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and Girl Children Domestic in Post
Partition Calcutta (1951-1981)

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ABSTRACT

Research on women's work has attempted to analyse how the interplay of market and patriarchy leads women and men to perform different economic roles in society. This segregation on the basis of gender or the sex-typing of work plays an important role both from the demand and supply sides in determining the work profiles of women and girl children. The present study attempts to see how a particular labour market, i.e. domestic service, a traditionally male domain, became segregated both by gender and age in post partition West Bengal (WB) and mainly in its capital city Calcutta. We have argued that the downward trend in industrial job opportunities in post independence WB accompanied by large scale immigration of women, men and children from the bordering East Pakistan, now Bangladesh, led to an unprecedented increase in labourforce under conditions of stagnant investment. This in turn led to a decline in the wage rate. In such a situation poor refugee women in their frantic search for means of survival gradually drove out the males of the host population engaged in domestic service in urban WB by offering to work in return for a very low and often for no wage at all. Again, poor males from the neighboring states of Bihar, Orissa and UP constituted historically a substantial section of the Calcutta labour market and many of them were employed as domestics in a state known for its prevalence of domestic service in colonial India. The replacement of male domestics by females was further facilitated by the gradual decline in inter-state migration due to lack of employment opportunities in independent WB. The second stage in the changing profile of domestic service in urban WB was arguably set by the migrating girl children from the rural areas of the state to Calcutta city in search for employment between 1971 and 1981.

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Introduction

Research on women's work has attempted to analyse why the labour market is segregated in a gendered fashion². These studies have shown how the interplay of market and patriarchy leads women and men to perform different economic roles in society. This segregation on the basis of gender or the sex-typing of work plays an important role both from the demand and supply sides in determining the work profiles of women and girl children. Studies on women's work in the British Indian province of Bengal have shown how the job market became more and more segregated on the basis of gender under the pressure of the colonial economic policies³. The present study attempts to see how a particular labour market, i.e. domestic service became segregated both by gender and age in post partition West Bengal (WB) and mainly in its capital city Calcutta. While the importance of domestic service declined with the advancement of industrialization in the developed parts of the world⁴, the experience of the developing

¹ We are grateful to N. Krishnaji for comments and discussions.

² See for examples, Juliet Mitchell, *Women's Estate*, Penguin, London, 1971. Heidi Hartmann, "Capitalism, Patriarchy, and Job Segregation by Sex", *Signs*, 1, 168, 1976, pp. 137-169. Sylvia Walby, *Theorising Patriarchy*, Blackwell, Oxford, 1990; *Gender Transformations*, Routledge, London, 1997.

³ For examples, Nirmala Banerjee, "Working Women in Colonial Bengal: Modernization and Marginalisation", reprinted in Kumkum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid (eds.), *Recasting Women: Essays in Colonial History*, Zubaan, New Delhi, 2006, pp.274-276; Mukul Mukherjee, "Women's Work in Bengal, 1880-1930: A Historical Analysis" in Bharati Ray (ed.), *From the Seams of History: Essays on Indian Women*, Oxford University Press, New Delhi, pp.237-39; Samita Sen, "Gender and Class: Women in Indian Industry, 1890-1990", *Modern Asian Studies*, 42, 1, 2008, Cambridge University Press, pp.75-116.

⁴ In a recent study, Gul Ozyegin, however, indicates a return of paid domestic service in parts of the developed world. See, Gul Ozyegin, *Untidy Gender: Domestic Service in Turkey*, Temple University Press, Philadelphia, 2001.

world was different. In India, for example, the importance of domestic service in urban women's work has been continuing or even increasing throughout the country's half a century experience of industrialization. Among the 15 major states of India WB shows one of the highest incidences of domestic service since the colonial times. While there are a few passing references⁵ of the changing profile of domestic service in studies on women's work in colonial Bengal, the major work is focused on the construction of employer-domestic relationship before independence⁶.

