

‘Kaaj’: Understanding women’s work, development and local knowledge in rural Bangladesh

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Abstract

In many parts of Latin America, Asia and Africa women spend considerable time doing agricultural work, and for domestic chores, such as cooking, childcare and animal care (Quisumbing, 1998). Participation of women in household as well as farm labour is a common feature of peasant communities across the world. In rural Bangladesh, women’s work is a significant part of the village economy (Abdullah & Zeidenstein, 1982). Particularly in the char lands, where livelihood conditions are vulnerable, women work for longer hours than men to support their households. Considering such a situation, rural development projects mostly target poor women as beneficiaries by involving them in income-based welfare schemes. It is important to understand how women interpret work (kaaj), in order to identify how development projects affect their own way of doing work. In this article, firstly I intend to focus on patterns of women’s work on the char, in Char Khankhanapur and Decree Charchandpur, two villages located in Rajbari region of Bangladesh and secondly, investigate how women perceive kaaj. In my attempt to understand whether development is improving or depreciating women’s lives, I also delve into understanding local women’s knowledge.

Introduction:

Bangladesh, an alluvial deltaic region in South Asia, is populated with about 16 million people and characterized by bureaucratic governments and patriarchal social systems. Ali (2012:2) defines patriarchy as ‘the male-dominated structures and social arrangements where women are systematically excluded from the productive or economic spheres of life and where women’s sexuality is always a matter of scrutiny’. Traditional norms of patriarchy and *purdah* (veiled seclusion of women) generally pattern gender ideology in rural Bangladesh (Hartmann & Boyce 1983, Kabeer 1990, White 1992, Baden *et al* 1994, Karim & Law 2013). Gender roles are highly segregated in Bangladeshi villages, backed by a dominant patriarchal ideology. Women are commonly expected to be in *purdah* (seclusion) and not encouraged to work outside their *bari* (homestead) (Abdullah & Zeidenstein 1982). Due to such restrictions on women’s free movement and economic involvement, men are the sole breadwinners (Parveen 2007) for their families. While daughters are expected to obey their fathers and mothers to their sons, wives are expected to obey their husbands as their guardians, remaining docile (Karim 2006). Often women see such submissiveness as a symbol of their femininity and accept male domination as natural (Hartmann 1981).

Maintaining the culturally prescribed ‘image of ideal women’ (Ali 2012: 4), some Muslim women, both rich and poor, prefer to put on *burka* (veiling cloak - long dress covering head to toe with or without showing face in public) over their customary clothing of sari when they go outside their

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homestead (making visits to natal homes, village doctors, markets or other public areas in male presence). Well-to-do Hindu women do not wear the *burka* but some of them cover their head with one end of their saris to exhibit their decorum and social status. Balk (1996) and Mannan (2010) show that wearing the *burka* is a mark of social prestige for some Muslim women of affluent households. Balk (1996) also highlights that purdah enables women's mobility outside the household.

White (1992) shows that some rural women ignore society's gender norms. For instance, poor women not only act as intermediaries, gather information, bargain and make market transactions with the help of their kinship networks, they also participate in agriculture related activities such as post-harvest work and contributed to household and village economy (Vasavi 1993: 26). Rahman (1994) demonstrates that poverty compels many poor women to get paid employment, and at the cost of their social status, making them break the traditional gender ideology of remaining confined within homes. However, Balk (1996) explains that it is not always poverty that leads women not to conform to their prescribed gender roles. According to her, other factors such as social class, education and wealth may lead some women to defy existing gender norms.

Karim & Law (2013) show that gender norms in rural areas are continuously changing because of the intervention of development activities such as microcredit lending, recruiting women in construction work and involving women in other income generating tasks aimed at promoting their empowerment. This is gradually resulting in the conservative gender ideology in rural areas becoming a partially liberal one while women are becoming co-breadwinners; men are not acting as co-carers. Increased employment for women hardly allows women to bargain with patriarchal power arrangements and instead of liberating, burdens them with dual responsibilities of income and household work.

To understand women's and men's work I used participant observation and in-depth, ethnographic interviews. Often the interviews were semi structured and I selected topics based on my purpose of investigation. Though I maintained purposive sampling, I was conscious of not pushing the interviewees to think according to imposed categories. Group interviews and focus group discussions helped me collect information from men as well as women, within a short period of time. Women usually, felt comfortable taking part in conversations when they were with others, and carrying out household chores or just chatting in the evenings. Such occasions were interactive and enabled me to investigate how the women's worldviews varied.

