

The Inside Story: Case study on Housewives in Bardhaman District of West Bengal

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Abstract

Household is a place considered as the epitome of safety and security where one gets solace and peace of mind. In traditional society a woman is called the “home maker” and man the “bread earner”. Inherent patriarchal structure of our society is largely responsible for shaping such a point of view. A family’s honour and respect are said to rest on a women’s behaviour and manners. Like a contagious disease it spread generation after generation, restricting the development of her individuality and independent identity. Housewives are more of the society and less of the economy. They form a homogenous group of individuals who work throughout the day managing the household without any economic or social gain. The paper aims to describe the role of housewives in the process of industrialisation and urbanisation in Bardhaman (Burdwan) district of West Bengal, India and the impact on their lives. As the district experienced a series of industrial development in post-1947 years, it is important to understand the nature of identity formation among the large section of population who remain economically camouflaged.

Keywords: housewives, unpaid, unrecognised, identity.

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I. Introduction

The term “housewife” has been generalised for every such wife putatively not engaged in any economic activity—that is to say, those who do not earn money for their family. Therefore, their contribution is not measured in terms of economic gain. A strict division is drawn between the working and non-working women. In case of the former, industrial association play the qualifying role—whether a woman is engaged in household manufacture or industrial workshops and whether she is engaged in the organised or unorganised sector becomes a determining factor. Housework is unpaid for and unrecognised. According to a survey taken in 2014 by the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development on working hours of men and women, it has been found that, Indian women do about thirty-five hours of housekeeping chores a week compared to two hours a week for Indian men. In other words, they do about fifteen times more housework than Indian men, the worst ratio in the report. (Lahiri, 2017) Ironically these individuals lack individuality and have been consolidated into traditional societal stereotypes carefully preserved over the ages. The story of housewives in different sections of our society and in different places is woven more or less in a similar manner with only some variation. Census reports furnish no records on housewives in our country. They have always been seen as dependents of their male members. Therefore, the category of non-workers includes children, old people, housewives, pensioners and lunatics. The total percentage of non-working population in the district for the year 1981 and 1991 is given below.

Table 1: Total percentage of non-working population in Bardhaman for 1981 and 1991

Year	Female	Male
1981	91.01%	49.99%
1991	90.99%	49.90%

Source: Census Burdwan 1981 and 1991.

The National Planning Committee on Labour suggested that housewives be given due recognition for their work. According to the Report of the Sub- Committee, housework is a part of the social services, which must be treated as productive employment and remunerated accordingly, if not in money terms, but in terms that would fully recognise the status and importance of that service. (National Planning Committee Report of Sub-

Committee: Labour, 1939) In terms of labour productivity non-recognition of housework done by women together with other classes like priests, landlords, etc. greatly diminishes the country's economic standard and hence poses a negative impact on the national budget.

Before analysing the role of housewives and their identity construction, we need to first understand the basic structure of a household. Household or family is the smallest unit of a society. A typical household resembles a hierarchal pattern similar to that of the latter. Head of the family is always a male member followed by other senior male and female members and lastly the junior females including daughters-in-law and children. Therefore, a household represents a type of caste system. Male members form the dominating and privileged section. The situation can be better described as- men are Brahmins in their own homes and are naturally excluded from all work. Most of the work is done by women, but not by all the women equally. This creates sharp rivalries between women. Generally, work load fall on the junior-most woman, usually a new daughter-in-law. She has to serve not just male members, but also other women who pull rank on her. (Lahiri, 2017)

When a girl gets married and goes to her in-law's house, by custom she is bound to perform all her responsibilities. If she works outside, she has to definitely reconcile the two domains of responsibility. In case of the opposite, she is solely identified as a 'housewife'. She spends her day managing the entire household—her in-laws, children and husband. Literally she is the pillar on which rests the whole household. Yet they are the most neglected and exploited section. They are even victims of physical and mental abuse.

