



Home as Workplace, Patriarchy as Regulator: Marginalized Rural Women and Jute Labour in West Bengal

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Abstract

In a patriarchal social structure, women are structurally confined to the private domain of the household through the social norms that ideologically present that private domain as a space of freedom, where women are presumed to be safe and able to flourish. Therefore, women are allowed to earn an income only when such economic activity occurs within the perceived safety of the domestic space. This article discusses marginalized women jute workers in West Bengal, most of whom are engaged in home-based work. The purpose of this study is to investigate the intersectionality of gender roles, labour engagement, and social barriers. It also addresses the key challenges that female jute workers face and why most of the women jute workers prefer to work at home rather than outside the jute factory. This article seeks to explore whether women's empowerment within a patriarchal cultural framework constitutes genuine empowerment or is a mechanism of exploitation and forced survival.

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Introduction

As highlighted in the *State of World Population (SOWP) 2025* report by UNFPA, India emerged as the most populous country in the world with a population exceeding 1.46 billion people, constituting nearly 17.8 percent share of the global population (TOI, 2025). It also commands one of the largest human resources departments. Despite possessing a large human resource, India's developmental potential remains underutilised due to a patriarchal social structure and gender-based marginalisation that limit the participation of nearly half of the population in economic and social life. "The first census conducted after the Mahatma's death, in 1951, India's rural population was almost 300 million; today it is more than three times higher" (Chandrasekhar, 2023) ^[4]. As per According to the 2011 census, India's total population was 121.1 crore, accounting for nearly 48.5 per cent of the total population (TOI, 2023). Among the total population, 63% population lives in rural areas (The Global Economy, 2024). Despite representing nearly half, ~48% of the population, women's contribution to the national economy is at only 18%, revealing a significant gendered asymmetry that is considerably below the global average share (Singh A., 2024). Official estimates indicate a persistent and wide gender gap in labour force participation in India, where the female labour force participation rate (LFPR) is estimated at around 32.8% compared to 77.2% for men, underscoring deep-rooted gender inequalities in economic participation (Employment, 2023). The widespread inequality prevails due to cultural constraints, domestic responsibilities, and household structure that systematically restricts women's labour force participation (Roy & Banerjee, 2017). In much of Indian society, entrenched cultural expectations tend to limit women's roles to domestic and care-related work. The prevailing social expectation is that women prioritise household duties over career objectives, thereby constraining their ability to pursue professional growth and economic empowerment. Moreover, rural women, representing a significant proportion, experience compounded disadvantage arising from poor infrastructure, limited mobility, and limited access to productive resources (Dongrikar & Londhe, 2025) ^[6]. Such social expectations are exerted with greater coercive force

among women who belong to a marginalized community. *Caste-based disparities interact with patriarchy and together play a significant role in further isolating Dalit women, who are also known as the "Dalit among Dalits."* As such, Dalit women experience double discrimination based upon their caste identity and their gender (Thapa *et al.*, 2021). The rural marginalized women are economically dependent, illiterate, and socially and economically disadvantaged, and overexploited by the wealthy upper caste owners. Therefore, marginalized women faced multiple layers of vulnerability, including economic insecurity, inadequate resource access, and social stigma that undermine their well-being and empowerment (Ali & Biswas, 2025).

This article discusses the marginalized women jute workers in rural West Bengal. Jute is commonly called the 'golden thread' or 'golden fiber' and is a cash crop, second only to cotton in its importance and wide utility. India is one of the largest jute-producing countries in the world, with West Bengal, Odisha, Bihar, and Assam contributing 98.4% of the total production, while West Bengal produces approximately 71% of the raw jute (Maity *et al.*, 2024). Several kinds of domestic commodities and quotidian essentials are made using jute as a primary resource, the majority of which are crafted by rural women. The women participating in this study are primarily from marginalized communities who are engaged in the production of jute ropes (which are later used to make 'mats') and various household jute items, which are often collectively designated as 'mats' in the local vernacular. Drawing on a qualitative, intersectional feminist approach, this study explores the lived realities of marginalized women engaged in jute work in rural West Bengal, examining their daily key challenges and the strategies and reshape patriarchal norms to ensure their survival. This study collected primary data through semi-structured, in-depth interviews with 120 female, marginalized jute workers across three villages in Nadia District, West Bengal. It also draws on focus group discussions and participant observation to document collective social norms and everyday labour practices. The data were thematically analyzed to understand how the intersection of gender, caste, rurality, and informal labor influences women's preference for home-based jute work, despite lower wages.