I also used timelines (May *et al* 2009) to identify life events, particularly those that might impacted on local livelihoods. I preferred to employ the seasonal calendar (May *et al* 2009) to evaluate livelihoods, and see how different farming seasons shape these. The seasonal calendar that I constructed was used 'to draw out and further explore the timing of a number of significant activities, and the potential relationships between different biophysical and social economic event domains, which are cyclical' (Sillitoe *et al* 2005: 142). For example, it helped me to understand both men's and women's seasonal labour migration.

1.1. '*Amader kaaj*' = 'our work'

Feminists analyse work through the lens of gender. They focus on gender, women and women's work as separate issues, in order to understand how these are empirically constituted (Barker, 2005). To grasp women's perception of work, I focused on women's experiences, and attempted to see gender not only as an empirical category, but also as a conceptual category. To help with this issue, I have followed

Sandra Harding's understanding of women's work which sees that gender as being constructed by social structures and institutions, forming part of the conceptual or symbolic systems (Harding, 1986).

While work is defined by a sexual segregated division of labour in rural societies in Bangladesh (Cain *et al*, 1979), at Char Khankhanapur and Decree Charchandpur people differentiate between men's work (*purush loker kaaj*) and women's work (*meve loker kaaj*). Men's work includes working outside the home, especially to earn money. Women's work comprises activities within, as well as outside, the household. Poor women consider working outside their house as complimenting their husbands' work. They call such work as *shahajjo* (help). It is not regarded as the principal source of income, but in case of female headed households, women do need to work outside their house, to earn a living, which is *beche thakar jonne kaaj* (working for survival).

Most men and women believe that the existing gendered division of labour is necessary for the wellbeing of households, as well as society. Often they trace it back to their religious traditions. According to them, if men do women's work and women do men's work, the ancient social setting will be disrupted, and that will increase conflict within society. Most Muslim women think that the gendered labour distribution is set by Allah, as the creator of the universe, while Hindu women consider it to be the age old practice outlined in the holy Veda and Ramayana scriptures. Therefore, most men and women do not usually challenge the existing norms of work within the villages, to avoid social upset. For example, if men did household chores such as cooking, cleaning and washing, women would consider that as *lajja* (shame) and label those as *chokhe laga* (see something bad). Men also ridicule their fellows who do women's work, instead of praising them for earning enough money to maintain the households. Even if men try to assist their wives with cooking and cleaning, or interfere in quarrels between their wives and mothers, they are criticized as *meveli purush* (man behaving like women). This underlines the strong patriarchal value of the village society, which significantly segregates the women's world from the men's world. I agree the socialist feminists' interpretation of work, which proposes that 'gender differences diminish as men share the burden of caring, labour, and other forms of unpaid household labour, with women' (Barker, 2005: 2199).

Women regard work they do in own homesteads as *amader kaaj* (our own work), which is time consuming and labour intensive (Quisumbing, 1998). According to Abdullah & Zeidenstein (1982), rural women's work is part of the subsistence economy. Poorer women, however, are increasingly becoming familiar with the labour market as wage earners (Chen, 1986). Although poor women, and some women from rich households, participate in paid labour, according to them it does not always improve their status and does not convey equal prestige to that of men. My findings oppose the liberal feminist view, that women's increasing participation in income generating activities minimizes the gender differences within society. In this context, I disagree with Charusheela (2003) who believes that employment gives women autonomy and increases their status within society. The reason for the non-relationship between women's employment and their empowerment is that women still have to perform domestic work in their own households, and men are the users of the women's income, leaving little left for the women to spend. When women work outside the house, they cannot devote enough time to household work, which increases their unequal share, regarding labour distribution. Sometimes paid work requires women to venture out of *pardah*, and work with men; this can create tension in conjugal relations. Most women consider working outside their homes as *daye theke kaaj kora* (working under forced conditions).

1.2. Understanding ‘ghorer kaaj’ = domestic work and ‘bairer kaaj’ = public work

While social feminists believe that productive labour is different from reproductive labour, it is important to understand how women differentiate work according to purpose and location. It is, also, necessary to see how work varies according to class, caste and gender to understand different patterns of women’s work. Most women at Char Khankhanapur and Degree Charchandpur identify work as either ‘ghorer kaaj’ (work done within their households), or ‘bairer kaaj’ (work done outside for money). They see *ghorer kaaj* as the work they do for household maintenance. Though some women engage in craft production as *ghorer kaaj*, like sewing and quilt making, within their homes, they do not always get paid for such work.

