

Beyond the boundary: middle-class women in income-generating activities in Burdwan, India

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ABSTRACT Work is a part of the life of women irrespective of their social and class locations. Women act as agents of social change and create new social spaces for themselves through income-generating but often informal occupations. This paper looks at the increasing involvement of middle-class Bengali women in various types of informal income-generating activities, and examines how their social space is changed through their work outside of home. Burdwan, a medium-sized urban centre of India, has an urban social history of conservative tradition-boundedness typical among similarly placed towns in the state of West Bengal, India. The paper is based on ongoing empirical research in Burdwan conducted via extensive field surveys and repeated personal interviews with individual women. The data used in the work are mostly primary in nature. The paper asserts that, while the changes brought about by women through such informal work are difficult to perceive easily, they nevertheless emancipate and empower women to a great extent.

The ‘average third world woman ... [who] leads an essentially truncated life based on her feminine gender (read: sexually constrained) and her being “third world” (read: ignorant, poor, uneducated, tradition-bound, domestic, family-oriented, victimized etc.)’¹ hardly exists. The current emphasis is not to see women of these countries as victims, ignoring their inputs, but to look at women’s agency and ingenuities in surviving patriarchy. Consequently, empirically grounded, context-specific studies have examined women’s roles and agency.²

Yet there remains a strong inclination among Western-trained feminists to look at the apparent and at the evident, without emphasizing the uniqueness of experiences even within the specific contexts.³ Scholars examining third-world women’s lives usually identify the familiar, rejecting as unimportant or irrelevant hitherto non-encountered aspects. This results in a neglect of the unknown,

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and brings forth the question of subjective positioning of the researcher, as much as that of the researched.

This neglect is particularly true when experts look at women's struggles, bringing into focus issues of power relations and social change. Much of such research is located in either rural or metropolitan settings, and looks at the bottom or the top layers, leaving out the significant middle sections that have experienced change in different ways. Large quantitative changes in societal values are believed to occur through collective movements of women and, as a result, small qualitative changes brought about by ordinary women in their day-to-day life and informal work in smaller urban centres and semi-urban places remain invisible. Similarly, the middle class, better defined from the point of view of social status and their anomalous placement between modernity and tradition, continue to remain neglected.

In India, women in this category are advanced, and yet engaged in the preservation and maintenance of the ill-defined 'Indian tradition'.⁴ In her 1999 study of Bengali women in Kolkata, Dagmar Engels noted that 'purdah did not only mean secluding women behind veils or walls, but entailed an all-encompassing ideology and code of conduct based on female modesty which determined women's lives wherever they went'.⁵ Accordingly, Bengali women's public appearance and participation need to be deconstructed and contextualized by looking at a wider range of discourses. The myriad ways in which millions of middle-class, urban, Bengali women in non-metropolitan locations perform work inside and outside of their domestic spheres, and try to flourish as a person, thus pose a research problem worth looking into.

Coming from a similar background ourselves, it seemed to be a fascinating topic for us to look at women trying to find their way through the constantly altering, yet unchanging, middle-class society in small town India. This paper examines the ways in which a woman pushes back the boundaries imposed upon her by social and cultural norms without overtly threatening the social system into which she belongs. We are trying in this paper to focus on how, in the process of participating in many types of informal income-generating activities, the ordinary woman constructs new identities for herself and rewrites the boundary of the social spaces inhabited by her. This research into the re-mapping of social space by middle-class women working in informal income-generating activities outside of their homes has the objective of re-examining Bengali women's work and agency. More specifically, this paper aims to identify how some middle-class women try to overcome social pressures and gain a foothold in the market-economy through informal economic activities that lead to other kinds of changes in the decision-making and power-relationship within the patriarchal family.