A brief survey of the available literature on women's work in colonial Bengal brings two important points into relief. First, as the censuses in the colonial period confirm, the rate of women's participation in the work force was traditionally much lower in Bengal than in other parts of the country. Second, the avenues of women's work in this region shrank between 1881 and 1931 as a result of the introduction of the 'limited version' of modernization in industry⁷. Unlike in other parts of the country, cultivation absorbed only a small section of women in colonial Bengal. Traditional household industries and modern industries such as the jute, tea and coal mining were the main employers of women. With changes in production processes and the decline of traditional crafts, women lost their household jobs. New factory laws barred women from the coal mines. The jute industry, which had nearly 20 per cent women among labour by the turn of the nineteenth century, started employing single male upcountry migrants at the cost of local women and men workers⁸. It is interesting to note that during the same period there was a growing social inhibition in Bengal to women's work outside home⁹. This inhibition was part of the middleclass nationalist construction of the public-private dichotomy during that period¹⁰. While the *bhadralok* ideology of glorifying the housewife was affecting the lower levels as well, working women concentrated in paid

⁵ For example, see, Banerjee, "Working Women"; Mukherjee, "Women's Work"; Sen, "Gender and Class".

⁶ Swapna M. Banerjee, *Men, Women, and Domesticity: Articulating Middle-Class Identity in Colonial Bengal*, Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 2004.

⁷ Banerjee, "Working Women"; Mukherjee, "Women's Work".

⁸ Samita Sen, *Women and Labour in Late Colonial India*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1999.

⁹ See for details, Tanika Sarkar, "Politics and Women in Bengal" in J. Krishnamurty (ed.), *Women in Colonial India Essays on Survival, Work and the State*: Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 1989. Sen, *Women and Labour*.

¹⁰ Partha Chatterjee, "The Nationalist Resolution of the Women's Question", (1987), reprinted in Kumkum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid (eds.), *Recasting Women Essays in Colonial History*, Zubaan, New Delhi, 2006, pp.237-38.

domestic service since it was seen as an extension of woman's traditional role in society¹¹. Thus domestic service emerged as the only available and also the acceptable area where women replaced men in Bengal towards the closing decades of colonial rule.

The overwhelming importance of domestic service, particularly in urban women's work, was continued in post-independence WB, although, men for the first two decades dominated the service claiming almost 60 per cent share of the work in urban WB till 1971. However, the scenario changes in the ensuing ten years and we find women outnumbering men engaged in the service in the urban areas of the state for the first time¹² in 1981. More importantly girl children domestics below fourteen years made their significant presence felt in the same year. The present study argues that the historically crucial three decades after independence actually shaped domestic service as a strongly feminized area of work with a large-scale presence of girl children in it in the urban areas of the state. The high rate of participation of very small girls in paid work in a state which has a historically low female work participation rate has made the case unique. To put it more specifically, this study tries to understand the problem in the context of the partition of India in 1947 followed by the industrial stagnation of the state of WB during the post independence period.

We have argued that the downward trend in industrial job opportunities in post independence WB accompanied by large scale immigration of women, men and children from the bordering East Pakistan, now Bangladesh, led to an unprecedented increase in labourforce under conditions of stagnant investment. This in turn led to a decline in the wage rate. In such a situation poor refugee women in their frantic search for means of survival gradually drove out the males of the host population engaged in domestic

¹¹ See for details Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Rethinking Working-Class History 1860-1949*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, NJ, 1989. Devaki Jain, "The Household Trap: Report on a Field Survey of Female Activity Patterns" in Devaki Jain and Nirmala Banerjee (eds.) *Tyranny of the Household: Imaginative Essays on Women's Work*, Shakti Books, Delhi, 1985.

¹² In 1981 women domestics of all ages enumerated in Calcutta were still a little less in number than male domestics though girl children had already outnumbered boy children in the service in both West Bengal urban and Calcutta. This difference can be explained by the fact that Calcutta, long a city of single male migrants got a major part of its supply of adult female domestics from the surrounding districts, who commuted to the city daily, already in 1981. Thus while the Calcutta middleclass was the buyer of their service they were enumerated by the Census in the districts where they resided. In fact, as early as the late 1980s local trains carried every morning hundreds of maids from the villages of southern Bengal to Calcutta which were described as 'jhee (maid) specials' by the city elites. The commuting maids, mostly adults, who work part time in a number of city homes, are still very much visible in the metropolis.

service in urban WB by offering to work in return for a very low and often for no wage at all. Again, poor males from the neighboring states of Bihar, Orissa and UP constituted historically a substantial section of the Calcutta labour market and many of them were employed as domestics in a state known for its prevalence of domestic service in colonial India. The replacement of male domestics by females was further facilitated by the gradual decline in inter-state migration due to lack of employment opportunities in independent WB. The second stage in the changing profile of domestic service in urban WB was arguably set by the migrating girl children from the rural areas of the state to Calcutta city in search for employment between 1971 and 1981.