Like many other women around the world, women’s work does not depend on their life cycles. For example, in Mexico while women prefer to work outside their home, when they are less burdened with child care and household chores, my study found that women accept it as their duty to perform housework throughout their lives. Only in old age, women can expect to leave housework to their daughter-in-laws. Unlike Mexican men, women do not work only for certain periods outside the house. Livelihood crises can mean that some women have to work outside their homes at any time of life.

1.3. Age, class and women’s work

There exists a difference between the rich and poor women, in the way that they define work. Age, is another determining factor. Rich women have the option of hiring household labour, usually from poorer households. They enjoy greater leisure, as they do not spend long hours in doing household chores. Barker (2005) showed from a feminist perspective, women of affluent households can participate in waged labour, because they get support with their household work.

Women of richer households consider certain activities as their work. For example, they think that it is their right to supervise domestic helpers, and also hire labourers to work in their household’s fields. They cook only the main curry dishes, while keeping control over the kitchen work. They believe that to secure their place within the household, they should participate in cooking. In this regard, women of rich households consider cooking as a skill, as well as a space for their identity construction. One of the women of a rich family of Char Khankhanapur told me, ‘*je meye ranna jaane na, shey meye manush na*’ (women who cannot cook are never women). She further asserted, ‘*mevera jato kaj i koruk, rannai meyeder prodhan kaaj*’ (whatever work women may do, cooking is their main job) underlying the importance of cooking as women’s work. Richer women hire domestic labour, to assist in cooking, cleaning and washing. From a Marxist perspective, the more affluent exploit the hired domestic household workers, which denigrate this type of labour.

Young women of rich households, freed from doing household chores, consider going to school as their main occupation. Few of these women enter the paid job sector, seeing education as a matter of social prestige, and a key to a good marriage. They, also, learn about cooking and other household work, but this is not a compulsory or regular commitment, as within households women distinguish between *meyer kaaj* (work of daughters) and *bou er kaaj* (work of wives). The task of a daughter, of a rich household, is to study and assist her mother and other relatives in household work in her spare time, while learning to become a woman. After marriage women usually live with their husband’s families. As wives they have to fit in with their mother-in-laws and sister-in-laws, and take part in *grihasthali*

kaaj (household work) to secure their place in the family. Older women, notably mother- in -laws and grandmother- in-laws, consider it their duty to assist and train their sons' young wives of the households in cooking and looking after children. Older women enjoy more leisure than younger women, and they devote much time to religious activities, and seasonally prepare *pitha* (cakes) and '*achar*' (pickles) for household consumption.

Women of rich households do not do *bairer kaaj* (work for money) out of necessity which is *purush loker kaaj* (men's work) to them. For rich women, to work outside their household involves going to the bank, when necessary, visiting local markets to shop, and visiting doctors during illness. Things are different for women of poorer households who do *bairer kaaj* for maintaining their living. Poor women working in their own homes start their day early, when the sun rises. Their first task is to clean the homestead courtyard, with a *baron* (a short broom of straws) or *shola* (broom made from dried coconut leaves). Afterwards, they wash themselves and enter the kitchen to cook breakfast. Poor women, who work in rich households all day, may also do other work in local *bazaar* (market), fields or building sites. They cook rice with a *bhaji* (vegetable curry) or *alu bharta* (mash potato) and, again in the evening, they cook rice fish or egg curry. Like rich women they cannot afford hired labour for assisting them in housework, but if they have grown up daughters, they can expect some help from them, for looking after younger siblings, washing clothes, utensils, and caring for domestic animals such as chickens and ducks. Poor women, unlike rich women, do not perceive their time spent in their own homes in cooking and household chores as *kaaj*, but they see working outside for their families to survive, as their *kaaj*.

1.4. Caste and women's work

Caste is deeply rooted in Hindu culture, and differentiates people on the basis of heredity and occupation (Marriot & Inden, 1977: 230). Hindu women's work in Char Khankhanapur varies from that of Muslim women, because of their caste identity. By focussing on how caste categorization constructs labour, we can see the hierarchy attached to women's and men's work (David, 1977).

According to Marriot & Inden (1977), Hindus believe that caste status corresponds to purity and pollution. Upper caste Hindus consider that they inherit purity of blood from birth, and look down on lower castes, particularly the scheduled castes, as most impure, to be assigned to the most degrading work in society. Dalit women face dual discrimination on the basis of their caste and class status in rural society.