We conducted our study in the middle-sized (around 300,000 population in the 2001 census)⁶ urban centre of Burdwan, West Bengal, India. In this town, society is more conservative and tradition-bound than larger metropolitan cities or even other towns of comparable size, not only because it is smaller but because of its historical antecedents. Consequently, middle-class women in

Burdwan are expected to lead a more cloistered life with fewer opportunities than, say, women living in Kolkata, the nearest metropolis (located about 100 kilometers to the southeast). We, therefore, emphasize the specificity of Burdwan, chosen because of our close familiarity with it. After a brief review of literature on women, work and changes in social space, we put the society of Burdwan in its historical and economic context, and then identify the various activities/occupations that women of middle-class families have chosen for themselves in an effort to redefine and expand their social spaces. This redefinition means that the space used and perceived by its inhabitants is changed along with the re-definition of gender roles through informal economic activities. As each social space is identified with a specific group whose values, preferences, and aspirations are reflected in that space, a woman feels empowered and fully flourished as a person through the means of work. This empowerment and self-fulfillment may happen even if she chooses home as the base to work from or works in a different site.

The methodology selected for this enquiry is empirical and qualitative, based on the ethnographic method of personal response. Here we are concerned with the study of women in their own time and space, in their everyday life, and, as such, are studying subjects in their natural habitat as opposed to the unnatural setting of the formal interview or laboratory. The personal response technique is widely accepted in gender research, and this methodology significantly stresses the emotional attachment with the interviewee.⁷ It includes not only the recording of every aspect of how an interviewee responds, including her thoughts, behaviour, feelings, and so on, but also the association of intellectual response and perceptions of the researcher.⁸ Often, there are differences in overt responses given by the research participants and their actual behaviour. Therefore, we had to follow-up on statements made by the individuals, going back to them repeatedly for clarification. In total, our research examines the cases of about 50 women. However, in the short space of this article, we can dwell neither on all these aspects nor their full stories. Following Yvonne Darlington and Dorothy Scott's view that, in qualitative research, the sample size can be smaller than quantitative research,⁹ this paper focuses on the empirical narrations of stories of six middle-class women of Burdwan. Note that our personal experiences and knowledge gained from other case studies have influenced some statements made in this paper. The six stories were selected because we feel they represent a wide diversity of situations and chosen jobs, and a cross-section of middle-class women in Burdwan.

Bengali women as catalysts for social change

In her recent book, Raka Ray finds that, in spite of being famous for a tempestuous political life, 'Kolkata was conspicuous by its absence in both academic literature and public discussion about Indian women's movements'.¹⁰ Ray states that urban women's movements are visible in Mumbai and Delhi, as well as in Hyderabad and Bangalore, but not in Kolkata. She ascribes the

apparent absence of a strong women's movement in this part of India to the nature of issues women tend to organize around, rather than in the absence of organizing. Ray is partially correct in that, in feminist movements, strategic gender interest issues such as violence against women, sexual harassment, safe contraception and amniocentesis have been identified as explicitly feminist issues. In Kolkata, women's movements have adopted issues—such as employment and poverty, literacy and skill acquisition—that are not authentically gendered. Therefore, the Kolkata model of the women's movement is not considered in the West as a sign of feminism's arrival in India. Yet Ray feels that the real difference between Kolkata and Mumbai in terms of the women's movement lies in their divergent political histories.

In Kolkata, Bengali women have a history of active participation in political life, from the social reform movements of the nineteenth century to the struggle for Indian independence and thereafter. Bengal received in full measure the impact of British colonial rule, and experienced a renaissance somewhat along the lines of the European enlightenment. Beginning in the 1870s, educated middle-class women of enlightened homes in Bengal began to step into the modernizing world so far dominated by males.¹¹ The creation by enlightened urban Bengali men of an ideal feminine woman, reformed visually by new attire¹² that was appropriate to the notion of emerging civility as well as moral reforms, created the new woman coded as *bhadramahila* (gentle woman). Malavika Karlekar shows how these women both compromised with, and pushed the boundaries of, the class-patriarchy of the Bengali middle class,¹³ while Meredith Borthwick argues that the emerging *bhadramahila* class holds the key to women's modernization in late-nineteenth-century Bengal.¹⁴