The period of analysis spans the years from 1951 to 1981. However, there are occasional references to more recent findings. The secondary data sources used include the *Population Census* and the *National Sample Survey* (NSS). Reports of primary surveys conducted by others have also been used. Apart from these usual secondary sources, the study has heavily drawn on contemporary news paper insertions and reports. Contemporary autobiographies and memoirs have provided with major sources of corroborative evidence. Fictional writings of the period under consideration have also helped enrich our understanding of the society and the psyche of the period and the people concerned.

As domestic service is primarily an urban feature and much of West Bengal's urbanization is still concentrated in the state capital, this discussion will mainly focus on the city of Calcutta. Further, the reference point of the news paper insertions and short stories and memoirs, one of the major data sources for this paper is also Calcutta. However, it has to be noted here that during the period of discussion i.e. the three decades between 1951 and 1981, the geography of the ever-expanding city underwent significant changes. Consequently, the decennial censuses on which this discussion largely depends have used not exactly the same areas of enumeration in different years¹³.

The remainder of this paper is organized in four sections. The following section traces the history of domestic service in colonial Bengal. The next section deals with the feminization of domestic service in the years immediately following the partition. We then take up the question how and when girl children started playing an important role as domestics in Calcutta. The last section concludes the discussion with a focus on the grave social implications of the increasing incidence of girl children domestics.

¹³ For instance, in 1951 Census the area of enumeration is defined as Calcutta District and Calcutta Industrial Region, in 1961 as Calcutta City and Calcutta Industrial Region, in 1971 as Calcutta Urban Agglomeration and finally in 1981 as Calcutta City again.

Driven out of the Mills?

These days people -pot-bellied gluttons in tattered clothes- from the districts of Munger and Gaya- have been crowding in Calcutta in search of jobs. They have either been driven out of jobs from the jute mills or have strayed from the tea gardens. Such people are utterly stupid having a gluttonous appetite and are apt in sleeping for long hours. To keep them [in domestic service] tantamounts to make camels read the scriptures.

Pratapchandra Majumder, 'Dasdasi', *Streecharitra* (written in 1890)¹⁴

A close associate of Keshabchandra Sen and also one of the founder members of the Nababidhan Brahma Samaj, Pratapchandra Majumder (1840-1905), in his manual for housewives, expressed his strong displeasure at the practice of hiring upcountry males as domestics in middleclass Bengali homes. While advising Bengali housewives to treat the domestics with care he excluded one particular group. According to Majumder, the Hindi speaking migrants could hardly be trusted with any responsibility. The urban middleclass in contemporary Bengal, however, does not seem to have shared Majumder's inhibition about employing upcountry domestics. As much evidence suggests, migrant domestics from the neighboring states were very often employed in middleclass Bengali homes in the first few decades of the twentieth century.

It has been noted that Calcutta, the centre of colonial trade and also the seat of colonial administration till 1911, had the dubious distinction of being the only attractive destination for migration from three utterly impoverished zones: Orissa, Bihar and eastern UP. It is not surprising, therefore, that the overwhelming majority of workers in the jute mills were from these areas¹⁵. Those who were not absorbed by the factories ended up at the lower rungs of the unorganized sector, many of them as domestics (see Table 1). By 1931 Calcutta and the adjoining district of the 24 Parganas had around four lakhs of migrants who accounted for 31 per cent of the city's population¹⁶.

Domestic service was in fact quite prevalent in colonial Bengal, which was the first among the colonized Indian provinces to have embraced English education and the Victorian ways of life. Popular literary sources from the last quarter of the nineteenth century described servant culture in ordinary middle class Bengali homes as an intrusion

¹⁴ Pratapchandra Majumder, 'Dasdasi' in *Streecharitra*, 3rd edition, Nababidhan Publication Committee, Calcutta, 1936.

¹⁵ Omkar Goswami, "Calcutta's Economy 1918-1970: The Fall from Grace", in Sukanto Chaudhuri (ed.), *Calcutta: The Living City*, II, Oxford University Press, 1990, pp. 88-96 (Paperback edition, 1995).