The gender roles and the social barriers marginalize women in rural West Bengal

Women are disproportionately the most vulnerable category of migrants from one place to another in search of work. According to a 2022 International Labour Organization (ILO) report, women are significantly less likely than men to be employed in the global labor force (Subramaniam, 2025). These disproportional migration patterns are observed not only in the global labour market but also at the regional level, where women refrain from going outside for employment because they think outer space is not safe for women. Women's migration is concealed, and only male migration is classified as "migration" in India's socio-academic context of interstate migration. When we examine the history of migration over the years, we find that women migrate both internationally and domestically just as frequently as men. The primary cause of women's travel is marriage. After marriage, women relocate from their birthplace regardless of the distinctions between rural and urban areas (Khadar *et al.*, 2024). Thus, the former represents men's higher rates of employment-related migration, which can be understood as a

pathway to empowerment, whereas the latter reflects women's higher rates of migration rooted in patriarchal norms and results in women's dependency and subordination. This disparity is largely due to "traditional patriarchal customs and norms that have relegated women to a secondary status within the household and workplace (Singh S., 2016). This labor disparity persists not only in developed countries but also in the women's labor force participation rate, despite their rising economy. In the 2024 Global Gender Gap Index (GGGI), India ranked 129th among 146 countries, and in Global Gender Gap Index (GGGI), India ranked 129th among 146 countries, and in the Global Gender Gap Index ranking by region, among the 7 countries, India ranked 5th, reflecting significant gender gap disparities (World Economic Forum, 2024). At the current rate, achieving full gender parity globally will take 134 years, well beyond the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) target (The Economic Times, 2024).

A key factor for gender imbalance in the labour workforce is due to negative social attitudes toward women: "Large parts of Indian society discourage women from entering the workforce based on negative social attitudes toward women's work (Costagliola, 2021) ¹⁵⁾". In Indian society, parents have a significant influence on gender roles and behavior, which is more effective in rural India compared to urban settings, especially among marginalized communities. Banerjee (2002) observed that "Women's training and socialization at the household level continue to reinforce those same household-oriented roles." For instance, in rural India, the birth of a girl child is accompanied by gendered expectations and social constraints. As she grows up, her mother often involves her in household chores. Boys, on the other hand, typically abstain from such tasks. Additionally, if a boy child is born in the family, the responsibility of looking after and caring for him often falls on the daughters, especially the sisters. In many families in rural society, this Responsibility is considered more important than the education of the girl. In contrast, men have not yet been significantly involved in family-oriented tasks such as childcare and domestic work. As a result, the gender division of labor persists within families. In rural patriarchal Indian society, it can be considered shameful for females to leave the home to work and take care of the family, while the sons stay at home. Even in situations where women become the primary earners while the husband or male member stays at home, they are being called "kapurush" (cowards). This is a reflection of deeply rooted social expectations and gender standards. The patriarchal social and cultural conventions that restrict female participation in outside work are still very much prevalent in Indian rural areas. Therefore, many women, especially those from marginalized groups, engage in low-paid home-based work within patriarchal social expectations.