In urban Bengal, a separation between *ghar* (the domestic world) and *bahir* (external space) created by colonial modernity was blurred in many ways. At the bottom end of Bengali social life were *adivasi* (tribal) and lower-caste women who participated in whatever modern economic activities (coal mining, plantation work, etc.) their families were engaged in, after being displaced from their forestry-based subsistence livelihoods by the agricultural castes.¹⁵ At the upper end was the high society of elite women of mainly enlightened Hindu families of Kolkata, and Karlekar describes in detail how colonial modernity was expanding the horizon of these women.¹⁶ In the vast middle range were many varied groups of women, especially the Anglo-Indians and, later, the women of migrant families from East Pakistan who were leaving homes in search of jobs. This fact does not sit comfortably with Rakhi Roy Chaudhury's conceptualization of women's movements in Kolkata as inhabiting a 'hegemonic field' with 'a concentration of power and a homogeneous culture'.¹⁷ A similar opinion is voiced by Amrita Basu in her remarkable work comparing rural women's activism in Maharashtra and West Bengal, in which she argues that a combination of socio-economic and political factors has given a less militant character to women's movements in rural West Bengal.¹⁸

In between the metropolitan and rural spaces, gender politics of small-town Bengal still remain largely an unexplored field. The smaller towns neither have

the cosmopolitan anomie of the metropolitan city, nor are as tradition-bound as the villages. Moreover, regional economic specificities have played significant roles in shaping gender roles and relations. However, the generalizing tendencies encountered in studies of the role of women in Bengal are probably a reflection of the overall metropolitan dominance. What applies to metropolitan Kolkata is often assumed to apply to all urban centres, even the smaller towns and cities. Such insensitivity to the particular culture of place is not uncommon in studies of Indian women.¹⁹

We differ with Ray's opinion that women organize in structured and socially constructed political fields for their rights, self-worth, and for remaking of their family, home and social lives. We assert that an individual woman has immense abilities to bring a change to her social space without any acquaintance whatsoever with political or other group organizations. In the third world, women's lives are largely controlled by state institutions.²⁰ State modernization and development policies are well-known to marginalize women and keep them invisible.²¹ India's constitution has also been criticized for not being woman-friendly.²² While these adverse conditions ail the ordinary woman, she does not give up and remain a victim, but uses her agency to improve her situation to some extent. In this effort, collectiveness does not always have the last word; an individual's attempt is no less powerful in changing the meaning of social space.

Growing under the cultural shadow of the *Raj family*

With about 300,000 residents, as stated earlier, Burdwan ranks seventh in population among the towns of West Bengal and is located in the middle of a rich agricultural land that is a part of the *rarh* (red soil) region of the state. It is a town of considerable antiquity, and has conducted a flourishing trade since ancient times. When the Damodar River was still navigable, Burdwan used to export fine cotton and other textiles by sea to Europe, West and Southeast Asia.²³ The society of Burdwan, especially as regards its gender roles and attitudes to women, has been significantly influenced by such factors besides the historical and political elements shaping the urban centre. Of these, the two most important have been the north-Indian Burdwan *Raj* family and its pro-British politics. The *Rajas* were originally a merchant family from Kotli, near the city of Lahore in present-day Pakistan, who arrived in Burdwan in 1610 and gradually established a *zamindari* (revenue-generating land). As such, the credit of setting up modern Burdwan town, and influencing much of its cultural heritage, goes to this family.²⁴

The permanent settlement of 1793 saw the *Rajas* of Burdwan, unlike *zamindars* (landowners) of other districts, survive with a high degree of resilience and ability to make the changeover from the old *zamindari* system to the new order introduced by the British Lord Cornwallis.²⁵ After an initial short-lived patriotic stint, the Burdwan *Rajas* became pro-British and followed their customs and rules in Burdwan. They wanted to make Burdwan a smaller example or a microcosm of Kolkata, and this is reflected in the way they pursued the adoption

of British means of justice, transport and, at least for men, education.²⁶ Burdwan also experienced the imposition of an intricate process of subinfeudation that created a complex hierarchical order of intermediary owners of land known as *patnidar*, *dur-patnidar*, *se-patnidar* and further layers of under-tenure holders.²⁷ The impact of such layering on the society of Burdwan was a deep-rooted tradition-boundedness as most town-dwellers owned and derived income from local agricultural land. In recent years, especially after land reform measures undertaken by the Left Front government of West Bengal since the 1970s, much of this source of income has evaporated, but the traditional rural norms, especially with regard to gender roles and such things as food habits, have remained strong.