Hindu women's work is decided by their ascribed caste identity. Here, I focus on the work of some scheduled castes like Ghosh (confectioner), Bagdi (small fisher women), Betei (bamboo craftswomen) and the Dalit (cleaner and leather worker). According to Hindu cosmology, the scheduled castes are the lowest category and Brahmins (priest) are the most superior. However, Brahmins are few at Char Khankhanapur, and hierarchy exists among the scheduled caste groups. Dalit women work with impure substances such as leather, drainage and dead bodies whereas other scheduled caste women are mostly craft person. From a feminist perspective, women's oppression predates class divisions, caste being the most ancient, and is the earliest surviving form of social stratification in human history.

Ghosh women belong to the hereditary occupation of making sweets for market sale. *Ghorer kaaj* for these women includes preparing and cooking sweetmeats. Almost all Ghosh households possess a cow,

as milk is one of the main ingredients of sweets. These women make *doi* (curd/sweetened yoghurt), *kheer* (condensed rice pudding) and *ghee* (liquid butter), while men complete the preparation of sweets.

Women acquire knowledge of sweet making through years of experience from their childhood, when they assisted their mothers and aunts. An experienced Ghosh woman can identify the quality of the *ghee* by its smell and texture, when, after hours of boiling, the *ghee* starts to separate from the milk. According to Ghosh women, it is the knowledge of heating milk which is important for making *bhalo ghee* (good quality liquid butter). A light yellow colour and smooth thick texture indicates the preparation of good quality *ghee*.

Besides making *ghee*, Ghosh women also make *chchana* (homemade cheese), which is the main ingredient of *shandesh* (soft cheese cake). Women, generally, prepare *ghee* and *chchana* in a separate *chula* (mud oven), that is not used for household cooking. They mix milk and lime juice, or malt vinegar, in large pans to prepare *chchana*. They distinguish between *ghono dudh* (fresh milk with full cream) and *torol dudh* (semi-skimmed milk). The former type of milk is best for making *chchana*, giving *shandesh* a good taste. Sometimes, women make *gurer shandesh* (palm sugar cheese cake) from *gur* (date palm sugar). This is not always for market sale, since the women prepare small amounts of sweetmeat for household use. They also make *kashundi* (mustard sauce) and *chutney* (thick, savoury sauce made from fruits and tomatoes).

Betei women are basket weavers and at Char Khankhanapur they are known as *monirishi*, and live in a separate location called *monirishi para*. These women weave baskets, mats, *kula* (rice winnowing fans) and other household items made from bamboo. Betei women possess the skill to craft items from different types of bamboo strip. For example, for making *pati* (mats), Betei women split bamboo into *kanchi* (small strips) that are strong and flexible.



Fig.1.4.1. Betei women weaving *kula* (winnowing fan)

The occupational skill of Bagdi women is small scale fishing, in shallow water. They catch fish in small ponds using a *pola* (hollow pipe) to catch small fish like *koi*, *magur*, *shol* and *puti*, that they can see swimming in shallow water, or resting on the bottom of the pond. Although they do not use fish nets, as not all Bagdi women are skilful with them, as they with *pola*. Experience of fish movements in the shallow water, and the skilled use of using *pola*, allow Bagdi women to catch a basket of fish in couple of hours, for household consumption and market sale.

Dalit women make a clear distinction between *ghorer kaaj* and *bairer kaaj*. Both Hindus and Muslims abstain from eating or maintaining any social relationship with Dalit women, as they are considered to be the most impure. They do not consider such women as individuals, or to be respected and valued for the work they do. Most villagers call them *metharni* as they clean drains, toilets and sweep up garbage, for which they are poorly paid. From a Marxist point of view, they encounter dual oppression for being impure and untouchable, and for being poor women.

1.5. Women's work and the seasons

Women's work varies according to the season, particularly in farming communities where work is seasonal. I will discuss cropping patterns and women's seasonal work according to the Bengali months.

Bengali months	English months
<i>Baishakh</i>	April
<i>Jaishtha</i>	May
<i>Ashar</i>	June
<i>Sraban</i>	July
<i>Bhadra</i>	August
<i>Ashwin</i>	September
<i>Kartik</i>	October
<i>Ogrohayon</i>	November
<i>Poush</i>	December
<i>Magh</i>	January
<i>Falgun</i>	February
<i>Chaitra</i>	March

Table.1.1. Bengali months in comparison to English calendar

At Char Khankhanapur and Decree Charchandpur there are three main rice cropping seasons - *Aman* 'winter', *Aus* 'spring' and *Boro* 'early summer'. Seasonal peaks and slacks are also evident in working patterns of non-farming households.