In this context, women jute workers represent a prominent example of home-based jobs. The biggest producer of jute in India is West Bengal, and a significant number of rural marginalized women are engaged in jute work. After completing all domestic activities, women allocate the rest of their time to jute-related work as a source of income, although some women are heavily reliant on jute-related work to support their families financially. As a result, they bear the *double burden of labor* by performing both paid jute-related employment and unpaid household duties. During the interview with rural, marginalized women workers in Nadia district, West Bengal, it was observed that most of the women

avoid working outside their homes, although some work in jute industry factories. Through the interview, participants shared their difficulties and offered critical insight into their experiences, some of which are discussed below.

Shyamarani and her two daughters are involved in jute work. They carry out home-based jute-related work through factory-linked supply chains, where essential raw material is delivered directly to workers' households. When asked whether her daughters were studying and attending school. She replied that her daughter had studied up to the eighth standard, which was adequate for her daughter's survival, as learning domestic work is more important than further education, which will help her adapt to life in her husband's home. I further asked if they permitted her to work or continue their studies outside the household. *Shyamarani* stated, "If her daughters go out to work, what will society say? Our family relies on the girl's income. Moreover, her daughters are of an age where stepping outside could lead to unanticipated incidents." She referred to the 'RG Kar Medical College and Hospital incident' (a 31-year-old trainee doctor was brutally raped and murdered) regarding studying outside.

Purnima Das, along with her newly married daughter-in-law, is involved in jute-related work. She said, - After finishing household work, both she and her daughter-in-law do not remain idle; they involve themselves in jute work. The income they earn from it is spent on family and personal needs, which means they do not have to depend on the male family member for money. Since the male members of the household don't like their women going out to work, this allows them to earn a little while staying at home.

Sushma Sarkar works in a nearby jute factory. She said that - she comes to work at the jute factory at 10 a.m., and after finishing work, she goes home at 6 p.m. She has a 12-year-old daughter and a 4-year-old son. When she works in this jute factory, her daughter looks after her younger brother at home." When I asked if her daughter goes to school, she said, "She goes sometimes, but not regularly, because she has to look after her brother."

Madhabi Biswas said - after finishing all the household chores and caring for my four-year-old daughter, she used the time she had left to do this work. The jute factory worker provided all essential materials on a designated day, and also mentioned the date when they would return to collect the finished work. Therefore, she must complete the work by the given deadline. She said - after fulfilling domestic and caregiving responsibilities, her sole focus shifts to completing the jute work within the time given. When I asked whether her husband helps with the household chores and caring for their daughter, she replied - Men do not do these feminine tasks. Men make money outside, not sitting at home running the household.

Marginalized Women of the Jute Industry: a wage of vulnerable, cheap labour

The 2024 Global Gender Gap Index reports that the second-largest obstacle to achieving gender equality globally, after political empowerment, is economic participation and opportunity (World Economic Forum, 2024). Such gaps are more pronounced in a country like India, where patriarchal norms are deeply rooted in everyday rural life. According to the Global Gender Gap Report 2024, India holds 142nd rank among 146 countries in terms of disparity in women's economic participation (Banerjee, 2024) ^[2]. The International

Labor Organization (ILO) reports highlight that the employability gender gap in India is 50.9%, with only 19.2% of women actively participating in the labor force, compared to 70.1% for men—a nearly four-fold difference. And given the current rate of progress, it will take 132 years to achieve full gender parity in the world's labor force (*Female Labour Participation Declining in India: Why Are Women Not Working?* - *India Today*, n.d.). According to the latest Monster Salary Index (MSI), India's pay gap is 19 per cent, with men earning about ₹46.19 more than their female counterparts (TOI, 2019). This wage disparity between men and women is significantly greater in rural India. The *Women and Men in India 2022* report by the National Statistical Office reveals substantial gender wage disparities in rural areas. For instance, in Karal, where rural men earn an average of ₹842 per day (the highest in the country), rural women earn ₹434, representing just 51.5 per cent of male wages, even though this figure is the highest recorded among major states. Wage discrimination is more vulnerable when it intersects with gender, caste, class, and other identities in India. It is commonly observed that, within the same caste experiencing similar caste-based discrimination, however, women consistently earn lower wages compared to men; therefore, marginalized rural women are facing dual discrimination. Such discrimination compels marginalized rural women into home-based labor, where their work is undervalued and poorly paid. In this context, women are involved in jute work illustrate this pattern clearly: they manage household duties while devoting long hours to home-based jute work. Although some women work in a regular jute factory, most of them work at home. During interviews, women respondents articulate varied perceptions of their home-based labour and factory labour. Some of these are discussed below-