The Bengali renaissance centred upon Kolkata did not fully touch the lives of the people of Burdwan living under the umbrella of the *Raj* family engaged in shaping its own distinctive cultural heritage. In matters of women's education, the *Rajas* followed the British half-heartedly. While Burdwan established schools and colleges for boys, they failed to emulate Kolkata's example of doing the same for women. The Christian missionaries who, in Burdwan, had patronized Western education since the 1830s, remained silent about women's education. Nonetheless, in 1853, the *Raj* family set up the first girls' school in a portion of the *rani mahal* (queen's palace). While a few girls' schools were established in 1920s and after the 1947 Partition, the *Rajas* remained reluctant to open college or tertiary-level education to women.

Despite recent large-scale urban growth, the special flavour of the *Raj* family culture still pervades Burdwan society. Today, the *rani mahal* houses a women's college established in the 1960s. Indeed, conservative attitudes towards a woman's place in the family and society are still widespread among both elite and ordinary citizens. Traditional *raj siphahis* (horse carts) may have vanished, but the *ghurir mela* (kite fair) and *Diwali* and *Holi* festivals continue to add a touch of north Indian culture to the social milieu of Burdwan. At the same time, the establishment of a university and medical college, and recent developments in agriculture-based industries,²⁸ have created a buoyant urban economy, to say nothing of the recent impact of economic liberalization and a boom in television viewing. Two or more Burdwans with diverse and often colliding values are rebuilding the social space of this *mofussil* () town in which the modern and progressive and the tradition-bound and conservative often get mixed up. How are its middle-class women coping in this setting?

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Middle-class women in Burdwan

In Bengali society, the middle-class began to emerge in the nineteenth century under British patronage.²⁹ This was a socially respectable class tied together by a similar lifestyle, customs, ethics and idealism, although there were several layers within it.³⁰ In Burdwan, the middle class is dominated by a land-owning caste group called the *aguris* (a shorter form of *ugra khatriya*) who live in town and are associated with the *Raj* family. This group traditionally acts as patrons

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of local art and culture, and generally decides what is good or bad for the society, including the Marxist movements that took hold some 30 years ago. As a result, Burdwan and its residents have developed a mentality different from other *mofussil* towns of West Bengal, which is perhaps best expressed in the cliché that 'agriculture is the only culture of Burdwan'. Nonetheless, while the middle class is concerned with retaining traditional values, it also aspires to the comforts of modernity.³¹ The conflict between these two is apparent in Burdwan where its middle class is exposed to divergent and conflicting values concomitant with a changeover from tradition to modernity.³²

The conflict between tradition and modernity is perhaps most problematic when it comes to negotiating changing gender roles.³³ Women working outside the home often have been portrayed in mainstream popular Bengali culture as either heroines working to support their family or failures for not having found a suitable mate. Thus, housework and the goodness of a woman are equated. A working woman is either the quintessential good person sacrificing her life for others,³⁴ or a self-centred and selfish person with little concern for others or even for society.³⁵ More broadly, women in middle-class Indian families are placed firmly within ideologies of family status, and social control and protection.³⁶ These bindings are stricter in small agriculture-based towns than larger metropolitan cities because the former *mofussil* towns have been less affected the waves of modernization and enlightenment. Kalpana Bardhan notes that such women in India are subject to a greater degree of patriarchy than lower-class women, who are more economically exploited.³⁷

Despite such constraints, middle-class Indian women do not remain inactive. The middle-class women who are the subjects of our research fulfill a variety of roles. They include housewives as well as those who are not in any heavy manual work, who may have some education (usually school, but also at college level), who may use some kind of transport (either public or personal) for work, who have no fixed income of their own, and who have a lesser burden of household chores (because of domestic help and/or grown-up children). All of these women thus have some time to escape traditional duties and go out of the house. How they apply their agency is the subject matter of this paper, and we intend to show how middle-class women in Burdwan are trying slowly to expand their boundaries of social space through various informal work, using whatever skills and contacts they can master, and giving rise to a revolution that is yet to be noticed.