As Cain *et al* (1979) found at Char Gopalpur, which is similar to Char Khankhanapur and Decree Charchandpur, seasonal peaks of women's work are from November to early January, with the harvest and processing of the *aman* crop, and from beginning of June to July *aus* and jute crops. A relatively slack period follows. During the rainy season and Ramadan (the Islamic month of fasting) poor women find it difficult to find work.

English Seasons	Bengali seasons	Bengali months
Summer	<i>Grishsho</i>	<i>Baishakh and Jaishtha</i>
Rainy season	<i>Barsha</i>	<i>Ashar and Sraban</i>
Autumn	<i>Shorot</i>	<i>Bhadra and Ashwin</i>
Late Autumn	<i>Hemanta</i>	<i>Kartik and Ogrohayon</i>
Winter	<i>Sheet</i>	<i>Poush and Magh</i>
Spring	<i>Boshonto</i>	<i>Falgun and Chaitra</i>

Table.1.2. Bengali seasons

Men and women of rich farming households are busy during the cropping seasons, because of having to hire and supervise agricultural labourers. Although due to the adoption of high yielding varieties of seed, rice and wheat crops grow the year round. During February and March poor women cultivate vegetables such as pumpkin, squash and beans, in their home gardens.



Fig.1.5.1. Poor women working in earth digging project

Most construction work occurs in the villages in autumn and winter. Poor women work then as wage earners, excavating earth and breaking bricks (for concrete aggregate). Poor women are over worked at this time, by having to manage both their domestic and waged work. They work from early morning to late afternoon, for about 14 hours a day in the dry season, when there are many employment opportunities available. Cain *et al* (1979) similarly showed that poor women's paid work peaks at a time when men find it difficult to find work.

1.6. Women and post harvesting

Women's participation in farming at Char Khankhanapur and Decree Charchandpur depends on their social class and caste. For example, women belonging to the richer land owning class do not engage, directly, in crop cultivation, while women of poorer land owning or landless households do so. They contribute to jute and rice cultivation, including clearing grass from the fields, weeding, transplanting, harvesting and post-harvest processing. My findings differ from that of Unnevehr & Stanford, whose belief was that Bangladeshi women who engage in rice production do not work in fields (1985: 2).

According to Sachs (1996), there exists a marked differentiation between men's crops and women's crops, in farming societies, reflecting the gendered control of production and crop sale (1996: 68). Men's crops are cash crops, cultivated on a large scale for market sale, and women's crops are home grown vegetables for household consumption. I did not find such patterns of control and classification of crops, since women do not have control of crops they cultivate. Women see their participation in the home and cash crop farming, as under men's control. Women who want to sell their vegetables, do so through the men of their households, and have little control over the money earned from them in the market. I prefer to use Sachs's (1996: 134) term 'farm women' or more generally, 'female farmers' for women working in the rural agrarian sector. Women from the richer, and some medium, farm households have greater decision-making power, regarding their share of agricultural produce, than do poorer farm women, because rich farmers produce a surplus, whereas poor households have almost no choice, other than consuming what they produce.

Saradamoni (1985) showed that in Kerala, women of landowning families, along with men, involve themselves with agriculture, not by doing manual chores like weeding and transplanting but by supervising the hired labourers working in the fields. Their involvement depends on the proximity of fields to their residences. If a woman belongs to a land owning family, and has no husband or adult son to supervise agricultural work, she depends on her brothers to manage share cropping. Women of rich farming households usually manage the cooking for *khoraiki poirat* (labourer working for food), that they employ, rather than supervising them in the fields.

While landless women work in fields as hired agricultural workers, women of small and medium farm households contribute to agricultural activities of their household. Though men and women work together in fields, and tasks are not done by one of them. For example, men do heavy work like ploughing, laddering, applying fertilizer and insecticides and transporting the produce home. Women do the time consuming laborious work, such as weeding, transplanting seedlings, preparing seed beds and range of post harvesting activities like drying, parboiling, threshing, husking, winnowing and storing rice (Abdullah & Zeidenstein, 1982).

Cultivation starts with cleaning the fields. It involves clearing grass and shrubs. They use small sickles. Rich and medium farmers hire female labourers for cleaning fields, which allows their womenfolk to concentrate on household activities and to maintain *purdah* (seclusion), as an indicator of household prestige. This is similar to Sachs's (1996: 88) study of Vietnamese women's work in paddy production. There, farm workers stand in knee-deep water to transplant seedlings that men prepare in seedbeds located near the fields. In households where there is no one to look after infants, mothers take them to the fields. They may tie suckling children to their chests, or backs, while transplanting and weeding. As Sachs (1996) showed, Malaysian women's farm work complements that of men.

