

Chapter- II

WORKING WOMEN IN THE INFORMAL SECTOR: THE DISTRICT PROFILE

2.1 A Brief Overview of Cooch Behar District

The district of Cooch Behar geographically forms part of the Himalayan Terai of West Bengal. It lies between the parallels $25^{\circ} 57' 56''$ and $26^{\circ} 32' 46''$ north latitude and longitude of the eastern most point being $89^{\circ} 52' 00''$ east and the longitude of the western most point being $88^{\circ} 45' 02''$ east. The northern boundary and most part of the western boundary are formed by the Jalpaiguri district. The southern boundary of the district is bounded by the Rangpur district of Bangladesh, the eastern boundary is formed by the district of Goalpara of Assam (District Census Handbook 1981: 16). The main town bearing the same name is situated on the river Torsa at $26^{\circ} 19' 86''$ north latitude and $89^{\circ} 23' 53''$ east longitudes.

The name Cooch Behar is a compound of two words, namely, Cooch and Behar. The term Cooch is a corrupted form of Coch or Koch, being the name of a race of people in habiting a large tract of country in the north east of Bengal and Behar or more properly Vihar denotes abode of sport. Taking the first sense of the second word of the compound, Cooch Behar means the adobe or land of the Koches. In the second sense, the compound means the land of sporting or dalliance with the Koches and has a mythological allusion to the Vihar of god Mahadeva with the Koch damsels (Chaudhuri, 1903)

The significance of the word Cooch Behar points to larger extent of country than the present small state of Cooch Behar for the Koch people is not confined to this state but is found in the neighbouring British districts as well. The fact is the territorial extent of Cooch Behar was at one time much larger than what it now is. As at present limited, Cooch Behar is a Feudatory state in Bengal in political relations with the British Government (Hunter 1877).

The Cooch Behar district consists of sub-divisional namely, Cooch Behar Sadar, Dinhat, Mekhliganj, Tufanganj and Mathabhanga. There are now nine police stations and twelve Community Development Block as

administrative units. In all, there are six municipal towns and three non-municipal towns in the district (District Census Handbook 1991: xviii).

2.2 Salient Features of Cooch Behar District

Cooch Behar district comprises an area of 3,387 square kilometers. The climate of Cooch Behar is very damp and to some extent enervating. The rains of the district are proverbially long and persistent in June and July and sometimes even in August. The range of temperature varies from 23 to 30 degrees during rest part of the year. Some salient features of the district can be put forth as follows:

- a) The district Cooch Behar is predominantly an agricultural area. According to 1991 census, 74.22 per cent of its total workers belongs to the categories of cultivators and agricultural labourers.
- b) The district has 4,467.43 hectares of forestlands in 1997-98, which is in the form of protected forests and unclassified state forest. Out of the total forestlands, 4,127.43 hectares are protected forests and the remaining fall under unclassified state forests.
- c) Cooch Behar town is one of the major centres for trade in the district. The commodities marketed here are tobacco, jute, rice, pulse and mustered seeds. A considerable amount of jute and tobacco are exported from the district.
- d) The people of the district generally composed of two communities—Hindus and Muslims. Beside these, there are some Mishes, Garos and other animistic tribes who are however grouped under Hindus.
- e) Though decennial population growth rate of the district during 1971-81 was more than state average, but during 1981-1991, the same was slightly lower than state average. According to 1991 census, the average density of population in West Bengal was 767 per square kilometers while it was 641 per square kilometers in Cooch Behar district.
- f) The sex ratio (number of females per 1,000 males) of the district in 1991 was 935 in comparison with 917 in West Bengal. Therefore, the sex ratio of Cooch Behar district was higher than the state as a whole.

2.3 Women Labour Participation in Cooch Behar District

The women labour participation in Cooch Behar district is lower than the India average. While the participation rate in economic activities for all India women was 14.44 per cent and 22.27 per cent in 1981 and 1991 respectively, the same was 8.94 per cent and 19.58 per cent in 1981 and 1991 respectively for the Cooch Behar district. However, it is worthwhile to note that the labour force participation among women in the district has been increasing sharply.

Table 2.1

Women Workforce in Cooch Behar District

	1981	1991
Female Population	85 6,182	10,48,839
(% of total population)	(48.33)	(48.30)
Total Female Workers	76,535	2,05,380
(% of female workers in total female population)	(8.94)	(19.58)
Women Workers in the Informal Sector	38,020	1,21,437
(Women in the informal sector as % of the total working women)	(49.68)	(59.13)

Source: Cooch Behar District Census Handbooks, 1981 and 1991

The women workers in the Cooch Behar district are on the rise. The table 2.1 shows that women in the informal sector as percentage of total working women in the district was 49.68 per cent in 1981, while the same was 59.13 percent in 1991. It is noted that most of the workers of this district are engaged in agricultural pursuits. The female labour participation in agricultural pursuits in the district is quite marked, of course in the role of cultivators. Of the total workers of Cooch Behar district even one-third are engaged in non-agricultural occupations. The women labourers are mostly employed in plantation crops, manufacturing of foodstuffs, tobacco products, cotton textiles, cotton weaving in handlooms, silk textile handlooms, bamboo, cane and other allied products.

2.4 Summary

Although the district Cooch Behar is predominantly an agricultural district and most of the women labourers of the district are engaged in agricultural pursuits, a good numbers of women workers of the district are associated with different manufacturing works. The large proportion of the women workers in the informal sector of the district belong to middle age group. However, the proportion of girl child workers in this district is also worth mentioning.

The women in the informal sector in the district is increasing trend. They are mainly engaged in bidi rolling, mat weaving, construction, and bricks kiln industry and certainly in domestic service. The majority of women in the informal sector of the district are engaged in production of rice, flour etc. and processing of crops and foods grains. Since the informal activities of the women workers in the district help in the process of employment generation, there is an immediate need to organise such women workers to get their proper rights in the informal sector.