Varieties of women's work in Burdwan

The actual contribution of women's work in India is far more than conventionally perceived. It is well known that, of the total volume of work in society, about two-thirds is performed by women, although they contribute only about 10% of total family incomes and enjoy 1% of the total production.³⁸ The reason for such discrepancies is that the vast majority of rural women in India are

employed in lower-wage and less-skilled jobs, and/or engaged in subsistence-related informal activities.

Although women of the lower castes and classes have always been participants in economic activities outside of home, slowly but steadily a class of salaried group of women has emerged, especially in urban society. Moreover, while the conventional trajectory of urban development in Burdwan earmarked the home space for middle-class women, India's liberalizing economy has created a number of paid opportunities for such women. For example, a great competition to do well in schools has led to the growth of a virtual private tutor industry for children which middle-class women with education can exploit. Some of the informal economic activities adopted by middle-class women are completely new and are related to the present needs of society. Through these activities, women seek personal fulfillment and create new opportunities for themselves. Economic independence is the prime factor in transforming the social space inhabited by women. Very few Bengali middle-class women, with the exception of a small professional group from the upper class, have taken part in waged work.³⁹

In the *Census of India 2001*, Burdwan town is shown to have 70,019 workers, of whom 7982 are women. Of these working women, 4432 are in the 'other services' category.⁴⁰ A vast number of middle-class and lower-class women workers who are self-employed have remained invisible to the government. However, this does not negate their existence nor devalue their value in the local economy. In our study, we found that the middle-class women of Burdwan are increasingly working in a wide variety of roles for a wide variety of businesses, including: teaching as private tutors or working as assistants in nurseries and kindergartens; acting as agents of private financial companies, local courier franchises or branches of multinational companies offering services to women; working in small manufacturing concerns; supplying snacks and lunches to offices; serving as receptionists in local offices or saleswomen in neighbourhood shops; and setting up crèche facilities at home. Although all of these jobs require a basic education while some need special training and/or skills, most are low-initial investment activities and can be done by using the family's own network of contacts. All of these occupations require personal initiative as well as contacts and networks.

Case study: Sangeeta Dan

Sangeeta Dan was born into a very well-to-do family in Kolkata, and studied in one of the city's better schools. She is now the *bahu* (daughter-in-law) of a family of good standing; her husband is a medical doctor, as was her father-in-law who is now retired. Sangeeta married at the age of 19 and has two children. While her parents-in-law did not object to her continuing with her studies, Sangeeta herself decided to devote herself to being 'a good, caring mother' for her children.

It was not until her children were older that Sangeeta felt she could devote some of her time to her own pursuits. She began teaching in a private school for a rather small remuneration while, at the same time, training at a beauty school in Kolkata. She has now opened her own beauty parlour in Burdwan, which she calls a 'skin treatment centre' to make it appear more prestigious than the ordinary beauty parlours that have been mushrooming in the town. Run from her father-in-law's home where she lives with her husband and children, her business is beginning to make a profit and Sangeeta can now afford to hire two helpers. She would like to use the money that she has been able to save from her small earnings for further training in Kolkata.

Sangeeta stresses that economic needs did not direct her to open a business, and feels proud that her husband has always adequately provided for her. Typical of many middle-class women, Sangeeta gives all her earnings to her husband, keeping only enough for herself to buy gifts for her relatives. However, unlike many working women who have the double burden of responsibilities inside and outside their home, Sangeeta has the assistance of three maidservants employed by her father-in-law, the patriarch of the family.

Has Sangeeta explicitly tried to overcome or cross the limits set by her middle-class surroundings? If necessary, she makes her clients wait at lunchtime when her mother-in-law finishes eating; revealing the priorities she attaches to her domestic versus business responsibilities. She also feels obliged to maintaining the prestige of her husband's family, and will sometimes undergo financial losses in order to maintain a certain standard in her work. While she doubts that her family would support her working outside the home, Sangeeta is conscious that many other families would be unwilling to allow their women members to do the work she does. She sees that, for most women, 'there always are emotional bindings' that prevent them from going against the wishes of the family. Thus, Sangeeta is proud of her achievement in spite of the restrictions imposed on her by the superior social status of her husband's family.