¹⁶ Ibid

of foreign elements¹⁷. The social reform movement in nineteenth century Bengal which centrally involved the remodeling of the traditional Bengali home also had enthusiastic propagation of the Victorian models of companionate marriage on its agenda¹⁸. Companionate marriage could be successful if the *bhadramahila* could be relieved of the burdens of housework to a certain extent by providing her with paid helping hands. Help for housewives was also the mark of middle class status¹⁹. According to the 1911 Census domestic service accounted for 12 per cent of all occupations in Calcutta, while Bombay, Madras and Delhi showed 7.3 per cent, 6.68 per cent and 6.1 per cent respectively²⁰.

Table 1: Migrant domestics in Calcutta in 1921 by their place of birth

Born in	Male	Female
Bankura	750	604
Burdwan	1251	1080
Dacca	3022	226
Hoogly	2157	1390
Howrah	1398	657
Jessore	302	136
Midnapore	2879	2465
Nadia	378	418
24 Parganas	3851	2513
Total intra-state migration	15988 (36.58)	9489 (48.64)
Bihar	11788 (26.97)	1416 (6.51)
Orissa	11240 (25.72)	583 (2.68)
U.P.	2956	473
Rajasthan	1726	295
Total	43698 (100)	21745 (100)

Note: Percentages are given in the parentheses.

Source: Population Census 1921

¹⁷ Banerjee, "Men, Women, and Domestics".

¹⁸ Geraldine Forbes, *Women in Modern India*, The New Cambridge History of India, IV, 2, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1998.

¹⁹ Meredith Borthwick, *The Changing Role of Women in Bengal, 1849-1905*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1984.

²⁰ Goswami (1990) notes that though Calcutta was the glittering jewel of the Raj, it was surrounded by one of the poorest hinterlands. This gives us a hint of extreme income disparity leading to the prevalent practice of employing the poor as domestics by the richer sections. See, Goswami, "Calcutta's Economy".

The 1921 Census shows (as reported in Table 1) that a significant number of these domestics came to the city from the neighboring states of Bihar, Orissa and U.P. While the total number of migrant male domestics to Calcutta from the districts of Bengal in 1921 was 15,988 (around 37 per cent), Bihar and Orissa supplied 11,788 (27 per cent) and 11,240 (around 26 per cent) domestics respectively. A single district of Orissa, namely, Cuttack, supplied around 9000 male domestics to Calcutta in 1921. Not unexpectedly, contemporary autobiographies and memoirs abound in references to Bihari servants and Oriya cooks. Premankur Atarhi, (1890-1964), a noted writer, has observed in his memoir, *Mahasthabir Jatak*, that during his childhood days (the last decade of the nineteenth century) almost every Bengali middleclass family in Calcutta had a servant from Bihar.²¹ We also find many of the Oriya cooks working in establishments known as the mess, where migrant working men and students lived and dined together²².

Unlike the male servants, maids came mostly from within Bengal, though some came from Bihar also (see Table 1). Satyajit Ray and Hirendranath Mukhopadhyay both remembered household Bihari maids of their childhood days in Calcutta in the early decades of the twentieth century²³. Evidence from other memoirs, however, suggests

²¹ Premankur Atarhi, *Mahasthabir Jatak*, Dey's Publications, new edn, Calcutta, 2009.

²² Sibnath Sastri (1847-1919) in his memoir (*Atmcharit* in *Sibnath Rachanasangraha*, Saksharata Prakashan, Calcutta, 1979) suggests that these institutions cropped up around the middle and frequented the city towards the closing years of the nineteenth century. The gradual decline in the number of cooks and domestics (mainly male) from the neighboring states could also be related to the decreasing importance of the mess in post-partition Calcutta. That male cooks from Orissa found regular employment in Calcutta messes is borne out by a number of contemporary memoirs (for example, Pabitra Ganguly, *Chalaman Jiban*, Pratikshan Publications, Calcutta, 1994). Before 1947 many of the city messes were inhabited by students and office-goers from the other side of Bengal who spent the weekend at the village or mufassil home and the rest of the week in the city mess. Men from the same district usually preferred a common shelter and establishments soon came to be known after the residents' regional identity; such as the Jessore mess, the Dhaka mess etc. Hirendranath Chakravarty suggests in memoir (*Neerobindu*, Dey's Publication, Calcutta, 1993) that after partition this type of weekend commuting was no longer possible and thus the mess was no longer a convenient option. The final blow to the Calcutta messes according to him, however, came with the introduction of local trains run by electricity [in the early 1960s], connecting the suburbs and districts of WB with the metropolis. As the distance between the home and the city was remarkably shortened, many from this side of Bengal, who previously lived in the Calcutta messes, now found it more convenient to commute daily. Gone were the days of the mess-life of Calcutta thriving with the Bengali babus and their Oriya thakurs.