Before bringing reaped paddy to the households, women prepare the courtyard by sweeping and smearing with a mixture of mud and cow dung, to prevent the paddy mixing with dust. The harvested paddy is piled up in the courtyard for women to thresh and separate grain from the straw by using a riddle (Abdullah & Zeidenstein, 1982: 211). The straw is stored as animal fodder or for making *sop* (mat). Parboiling of paddy, known as *dhan shidhdho kora*, involves overnight soaking of paddy in *khada* (earthen pots). Women parboil paddy in big metal or earthen pots for about half an hour, and, as they say, they can tell from the smell of the boiling paddy and the foam on the surface, whether the paddy is properly parboiled, or not. They use the bran collected from parboiled paddy as animal and poultry feed (1982: 212).

After parboiling women dry the paddy. The process of drying paddy is important because if not dried properly the rice breaks while husking or milling, and spoils if stored. Drying requires one to three days and depends on the extent of sunshine; the summer harvest dries quicker than winter harvest. Women generally dry parboiled paddy on their homestead courtyard floor or in the rice mill's *chatal* (cemented floor), turning periodically with their feet or a wooden stick. Women work at *chatal* as paid mill workers, whereas courtyard drying is household work.

Dried parboiled paddy is husked either in rice mills or in the household. In rice mills, men generally do the husking, while women use a *dheki* (wooden foot pounding device used to hammer and husk rice) in their household yards. Two women pound the *dheki* paddle and another collects the husked rice from the hole underneath the *dheki*. Home based rice is used for household consumption. Women believe that it is high in nutritional value and good for health. They do not use a wooden bowl and heavy stick to husk rice, like farm women do in the other villages of Bangladesh (Abdullah and Zeidenstein, 1982).



Fig.1.6.1. Women husking rice with *dheki*

Winnowing is done exclusively by poor women. They use a *kula* (bamboo flat basket) to fan the husked rice. After winnowing they store rice in *motka* (earthen containers) or sacks. As they say, when they bite dried grains, and they break between their teeth, with a sound like *kot*, the grains are suitable for storing. This is *kotkote shukhano* (dried to its fullest). Usually every farm household has a grain storage room with *macha* (wooden or bamboo shelves) to protect stored grains from rats and insects. Yet before storing, women wrap the containers with mud and cow dung and close with earthen plates or

pieces of dried coconut shells to protect rice from dampness. Before cooking, they winnow again to separate black rice, dust from rice.



Fig.1.6.2. Winnowing rice at Decree Charchandpur

Poor women harvest crops for their households, and as hired labourers paid daily or monthly. Due to increased wage demands of male labourers, non- agricultural employment opportunities and out-migration of men, rich and medium farmers hire poor women from landless households to harvest and undertake post harvesting tasks. In jute harvesting, women tie jute in bundles and carry them for drying in the farmers' courtyards. Afterwards, women soak the harvested jute in *doba* (shallow ponds) for two to three weeks, depending on time needed, to soften the jute fibres. These waist deep ponds are not used for household purposes, such as cleaning, bathing or washing because of the contamination by rotten jute. The soaking process is '*jag dewa*', the jute on bamboo or water hyacinth stacks. It can take several hours to separate fibre from jute sticks. Both men and women have separate clothes for doing this work known as *pat jagano kapor* since prolonged time working in water spoils the texture and colour of clothes, making them unusable as daily wear. Women of small landowning families who cannot afford hired labour, separate jute from its stem at their homestead courtyard. Women do most of the sun-drying of jute fibre, often spreading it on the dirt roads of the villages, or in their courtyards, where they may erect bamboo frames for drying the jute. It is important to dry jute properly as *bheja pat* (wet jute) is poor quality jute and commanding a low price in the market. Women use *pat khori* (dried jute sticks) as fuel for cooking and fencing round houses.

Farm machinery has had negative consequences for the women. Nowadays many farmers use tractors, threshing machines, husking machines and automated dryers for harvesting and post harvesting activities. As a result, farming requires less labour, and that largely of men, who are the machine operators. Begum (1985) similarly reported that introduction of rice mills has replaced women's traditional *dheki* rice husking. She highlighted that the impact varies according to class. Before women from rich and medium farming households controlled post harvesting work. Now men have more control.

The introduction of high yielding varieties (HYV), has also affected different people in different ways. The crops, that now grow the year round, are cultivated two to three times a year, such that harvesting and post harvesting requires more labour. This stresses poor women who have to coordinate their domestic activities with farming responsibilities. Moreover, as Abdullah (1985) showed, technology and agricultural extension services hardly reached the poor rural women. Mostly, the agricultural

extension agents are men, whose services target the big farmers, whose farms are on a large scale. Small farmers and women, have less access to information regarding crops, insecticides and technology.