Case study: Putul Roy

Putul Roy, a 44-year-old housewife, belongs to the *aguri*, the landed caste of Burdwan known for its strong orthodoxy and conservativeness. She received a good education and had hoped to work independently, but her father arranged a marriage for Putul and initially she was forced to suppress any work ambitions. Putul had to perform domestic chores and look after her parents-in-law and children: 'my inner wish could not be realized because there was a great burden of duties in my in-law's house'. Putul's husband had a business that he could not run efficiently and so she still lives in a joint family with her well-to-do parents-in-law who take financial responsibility for herself, her husband and their two children.

Although there was no real economic pressure, her domestic situation felt stifling to Putul: 'I felt as though I was the doll [ironically, the name Putul means 'doll'] the Roy family wanted to play with. I was the lowest in the family's status list'. She felt that, if she could earn some money, she may be able to

escape domestic drudgery and also inspire her husband to work. Putul obtained a government license to become a small savings agent for the Life Insurance Corporation of India. Later, she also took up a distributorship for a large cosmetics company.

While her husband is supportive of her work activities, Putul's parents-in-law do not like her going outside the house. Even her husband's support is on the condition that Putul cooks lunch and ensures that everyone is looked after before going out to work. While she spends much of her income on the family, Putul lets her husband take all the credit in public or in front of relations. She also tries to conform to the role model of an ideal *bahu* by maintaining a traditional façade such as putting on a large *bindi* (a traditional sign of marriage) on her forehead, and covering her head outside of the home. Yet, despite the economic assistance Putul provides for the family, she feels she has little power, and her husband takes all significant family decisions. Asked whether she expresses her opinions, Putul says 'I never do so, or even express my grievances'.

Nonetheless, Putul admits to some success in asserting her wishes. For example, she decided that her son must go to Kolkata for higher studies and be on his own. Putul feels she has been able to overcome some of her conservative family's pressures by establishing within it some understanding of the importance of her need to work. While she avoids the social meetings of her group of agents, Putul maintains a good social relationship with her clients by visiting them in their homes after work. This step, she says, was possible 'due to my strong desire to work, determination and perseverance'.

Case study: Niva Banerjee

Niva Banerjee is a 55-year-old housewife with a Masters degree. She has two daughters and one son, all of whom are qualified and well-placed. Niva's husband was in the top managerial position in the university and he looked after her well. Still, she often felt the need to do something on her own. When her children were young, Niva was not permitted by her in-laws to seek employment outside Burdwan. However, she began as a private tutor about eight years ago, and now has a large business of about 45 students. Although it was her husband who was the first one to start giving tuition to school students privately in their home while Niva occasionally helped, she now tutors students at higher levels than those taught previously by her husband.

In Niva's case, economic need did not play a significant role in her decision to seek employment. Her husband receives a pension and her son, a government employee, even provides her with pocket money. As Niva says, 'I have not taken teaching as a profession but rather it is a passion to me'. She emphasizes that she gives private tuition only because she loves being in touch with books and reading, and wants to utilize her education in a useful way. She also admits to like building social relationships with her students' families so as to advertise her teaching business via word-of-mouth, as well as to enhance her network of personal friends.

Niva is a good example of a conservative, middle-class woman whose economic activities neither overtly challenging her family's expected behavioural norms nor damaging its prestige. While she has made compromises regarding her type, place and amount of time she devotes to her work, Niva has flourished as an individual and fulfilled her aspiration of establishing herself as a person of value. Recently, her husband has become paralyzed, and all the responsibility for nursing him has fallen on Niva. The power relationship within the family has changed greatly since her husband's illness, with Niva now making all the major decisions for which her husband was previously responsible. However, she feels content that she was able to push the boundary to some extent by succeeding in her teaching profession.

Case study: Nipa Aich

Nipa Aich is 38 years old, lives alone, and is a life insurance and small savings agent. She also works for the Integrated Child Development Scheme or *Anganwari* (women social extension agent). Nipa comes from a very conservative middle-class family. Her father discouraged her from spending time outside the home and, after her mother's death, Nipa assumed the responsibility of looking after her younger siblings. Nonetheless, she completed her school and college education, took Junior Basic Training, and began to give private tuition. For Nipa, the driving factor behind all the effort was to achieve self-realization; in her words 'I wanted to become something, not just live my life as a burden on my father'.