Ram Das, the owner of a jute factory, explains that a total of 356 women are associated with his jute industry, out of which 36 come to the factory regularly, and the rest work at home, where we deliver all the necessary materials to them. When I asked why fewer women work in the factory, he said, women generally prefer to work on jute from home because they can manage it in their free time after doing household tasks. He also said - Various types of jute products are made from jute. The bigger jute products, which are higher in value, cannot be made at home. Women who need more money or whose families depend heavily on this work come to the factory.

Another jute owner, *Mangal Chakraborty*, said that a total of 370 women work in his jute industry, of whom 26 come to the jute factory daily, while 344 are home based worker. He also added that, since his work can be done from home, women often prefer it, and their income depends on how much work they can complete in their free time. However, as he currently has less work, he has excluded some women, giving work only to those who been involved in his business for a long time and were working regularly.

Putul Das, a jute factory worker, shared his daily routine - She comes to the jute factory between 10 am and 10:30 am with her tiffin, works till 6 pm, and earns around 250 to 300 Taka. When I asked her what she does with this money, she replied, - She usually spends it on family expenses, like her children's education, new clothes during puja, and other necessities. The money she earns by working 7-8 hours is very meager compared to her hard work, but it is very difficult for her husband to manage the family expenses alone. So, she tries to contribute as much as she can.

Priti Mondal is a regular worker in a jute factory. She said that - after finishing all her household chores in the morning, she comes to work at 10:00 AM and works till 5 PM, only going home for lunch at 2 PM. Meanwhile, she makes between ₹400 and ₹450. Since her husband suffered paralysis, she was forced to take on the responsibility on her own for supporting her family. The jute work given at home pays very little, so she has to come to the factory. She also mentioned that although the wage for jute work is minimal, it is consistently available, so she has remained involved in this work. Additionally, the owner often lends her money when needed, which she repays later through her work.

Dolly Biswas, a 42-year-old widow, works on jute from home. She said, - After her husband died, she had no other option but to do this jute work, as the 100-day work (MGNREGA) is no longer available. Moreover, her family cannot depend on the 1,000 rupees widow allowance, so she has no other alternative but to get involved in this work. When I asked her how many hours a day she works, she replied that after completing all the daily household chores, she devoted 6 to 7 hours to this work, from which she earns 150 to 200 rupees.

Kanan Majumdar, a 72-year-old woman, works on jute from home. She said, - At this old stage of life, she can no longer devote her time to jute work as before. Now she can earn Rs. 60 to Rs. 80 a day. With this, she pays for her nerve medicine and some expenses for her grandchildren. She tries not to be dependent on her sons. The sons' families are struggling a lot, so she earns money by doing this work, and she tries to live on what she gets from the old age allowance (1000 Rs.). She also said that the jute owner pays less money and does not pay on time. Sometimes she has to go to the owner's house to ask for money, and the owner delays a lot in paying.

Manabi Roy, a housewife, said that after finishing the household chores and taking care of her 5-year-old daughter, she works on jute for 5-6 hours, earning 100 to 150 rupees, which she spends on her daughter's tuition fees, books, pencils, and pens, etc., and not to take money from her husband. She also says that the money earned from jute work is very low, and even then, if you work at home, and even though you can earn a little more by working in a factory, it is not considered appropriate for a housewife to go out to work. Moreover, she notes that girls earn less than boys.