II. Methodology

A survey of some housewives in specific localities of Bardhaman district was conducted through questionnaires and unstructured interviews, and the findings composed in the form of case studies. Studies show more-or-less similar pattern of their lives with few distinct cases. The section aims to construct identity formation through the case studies of three women. Though they all are housewives, yet differences lie embedded in their class, social status and family structure. Variation in character among this section of the populace has been identified in urban and rural areas.

Study Area: Survey has been carried out in the cosmopolitan city of Asansol situated in the industrialised western part of the district (now called Paschim Bardhaman), as well as Kalna in the agriculturally developed eastern part (now called Purba Bardhaman).

Study Duration: 1970's to 1990's.

III. Result

• Case Study 1: Rural area

Pratima Ghosh, a lady in her sixties, lives in Kalna. She was married at the age of twenty to Haradhan Ghosh, youngest son of the Ghosh family. The Ghosh's are a simple middle-class family owning some ancestral agricultural lands at the outskirts of the town and a potato cold storage. Land is their primary source of income. Pratima hailed from a village in Monteswar and belonged to a joint family. She was the third of the four children. She passed her matriculation and possessed different creative skills. However, there is nothing unusual about this. From a very tender age girls are taught to cook, manage the household and even stitch, knit and draw *alpona* (colourful motifs drawn by hand on auspicious occasions). There is a common Bengali saying: *Je randhe shey chul-o bandhe* (She who knows how to cook also knows how to braid her hair). This implies that a woman who knows only to cook cannot become a good homemaker unless she does not have other creative skills. Pratima reminiscence about her early marriage days. Being the youngest daughter-in-law, she received much love. However, her elders expected her to shoulder household responsibilities at the earliest. Her mother-in-law Shantipriya Ghosh was a very matronly woman. There was strict discipline inside the house and responsibilities were divided. She used to work hand in hand with her elder sisters-in-law from dawn to dusk—cooking, cleaning, making puffed rice, taking care of children. Evening was the time for relaxation, spending some time talking with each other and even neighbours. Her husband was a nice soft-spoken person. As years passed, she mastered the art of household management.

People's thoughts are shaped by societal norms and traditional beliefs. Those who become one with them are considered to be happy, while those who cannot are the worst sufferers. The reason for this is that our society is fearful of challenges and exceptions. Pratima performed every responsibility in the best possible way. Being religious, she participated in every puja and festival whole-heartedly. After the demise of Shantipriya, three of them have managed the household with their dedication, hard work and prudence. Pratima is an example of hundreds of such housewives who are circumscribed by taboos and discrimination. Gender bias, inequality, and lack of identity are concepts alien to their worldview. They love to be called by their husband's name which inspires a sense of pride in them. They seek satisfaction in their partner's success. This is not their fault; it is simply their lack of gender consciousness. From the interview it becomes evident that their identity as housewives, or precisely homemakers, brings them immense respect within the household. However, at the end of the day their individuality gets lost and buried under the patriarchal setup.

- **Case Study 2: Urban lower-middle class**

Neamatpur is a small locality in Asansol sub-division. Laxmikanta Haldar runs a small grocery shop in Neamatpur market. His wife Purnima Haldar is a housewife. They live in a two-room house while his three brothers live in separate houses within the same locality. Purnima said that their joint family broke apart on a serious property dispute after the demise of her father-in-law. She is a girl from Sata village and married into the Haldar family in 1982. However, her life did not take a smooth trail. Firstly, her husband's economic condition could not fulfil the needs of the family as most of his earnings were spent in drinking. She became the mother of two children within five years of her marriage. Life really proved difficult for her. She had to run the house and bring up her children single-handedly. Purnima Debi has an expertise in stitching. To support her family, she decided to earn money by doing the same. Unfortunately, she got no support from Laxmikanta. He never wanted her wife to work. Recalling her past, she said how hard her life had been in those days. It was her patience and self-confidence that gave her strength. She even faced the wrath of her husband who sometimes physically abused her. When asked why she did not leave him, Purnima replied with a sigh that a girl is always taught from childhood her real house is her husband's house. Her own family turned away from her for the fear of society. The sole aim of our society, an institution as it is regarded, should be to benefit all people living in it. But it has neglected its women and kept them at the vulnerable end, bound by traditional customs and beliefs.