1.7. Women's work, other than farm work

Women spend considerable time working on seed storage, animal care and home gardening. They also prepare *gobor shar* (manure made by mixing cow dung with fuel ash and paddy husks) to use as natural fertilizer on the fields and in home gardens, and use the dry dung as fuel.



Fig.1.7.1. Preparing gobor (cow dung) fuel sticks for cooking

Women cultivate gourd, bitter gourd, spinach, pumpkin, squash and other vegetables for household consumption. Sachs (1996) pointed out, that through home gardening women contribute, significantly, to family nutrition. Particularly, when food prices are high at local markets and household income is not sufficient to buy meat and fish, women can, sometimes, provide an adequate diet from their homestead gardens. Since such production does not require rigorous cultivation, and farm machinery, women, themselves, prepare land, weed, fertilize and harvest grown vegetable.

Women keep some seeds for home gardening, using traditional methods. Shah & Nuri (2000) noted three forms of seed storage: bulk storage, flat ambient storage and conditional storage. Bulk storage means mass storage of seeds, flat ambient storage (cleaned, packed and stored in containers) and conditional storage (under certain temperature and humidity) (2000: 93). Women usually bulk store for main crops like rice.

The onion seed storage follows the flat ambient process of seed storage. After harvesting onion, women clean, dry and store some onion in their storage room, known as *hali piyaz*. Men plant *hali piyaz* in fields and allow the plants to grow until the flower blooms. Women gather flowers, dry them and thresh with wooden stick or feet to obtain the black seeds. They put the seeds through *chalon* (sieve), then further clean them with water, dry them in the sun and store them in *kola* (earthen containers). They seal *kola* with piece of cloth to prevent spoilage and insect attacks.

Shah & Nuri (2000) reported how women collect and preserve seeds of leafy vegetables like *lal shak*, *data shak* and *palong shak* (Indian spinach), of pumpkin, ridge gourd, bottle gourd, and squash, and other vegetables, according to their conventional ways of seed management. They let vegetables and

fruits rot and dry with seeds inside, and then wash and dry them again. Often they dry such seeds on the roofs of their houses, and monitor their process, and turn the seeds, occasionally, to ensure that they are completely dried. After drying the seeds, the women preserve them in small containers, or polythene bags. At certain intervals they take the seeds out, and expose to sun and wind. This process is said necessary to maintain the quality of stored seeds by controlling moisture, humidity and temperature. Poorly stored seeds do not germinate well.

Women exchange seeds between themselves. This is an aspect of social capital, reinforcing mutual interdependence. Not all women collect and store good quality seeds, which depends on expertise and experience. Seed management is a skill that not only supports their subsistence, but also empowers women as experts. However, the recent introduction of hybrid, high yielding, variety of seeds, has reduced women's control over the seed collection and preservation. Genetically modified hybrid seeds, give good yields and medium and small farmers, like rich farmers, influence their wives to cultivate those seeds to ensure some surplus production for market sales.



Fig.1.7.2. Poor woman managing livestock

Capitalist penetration in livestock management has had a similar effect. Sachs (1996) showed, in case of Indian villages, that poultry keeping has become industrialized. While dairy farms have created more employment opportunities for rural women in India, poultry farms and hatcheries with mechanized feeders, drinkers and hatcheries, do not. In most cases poor women are employed as cleaners on the farms. Poultry farmers and hatchery owners often underestimate women's knowledge of poultry and skill as livestock managers, so some poor women are now only employed as cleaners.

Traditionally, rural women feed poultry in their farm households (Abdullah & Zeidenstein, 1982: 31) and are experts in animal rearing and caring. They fetch water, clean cow sheds and collect fodder for animals as in Pakistan (Sachs, 1996). Poor women also gather leaves, rice straw, corn and husks for fodder. However, farmers are increasingly using vitamin enriched fodder, bought from markets to feed domestic animals, especially chickens and cows, which increase milk and egg production. Consequently, women's knowledge of animal caring is becoming undervalued.

1.8. Women's knowledge in *gur* (date palm sugar) making

The making of *khejurer gur* (date palm sugar) requires training and practice. The person involved is called the *gachchi* (the tree man). According to the villagers, the reason for this term is that the person who collects the date juice has to maintain a spiritual interconnectedness, when climbing the tree to collect the *khejurer rosh* (date palm sap). The process is specific to this locality, and certain groups had been involved in making *khejurer gur* for generations. The knowledge is passed from one generation to another, from a master to an apprentice. It is important to focus on the *gachchi* and his wife's work, to understand how they interpret their work and knowledge of *gur* making.