A testimony of the suffering of jute women workers

Domestic violence against women occurs in every society across all countries around the world. According to the World Health Organization (WHO), “any sexual act, attempt to obtain a sexual act, unwanted sexual comments or advances, or acts to traffic or otherwise directed against a person’s sexuality using coercion, by any person regardless of their relationship to the victim, in any setting, including but not limited to home and work (WHO, 2021)”. “Estimates published by the WHO indicate that globally, about 1 in 3% of women worldwide have been subjected to either physical and/or sexual intimate partner or non-partner sexual violence in their lifetime. (WHO, 2024)”. in country like India, domestic violence against women remains a serious and alarmingly prevalent social problem, according to the National Family Health Survey (NFHS-5) 2019-21 “reports of ever-married women age 18-49 of their experience of spousal violence, husbands who have completed 12 or more years of schooling are half as likely (22%) to commit physical, sexual, or emotional spousal violence as husbands

with no schooling (43%). Notably, the variation in spousal violence by women’s own education is similar to the variation by the education of their husbands”. Spousal violence is less common among the equal education levels (26%). Then among those with no schooling (43%) or unequal education. This report also highlights that the spousal physical and or sexual violence is significantly higher among women whose husbands frequently consume alcohol (71%) compared to women whose husbands do not drink. “Of all women in India who have ever experienced any type of physical or sexual violence, only 14 percent have sought help for the violence, and 77 percent have never sought any help nor told anyone about the violence they experienced (GOI, 2022). Therefore, violence inside the home continues to remain a serious concern, where 24% (6,237) of the total 25,743 complaints received by the National Commission for Women in 2024 were on domestic violence (Pandit, 2025). In rural Indian society, domestic violence remains highly prevalent due to entrenched patriarchal norms, low socio-economic conditions, limited access to education, and women’s economic dependence on male family members, which legitimize and normalize such violence. This violence is more prevalent among marginalized women in rural areas, where the marginalized women experience violence not only within the household but also within the private space (Irudayam *et al.*, 2006) ^[9]. Therefore, marginalized women are subject to triple marginalization - gender (as women), caste (as Dalits), and class (as poor labourers).

In this situation, marginalized adopt different strategies to maintain their family and patriarchal norms. The Marginalized women working in the jute industry present a prominent example, as they engage in income-generating work while simultaneously continuing to uphold patriarchal norms within the household. During the interview, marginalized women shared the challenges they encounter in their daily lives. And learned that 47 jute women workers have faced severe domestic violence from their husbands and other family members.

Kanika Majumdar said that her husband abuses her physically and emotionally when he consumes alcohol. Her husband spends all the money he earns from his labor work on alcohol and contributes nothing to the family. To ensure the family’s financial stability, she must work as a jute worker to support her 13-year-old son and herself. Even though she goes out to work in a jute factory, she faces torture by her husband, so she stays at home and works as a jute worker. She further added. – Sometimes, her husband forces her to give him money for alcohol.

Madhobi Das (name changed) said that she works as a dishwasher in other people’s houses to support the family, and also works as a jute worker in her free time at home. Her husband does not contribute a single penny to the family. Instead spends all the money he earns from driving a ricksha on alcohol. Sometimes, he even tries to take money forcefully from her to buy alcohol and beats her if she refuses to give him money.

Devika Karmokar (name changed) shares her life experience with us, saying that after giving birth to two daughters, the village boys used to leave the idol of Kartik Thakur (Hindu God) in her house at night before the birth of Devika’s third child. According to Hindu belief, if Kartik Thakur is left in a house, a son will be born there. But when her third child, another daughter, was born, her husband got angry and broke the idol of Kartik Thakur. Even her mother-in-law harassed

her in various ways for having daughters. When her husband beat her, no one in the family came forward to oppose him. To meet the needs of the family, she sometimes borrows daily necessities from near the shop, which she repays later by working on jute.