After her siblings were married, Nipa felt her duty to the family was over and she was determined to leave home and live independently, away from her domineering father. Although it is not easy for a single woman to live alone in a small *mofussil* town like Burdwan, Nipa warded off the advances of local suitors and expanded the range of her skills. After failing to get a job with the government and briefly operating a small private savings agency, she worked in a crèche and as an unpaid primary school teacher. Nipa eventually became licensed to operate a government small savings agency and is now well established, with about 300 clients.

Nipa regrets that female insurance agents are yet to receive respect from society—'nobody respects a woman insurance agent'—and believes that she receives more respect as an Integrated Child Development Scheme worker from her rural clients. As a woman working in a male-dominated area, Nipa has faced considerable harassment from men, although she now feels able to deal with these situations more effectively. The two jobs Nipa does are in two different locales, involving commuting between the business area of Burdwan and its adjacent villages. She uses her own transport, a moped, as 'it saves my time and gives me freedom'.

Nipa intends remaining single for the foreseeable future as she believes marriage would curtail her freedom. She lives in a rented house by herself, and takes care of all domestic chores without paid assistance. Does she feel that her

life is curtailed by her single status? No, her expanding social circle has 'more than compensated' for the lack of a family. Nipa is 'proud of what I have been able to achieve on my own' and believes her example could inspire other women to flourish into personhood.

Case study: Bandana Roy

Bandana Roy's father ran a profitable tailoring shop and, since she attended a reputed school and lived well, she felt her family was well-to-do. During her early teens, when the tailoring business closed due to some political intervention and her family's economic situation deteriorated dramatically, Bandana's life changed drastically. She eventually quit school, quickly fell in love and married a local boy. Unfortunately, the marriage did not last and Bandana came back to live in her parents' house.

After a few years at home, Bandana began working as an apprentice in a local beauty parlour for a daily meal and rather low salary. Over time, she was able to build up her own network of clients and, working in the privacy of their homes, increased her income. However, with her father becoming an alcoholic and unfit to work, Bandana's meagre income became increasingly crucial in meeting the needs of her family. Her mother had no skills to earn for herself, and family values restricted her to the home. Bandana has a brother who went through similar trauma and deprivation; however, he has not made much effort to look for work.

Faced with increasing financial pressures, Bandana took the initiative of learning new skills. She has lessons in aerobics, yoga, embroidery and tailoring, and was able to further increase her income by giving yoga training to middle-class housewives, and undertaking embroidery work on saris. Bandana eventually opened her own small beauty parlour with loans from family and friends, and has been able to appoint two helpers. In addition, she began to work as a distributor of cosmetic goods for two international companies.

Bandana now earns a reasonable sum, and has been able to employ two domestic helpers for her mother. She makes a regular deposit in a post office account as well as a bank, and saves a small amount every day. Bandana now has a boyfriend but, unlike many Bengali girls, she is determined to keep the relationship informal. Her male friend often acts as her protector when local neighbourhood goons tease her. Bandana maintains a cheerful face, and devotes time to cultivating clients and customers, often giving them beauty tips or sharing gossip, with a view, she says, 'to expand my business'. A school dropout, Bandana nevertheless reads the newspaper every day and watches the English/international news on television to keep abreast of world affairs and learn a more 'sophisticated manner of speech'. To move around Burdwan, she uses a bicycle and is planning to buy a scooter with her savings. Bandana feels confident about her new status and takes pride in being the main breadwinner for her family.

Case study: Sujata Samaddar

Sujata Samaddar sells *saris* and works as a private tutor. Her husband, a music teacher, is formally unemployed. After getting marriage and completing a Bachelor of Arts degree, Sujata felt compelled to supplement her family's earnings by accepting various forms of employment.

However, what began as an economic compulsion soon became her passion. Over the next two years, Sujata developed a successful *sari*-selling business from her home, and now has a wide customer base drawn from among the residents of her locality, her relatives and other acquaintances. Always conscious of the economic benefit of her activities, Sujata is also undertaking a course in order to start a beautician business, and is practicing *adhunik* (modern) and film songs with the purpose of performing in stage shows. Her enthusiasm seems boundless: 'once I started working and began earning money, I felt driven by the need to do more'.