Khejurer rosh (date palm sap) is usually tapped during the winter, commencing in November, and continuing through January. During the season, the date sap is collected from one side of a palm tree, three times a week. The *gachchi* knows how deep to scrape the trunk and the thickness of the wound depending on the depth at which the sap flows. After scraping, the *gachchi* inserts a *nala* (bamboo pipe) in the slot where *khejurer rosh* (date palm sap) flows freely. He ties *kolosh* (earthen pot) at the open end of the bamboo pipe to collect the sap. Early in the morning, the *gachchi* (tree man) climbs the date palm tree, with the help of a thick rope, to collect the sap filled pot. They take the pots to the courtyard of their house for preparing *gur*.

The younger women of the household then commence the process of making *gur* (date palm sugar). The manufacturing starts with filtering the *rosh* (date palm sap) through a thin cloth and heating it in a big tray placed on a specially prepared mud oven, the *rosh jalanor chula*. Older women, usually wife or mother, make the *chula* (mud oven), which is a special type of oven not used for everyday cooking. It has a mud built chimney and a hole underneath to let the ashes pass through. They use dried betel leaves as fuel for the *chula* to heat the date sap, which they say burns well, heating the tray properly. They use an *oron*, a locally made spoon, comprising a bamboo handle and dried coconut shell cup, to stir the *rosh* during heating,

While heating *khejurer rosh* (date palm sap), women remove the upper layer of foam with the *oron* (bamboo spoon). After an hour or more, when the *rosh* condenses to a deep brown, women check the density of the thick *gur*. The *gachchi* (tree man) may assist in *bichchon tola* (stirring the *gur* to remove any hard particles existing in the dense liquid *gur*). The hot *gur* (date palm sugar) is poured into round dishes, lined with a piece of thin cloth to protect them from the dirt at the base. Finally, it is allowed to cool.

Men take the *gur* to the local market, selling nowadays for 200-300 BDT per kilogram. Women of *gachchis'* households do not go to the markets to sell the *gur*, as they believe the market to be a 'men's place'. The work they do during *gur* (date palm sugar) manufacturing is part of their *ghorer kaaj* (house work) and *shahajjo* (help) for which they do not expect to be paid. Some women see it as their *daitto* (duty) to assist their husbands or sons in making *gur*.



Fig.1.8.1. *Gachchi's wife removing foam during heating gur*

Now, there is insufficient soil moisture for date palms to yield much sap, due to the construction of an embankment on the river Padma, in 1986, for flood control. Previously, floodwater carried alluvial silt, which replenished the soil's *rosh* (moisture). Therefore, the *gachchi* (tree men) and their wives have had to diversify their livelihood strategies, and many are losing interest to making *khejurer gur* (date palm sugar), so, eventually, it is possible, that the local knowledge of manufacturing *khejur gur* (date palm sugar), will be lost.

1.9. Conclusion

While western feminists make a clear distinction between women's paid and domestic work, poor women think of wage earning work, to support their households' income, as *shahajjo* (help) to meet their households' needs. They hardly differentiate between work for money, or for the household. While men's income generation activities are *purushloker kaaj* (men's work), and women's domestic work is *meyeloker kaaj* (women's work), women's work within the household domain is *ghorer kaaj* (work within household) and outside the household is *bairer kaaj* (work done outside home). Women see their income generating work as *kaaj kam* (work for money).

Western development interventions are also undermining the women's way of life, rather than improving their wellbeing. For example, the introduction of mechanized farming, and male biased agricultural extension services, exclude poor rural women from using their traditional expertise in pre-harvest and post-harvest activities, redundant. Market penetration in agriculture and livestock management, has endangered women's knowledge of seed management, management of local crop varieties and animal care.

The introduction of improved and genetically modified seeds has, however, increased crop production and reduced food insecurity, but these high yielding crops require labour the year round, putting additional stress on women. Poor and small farm women are the worst affected. Rich farm women, also lose control of farm activities, with replacement of manual farm labour with machinery. Mechanized

farming and livestock management in the villages tend to undermine women's traditional skills as natural managers.

The flood control measures such as the flood control embankment on the Padma river, have had negative effects on the land and lives of people, particularly, the *gur* manufacturers of Char Khankhanapur and Decree Charchandpur forcing them diversify their livelihoods in unfamiliar ways.

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