in weaving industry at present has given a new dimension to the Bengal economy in every level. The weaving industry of Nadia has spread into the regions of North Bengal.¹⁹ Phulia has inspired this extension more than Santipur. The homeless destitute weavers had turned Phulia into handloom centre and created a bright instance through hard work and inspiration. Though Nadia and Santipur are not much behind. Since at Phulia, many weavers from different places come to work and its fame has spread far and wide. Most importantly the women have accepted handloom as certain means of livelihood mainly for the uneducated or less educated women this is a definite means of earning. Since 18th century many women had been doing handloom related work and in the 21st century women are not just into indirect support they are actually engaged into weaving and supporting their families. Some of the examples are cited below :

'Problems of Survival : Role of the co-operative society' portion has mentioned of USHA GRAM SAMABAI LOKE SIKHA NIKETAN inspired by Phulia 1996-97. the organisation is a member of INDIAN FAIR TRADE FORUM. At present there are more than 100 women members and engaged in handloom and batique work. They earn reasonably well. Their products are mainly sold in Phulia. The interviews of some of the women working there as follows :

USHA GRAM SAMABAI (near Phulia)

Interviews

1.Date	: 4/05/08
Name	: Usha Biswas
Residence	: Taherpur Colony
Age	: 29/27

Years Of Experience : 20 Years
Wages : Ordinary Cloth @Rs 70 Per Piece
Benarasi @ Rs 120 Per Piece
Where Their Products Are Sold : To Mahajans And Shops Of Phulia
Skill : Not Needed
Family Problem That Had Brought Her Here : No Family Problem
2.Date : 4/05/08
Name : Mukul Das
Residence : Taherpur New Colony
Age : 40 Years
Years Of Experience : 20 Years
Wages : Ordinary Cloth @Rs 70 Per Piece
And Benarasi 120 Per Piece
Where Their Products Are Sold : To Mahajans And Shops Of Phulia
Skill : Ordinary
Family Problem : No Family Problem
3.Date : 4/05/08
Name : Gouri Ray
Residence : Usha Village
Age : 40 – 42 Years
Years Of Experience : 22 Years
Wages : Like Everyone
Skill : Ordinary
Family Problem : No Family Problem
Women initially were not considered 'skilled' in weaving but now the situation

has changed and they are now considered experts in weaving. Usha Biswas of USHA GRAM SAMABAI is an instance. She had been working since twenty years and had started at the age of 7 with her mother. Today she is an expert jacquard artisan and weaves benarasi very efficiently competing any expert man in the industry. Such instances in scores can be found in Santipur, Phulia, Samudragarh, Karimpur, Dumurdaha, Chakdah, Nabadwip.

At present, to make women self employed, the government has also come forward. The different cooperatives and the government employees have extended their hands in help in different forms. The co-operatives have such supports listed in their directory. D.R.D.C (District Rural Development Cell) has taken various steps to ensure that working environment is made secured for the women through the formation of various organisations. In this regards the statement of project manager of D.R.D.C- Ms. Deepika Chakroborty, Krishnanagar Branch is worth mentioning.

Interview of Deepika Chakroborty, project manager - Krishnanagar Branch

After 1970 the office was opened here. This is a cottage industry and primarily work in different parts of Nadia. Like Santipur, Phulia, Nabadwip, Nakashigunj, karimpur. The organisation helps the weavers in many ways. Primarily the weavers specially women were guided to work in groups. They inspire each group to create savings. They are given training for it. If they can save 50% money the rest will be arranged by the organisation in the form of loan. Interest will be on 50% if they could save Rs1.25 lakhs then they can avail loan to the extent of Rs 2.5 to 3 lakhs. The interest will be on 1.5lakh. They inspire the weavers to select a bigger space and work in groups then D.R.D.C. would support it but the latter could not buy the land and build the shed as yet.