Buchi Majumdar said that the money her husband earns from labor work is not enough for him to run the family. Sometimes, when he asks for money for his son's and daughter's education, it leads to arguments. These arguments often reach the point where her husband beats her and abuses her in foul language, and asks her to bring the meager dowry that was given at the time of marriage from her father's house. As a result, she is forced to work in a jute factory and spends what she earns on her son's education, clothing, and other family needs.

Discussion and conclusion

Marginalized women jute workers in rural West Bengal present a deeply disturbing picture of gender, labour, and violence. They experience multilayered discrimination based on gender, caste, and class, which is rendered ordinary and largely invisible within a patriarchal social environment. Within this patriarchal structure, most marginalized women engaged in home-based jute work receive lower earnings. In contrast, factory-based women jute workers earn comparatively higher wages. However, women engaged in both home-based and factory work bear a dual burden, balancing unpaid domestic labour with time-bound paid work.

Within patriarchal ideology, women are symbolically represented as *Griho Badhu* (household wife), *Griho Lakshmi* (house Lakshmi), and *Griho Kone* (house bride). This cultural framing naturalizes women's domestic happiness, harmony, and responsibilities, while prioritizing household maintenance as their foremost duty. Consequently, patriarchal norms actively shape women's subjectivity by presenting the home as an appropriate and desirable space for work, which explains their preference for home-based jute labour. Although some women actively renegotiate these norms by working in jute factories during daytime hours, they ensure their return to the domestic sphere before evening.

The study demonstrates that economic vulnerability compels both factory-based and home-based marginalized women workers to intensify their engagement in jute labour, leading them to devote longer hours to work that aligns with prevailing social expectations. Patriarchal norms operate to internalize women's subordinate position within society. As a result, many marginalized women internalize the belief that they are subordinate and secondary, with income generation defined as men's responsibility. The public sphere is socially marked as male, while the private sphere is assigned to women; consequently, women's lower earnings within this private space are considered adequate.

Marginalized women experience violence in both public spaces and the private sphere of the home. Violence in the public sphere is structured by caste hierarchies and is expressed mainly through verbal abuse, while violence in the private sphere is driven primarily by economic stress and unequal household power relations. In both contexts, such violence is socially normalized and legitimized through patriarchal norms. Economic vulnerability and experiences of violence compel some marginalized women to enter jute factory work, enabling them to earn higher wages and

enhance their economic independence.

Finally, the findings underscore the urgent need for social reform. Expanding educational opportunities, strengthening women's skill development, and ensuring women's financial independence are crucial steps toward gender equality. Comprehensive reforms in the workplace and broader social institutions are necessary to facilitate women's equal advancement and to disrupt entrenched structures of inequality and exploitation.

Data Availability Statement

This study is based on a combination of primary and secondary sources. Publicly accessible documents and materials used in the analysis are properly cited and can be retrieved from their original platforms. Primary data were generated through face-to-face interviews conducted by the author. Due to ethical considerations and the need to protect participant confidentiality, the interview data are not publicly available. Anonymized excerpts are included in the manuscript where relevant.

Ethical Statement

Ethical approval does not apply to this manuscript. The study relies on primary data collected through face-to-face interviews conducted with informed consent. Participation was voluntary, and the identities of participants have been protected by anonymizing personal information and withholding names where necessary to ensure confidentiality and minimize potential harm.

Declaration of generative AI in scientific writing

During the preparation of this work, the authors used ChatGPT-4 Version in order to edit the language. After using this tool, the authors reviewed and edited the content as needed. The authors take full responsibility for the content of the publication

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Authors Contribution

Salil Biswas conceived and designed the study, conducted the primary data collection, including face-to-face interviews, performed the analysis, and drafted the original manuscript. Parfej Ali contributed to the literature review, assisted in data interpretation, and provided critical revisions to improve the intellectual content of the manuscript. Both authors read and approved the final version of the manuscript.

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