In case of Purnima Debi, identity construction took a conflicting route—on one hand, she wanted to do something for economic gain while, on the other, family pressure subsumed her individual needs. Her enterprising nature could not find fulfilment. She was afraid of breaking prevalent norms and hence resigned herself to the belief that being a woman she had to endure what fate has destined for her.

- **Case Study 3: Urban elite class**

Ashish Agarwal is an officer of Eastern Coalfields Limited, posted in Chinakuri Circle area office under Asansol subdivision. His family consists of his wife Ritu Agarwal and their only son. They come from a sound economic background and their socio-cultural outlook reflects a distinct standard. Ritu Debi is a middle-aged woman and comes from a wealthy Kedia family residing in Kolkata. She said that her family has a traditional Marwari background tied by cultural taboos. She was married just after she completed her graduation. For one year she lived with her in-laws in Dhanbad, her husband being posted there. Thereafter she started living in an ECL bungalow in Chinakuri, with her husband. She has a domestic helper and gardener as well. She supervises them. Ritu Debi is a fantastic cook and loves to make different handicraft items. She has decorated the bungalow with her artistic creativity. Her day is spent taking care of her son and his studies, managing the household, looking after her husband's requirements and so on. She never felt the need to take up a job outside. Her socio-economic and cultural background never aroused in her the desire to work outside or to be a working woman. She has always performed her duty with immense concentration and dedication. She said that, she is happy in her own world, receiving due respect and honour from her family. Her husband feels proud of her and considers Ritu as his soul mate.

In this case, the growth of an individual identity takes place in an opposite direction from the usual. Recognition and respect greatly motivate Ritu Debi to contribute toward the betterment of her family. This itself functioned as a prime cause of her never considering working outside.

IV. Conclusion

The conclusion attempts to find answer to the question- do housewives possess individual identity? If so, then why are they addressed by their spouse's name and surname? The answer lies with the understanding of societal structure which attaches a stigma to the idea of being a housewife. Housewives are mere dependents and hence their presence is obscured by men, overshadowing independent existence. In the words of Yasodha Shanmugasundaram (1993), "to run the home is a career in itself". (p 3) But this fact is unfortunately ignored and housework is relegated to the domain of unproductive work.

The term labour is always juxtaposed with economy and rarely with society. The labour of a full-time housewife is counted as zero input in the labour market. Though she receives no wages she does contribute to her spouse's productivity. Her work, in terms of economy, is therefore counted as '*unmeasured support sector*', if appropriately captured in a '*measured sector*', it will reveal women's labour productivity in true sense. (Shanmugasundaram, 1993) Women are mostly ignorant of their rights and status in society. They are unaware whether they have any individuality at all. 'Individual existence' is a word which sounds absurd in a social situation where woman's identity is overcast by men. They visualise for themselves a dormant existence. The National Planning Committee said that, all citizens are workers and none parasite, (National Planning Committee Report of Sub-Committee: Labour, 1939) and therefore found it necessary to organise every individual in accordance to their work. It further suggested the formation of Housewives Cooperative Society in each locality. But women lack consciousness about their identity and seem to be satisfied in their world—a world created and defined by men. Moreover it has been found that though technological advancements in the

era of globalisation, caters to the liberation of women from hard chores of traditional lives, it also displaces them from the employment market.

The paper aims to highlight the crisis of identity of housewives as a societal class. It endeavours to eradicate gender bias by addressing them by their names during the course of interviews. However, a similarity among maximum housewives has been found. Most of them stated that their husbands or male in-laws rarely participated in household activities, except for bringing everyday goods. Junior female members of a house bore the maximum workload where they lived with their in-laws. This is a widespread norm of every Indian household at all times. However, some admitted that they received help and support from their seniors. Such exceptions remained few and limited even in urban areas which are thought to be hubs of progressive ideologies. The concept of a caste-like system in Indian households discussed earlier finds its prototype in the towns of Asansol and Kalna.

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