Participation of women :

She stressed upon the fact that about 90% of the work is done by the women

though at the initial point of the scheme it was decided that participation would be 60%. They also want to render marketing facilities to the women. The moneylenders such that it is not possible for any individual be it man or woman to rise above the situation substantially captures the market. Where would they sell their products? The women are insisting upon a place at Howrah Haat so that they could sell their products independently or else they would have to depend upon the moneylenders again.

At present the women are taking part in different fairs in different parts of Bengal, Delhi and Hyderabad and selling their textile. Generally two women represent the groups the expenditure is borne by D.R.D.C.

They are generally weaving textile. At Karimpur a woman on her own is weaving Bangladesi Dhakai sari and labour cost to which amounts to Rs 2800. D.R.D.C. is taken by surprise wondering where did they locate the market for such product. Mainly support is extended towards the men and women of the BPL category. The well off is left to themselves to buy their own raw materials.

The women are engaged in weaving plain as well as jacquard bordered cloths. There is no discrimination between the wages between male and female weavers. Focus is on how to equip them better that they can produce more and earn extra and become self-reliant. Primarily the housewives and ladies of the house weave. According to her, the rate of women weavers are pretty high at Phulia.²⁰ D.R.D.C has taken pioneering measures to make women self-reliant. Working at loom from home is a very apt mean for earning. Initially they used to lend support to domestic expenses now they earn enough to take care of the entire expenditure and sometimes even more. Working from home give them chance to support the domestic needs of the family.

Participation and the role of women in the cotton weaving industry of Santipur and Phulia has revealed how the women were involved in weaving since the

18th century. Handloom is one of the oldest cottage industries in India. Without the participation of the women it would not have been what it is today. Just not as a means of earning, the support of the women had been essential in every steps of weaving rendered with much care and attention. The women had faced the atrocities of the British with the same resilience as the men. They had raised their voice along with the men at the time of crisis like during the famine of 1770. When scarcity of thread had created critical problems they had written to the British government. They could not write it themselves but their strong urge could find a vent through somebody else's words and expression. The protest regarding yarn by the women outmaneuvered the protests by the modern women thereafter. What is remarkable is that the women force had worked at the background supporting every vital activity but they did not get desired recognition. The dexterity of male weavers hovered the limelight. But the textiles of Santipur would have lost much of its grandeur had the women been not into it. The fineness of the textile would have been long lost, had not the women used to embroider over the charcoal drawings.

Situation had changed with the advent of spinning wheel or charka. Everybody could weave textile. Phulia took a new avatar. The women at Phulia, Santipur and other places have taken weaving keenly unlike the earlier period when they had abstained from weaving. There is no gender discrimination in weaving now. Women are also engaged in weaving stoles.

Women who are engaged in weaving no longer at the background. The discrimination between any other profession and weaving are no more. Women can be engaged in weaving like any other dignified occupation of their choice, invest and become self-reliant though still there are some social taboos to it. Weaving has given a special support to Bengal economy and it had always been like that since long. At present weaving is a very popular self help means

of livelihood to the women across India.

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4. Bhattacharya, Kalikrishna - Santipur Porichay, 1st Edition, 1344 Bangabdo, Page - 251.
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6. Bhattacharya, Kalikrishna - Op. cit - Page - 252.
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11. Ibid.
12. Nath, Purnendunath - Santipurer Samaj Sanskriti O Itihas, Page - 5.
13. Nag, Kalyani - Santipur Prosango, Vol - I, Page - 32.
14. Pramanik, Bholanath Banikantha, Belati Suta O Tantir Durabastha (Article)
Tantu o Tantri, 1st Issue, 1337 Bangabdo.
15. Interview of the Secretary of Santipur Kutirpara Samabay Samity
Date - 17th May 2008.
16. Interview of the Secretary of Fulia Co-Operative Samabay Samity
Date - 10th April 2008.
17. Interview of the Secretary of Santipur Kuthirpara Samabay Samity
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18. Interview of the Secretary of Fulia Co-operative Samabay Samity
Date - 10th April 2008.
19. Ibid.
20. Interview : Deepika Chakroborty
Office of D. R. D. C, Krishnanagar
Date : 08.04.08