²³ Satyajit Ray, *Jakhon Chhoto Chhilam*, Ananda Publishers, Calcutta, 1982. Hirendranath Mukhopadhyay, *Tari Hote Teer: Paribesh*, Pratyaksha o Pratyar Britanta, Manisha, Calcutta, 1974.

the prevalence of part time Bengali maids in Calcutta middleclass households during the same time²⁴. We also find Bengali maids as important characters in contemporary Bengali fictions²⁵.

Scholars have observed on the basis of Census data that the absolute number of domestics in the British districts of Bengal almost doubled between 1921 and 1931 and in those ten years the percentage of female domestics rose from 26 to 52 and that of males declined from 72 to 48²⁶. However, the reported outnumbering of men by women in domestic service in Bengal in the 1931 Census seems to have been reversed in the later censuses conducted after independence²⁷. Though domestic service continued to be the largest area of urban women's work, women were less than 40 per cent of the total domestics even in 1971 in urban WB. In Calcutta city, known for its historically poor sex ratio, the percentage of women domestics was even less. In 1981 the share of women finally surpassed that of men in domestic service in urban WB, a trend which not only continued but was intensified in 1991. This outnumbering was particularly significant in the youngest age group (0-14) years.

In Search of a 'Home'

Wanted a middle aged female in an elite family for household chores. Food, shelter along with a monthly salary of Rs 15/- offered. Refugees will be preferred. (*Jugantar*, 22 September, 1956)

In one year, between April 1956 and March 1957, one of the largest circulated Bangla dailies, *Jugantar*, carried about 150 insertions in the situations vacant column wanting domestics and cooks, among which more than 75 per cent preferred women, mostly middle aged, single and in search for shelter. Twenty years later, the changing trend of preferring women domestics and cooks to men was even sharper. *Ananda Bazar Patrika*, another largely circulated Bangla daily carried about a hundred insertions between April 1976 and March 1977 for domestics and cooks of which almost over 90 per cent

²⁴ Nirendranath Chakrabarty, Neerobindu, Dey's Publishing, Calcutta, 1993; Samar Sen, Babubrittanta, Dey's Publishing, Calcutta, 1978.

²⁵ Saratchandra Chattopadhyay, Charitraheen in Sarat Rachanabali, Vol.2, Tuli-Kalam, Calcutta, 1989; Ektala by Narayan Ganguly

²⁶ Banerjee, "Working Women"; Mukherjee, "Women's Work".

²⁷ During the 1930s and the 1940s male workers also started losing jobs along with the females in large numbers in the industry as a consequence of depression and finally the partition of Bengal in 1947. In this context it is not unlikely that the male workers returned to their old domain of domestic service reversing the trend once again in 1951.

preferred women. However, the urban middleclass possibly employed domestics mainly through different kinds of networks and rather than through advertisements then as of now. Therefore in this case newspaper insertions should be read as examples of social trends only and not as the exact reflection of the reality. This trend change in favour of women in demand was also evident from the Census data.

Table 2: Percentage share of women in Domestic Service in Calcutta District and Calcutta Industrial Region in 1951

Occupational Division	Calcutta district	Calcutta Industrial Region
9 (Services not elsewhere classified)	18.43	17.97
9.1(Domestic services (but not including services rendered by members of the family)	29.44	31.25
9.10 (Other Domestic servants)	34.50	36.00
9.12 (Cooks)	25.60	27.68

Source: Population Census, 1951

Table 3: Percentage share of women in Domestic Service in Calcutta city and Calcutta Industrial Region in 1961

Occupational Division	Calcutta City	Calcutta Industrial Region
9 (Service, Sport and Recreation Workers)	18.20	17.76
91 (Housekeepers, Cooks, Maids and Related Workers)	31.57	33.79
911 [Cooks, Cook-Bearers (Domestic and Institutional)]	17.47	17.15
912 [Butlers, Bearers, Waiters, Maids and Other Servants (Domestic)]	37.13	39.25