To start her *sari* business, Sujata received help from businessmen at the Burdwan market and, over the years, she has created an intricate network of commercial contracts. She feels empowered by having earned this trust from outsiders, especially businessmen. However there are times when she experiences difficulties in dealing with men in the commercial world and, in these instances, takes her husband along to assist with negotiations.

Sujata's family is strongly patriarchal and her husband still makes all the significant decisions. However, she herself takes financial responsibility for their son's schooling and arranges for him to get private tuition. While Sujata has earned the freedom to spend her own income, and re-invests much of her profits back into her business, her husband controls her spending habits at times. She accepts this as it allows her to 'keep him happy while giving me the freedom to do what I want'.

Sujata says the profits from her business enable her family to lead a more comfortable life. They now have more friends and contacts than before, and she makes it a point to maintain a steady communication with those who are her current customers—or may be ones in the future. Although Sujata's husband helps her a great deal with domestic chores and with her business, she has been able to hire part-time domestic help as her business has expanded. The family house has been re-modeled, and they have bought consumer goods such as a colour television and a stereo. Sujata's income also allows them to buy the newspaper on Sundays, and occasionally eat out and go for short vacations. Sujata feels that she has accomplished a lot: 'I can now contribute to the well-being of my small family and at the same time please myself and work on my own without waiting for a job'.

Conclusion

In the case studies described, we find ordinary middle-class women in Burdwan constantly challenging the traditional gender boundaries still common in India

outside the major metropolitan cities. Although not all these women worked outside of the home, all went beyond their conventional gender roles. With a few exceptions, these women achieved economic success with little or no help from their partners, families or external sources. Their drive to go beyond traditional gender boundaries came from within; without conspicuous signs, these women used their agency to recreate their worlds, and, in their own small way, the society they live in. Women in colonial India went through a process of learning. What we see happening now in Burdwan is another learning experience that triumphantly copes with and adapts to restrictive situations.

What alternatives did these women have? The use of informal in describing the nature of work assumes importance here. Some of the women would have been happy to rely on social security or be employed in a formal sector job, but neither was available. Some could have urged their husbands or brothers to work. In the end, all the women described herein decided to act for themselves.

The specificity of the time period under observation must be noted, as India's liberalizing economy of the 1990s encouraged the rapid rise of a middle class and expanded urban amenities. It also exposed the country's middle class to the wider world through the growth of mass media and information technology. Consequently, many of the women in our research have taken up jobs that are neither dependent on traditional feminine skills such as tailoring nor can be categorized into conventional home-based occupations. The crossing of the boundary is indeed multifaceted and still unfolding.

The exact nature of the changes in the traditional gender roles of Burdwan needs further examination. Tradition remains strong; for instance, the town's conventional dress code and patterns of acceptable social behaviour has changed little for women. The lives of most middle-class women still revolve around their households, husbands and children. The domestic milieu also remains tradition-bound, with husbands or fathers taking most family decisions.

Nonetheless, the lives of ordinary middle-class women in the *mofussil* town of Burdwan are changing. Women are creating for themselves invisible revolutions through their everyday lives, and immense changes are taking place in how *ghar* and *bahir* are defined. These two spheres of the domestic and the outside world are no longer mutually exclusive of each other for, every day, women are trying to break out of the gender limitations traditionally ascribed to them by the family and society. Yet these women act neither conspicuously in a collective form nor do they proclaim their actions as a badge of independence. However, while they appear as subordinate, subservient and subject to patriarchal oppression, they assert their personhood by re-claiming economic and social spaces through informal economic work. The efforts of ordinary middle-class women is re-creating the identities of both women and work in Burdwan and, by extension, throughout the towns of India.

Our study has brought into focus the innumerable and subtle ways in which ordinary middle-class women are pushing back the limiting boundaries imposed upon them by the traditional patriarchal society found in innumerable Indian towns. It reveals ingenious coping techniques devised by women who create new

spaces for themselves and redefine gender roles without overtly threatening the patriarchal system. Above all, it refutes the notion that women's agency is expressed through movements, and establishes the point that there is a need to look at the intimate, covert and subtle ways such agency operates.

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