Source: Population Census, 1961

Table 4: Percentage share of women and girl children (0-14) years in Domestic Service in Urban WB in 1971 and 1981

Year	Female all	Female (0-14) years
1971	42.00	40.62
1981	58.01	60.42

Source: Population Census, 1971, 1981

Data on domestic service in WB provided by the first two consecutive censuses after independence (1951 and 1961) are not exactly comparable because of the differences in the definition of domestic service and the area of enumeration. However, a close look at the tables 2 and 3 does suggest an increase in female share in the categories related to domestics. The data provided by the 1971 and the 1981 Censuses are much more compatible and they clearly show an increase in the percentage share of both women and girl children in domestic service in urban WB in 1981 over 1971 (Table 4).

In order to understand this changing profile of domestic service in the state let us take a quick look at the changing economic scenario in general in urban West Bengal during the initial decades of independence when the province and particularly its capital city Calcutta also saw one of the largest movements of people in history. In the 1930s most of the industries in Bengal, once an industrially advanced state, had gone through a recession, and net investment by the firms controlling them had slowed down or disappeared altogether. After the war, along with independence came the dislocations of the partition that severely affected the trade links between East and West Bengal. As a result, the most important industries in this region, jute and tea, were badly hit. After independence, two sets of central government policies - freight equalization for coal and steel and emphasis on import-substitution- dealt again a heavy blow to Bengal's industry²⁸. This was aggravated by the confrontationist strategy on the part of the state - followed since the beginning of Congress rule and carried on by the Left Front Government - which prevented it from lobbying pragmatically to obtain licenses and industrial investment²⁹. Further deterrents emerged in the form of a radical trade unionism backed by leftist intellectual support, and central government disinvestment

²⁸ Amiya Kumar Bagchi, "Studies on the Economy of West Bengal Since Independence", *Economic and Political Weekly*, 33, (47&48), pp. 2973-2978.

²⁹ Aseema Sinha, *The Regional Roots of Developmental Politics in India- A Divided Leviathan*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington, 2005.

in the infrastructure sector in the mid-1960s, which badly hit WB's engineering industry and precipitated large-scale unemployment in formal manufacturing in the state.

The industrial stagnation and the consequent downward trend in job opportunities that started in the late 1940s and the early 1950s, was accompanied by large scale immigration from the bordering East Pakistan, now Bangladesh. According to official estimates nearly 40 lakh men, women and children entered WB between late 1946 and early 1971. Thus there was an unprecedented increase in labour force under conditions of stagnant investment. The major chunk of this labour force was naturally concentrated in and around Calcutta which provided some hopes of livelihood. What looked novel about this labour force was the significant presence of women and children. Before the 1940s migrant labour force to the city was chiefly single males from the neighboring states. Partition made the real difference in the sex ratio of Calcutta by enhancing it to 657 women per thousand men in Urban WB in 1951 as against 554 women per thousand men in 1941³⁰. The sex ratio improved even more in favor of women (701) in 1961.

As only a small fraction of refugees were rehabilitated by the government, most struggled to settle through their own efforts. In an already overpopulated job market wages were generally low. So in order to survive the entire family had to work. This was particularly true for those who lived in the sprawling slums of the city and swelled the ranks of the poorly paid unorganized labor force. A significant section of the middleclass refugees was also no exception. In fact, compared to the women in the host population the incidence of refugee women joining paid work is significantly higher in most of the categories already in 1951 (Table 5).

The 1951 Census showed that a substantial percentage of the 'displaced' women (18 per cent) succeeded in getting jobs in the upper levels of the services sector which included health, education and public administration as against only around 9 per cent in the case of the host population. And as early as in 1951 more than 15 per cent of these jobs (taking into account the total volume of women's work in Urban WB) were dominated by the refugee women. Most refugee women, however, ended up in the lower rungs of the services sector as domestics (42 per cent) or in retail or petty trade as against around 33 per cent in the host population.

The gradual increase in the percentage share of female domestics since 1951 and the final outnumbering of men by women in 1981 can partly be explained by the sheer

³⁰ Joya Chatterji, *The Spoils of Partition: Bengal and India, 1947-1967*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2007.

increase in the total volume of female work force in the city during the three decades under discussion. However, the question remains how refugee women could replace men in a historically male dominated job, a domain largely constituted of single male migrants from Bihar, Orissa and UP. Even the 1961 Census showed that out of the total volume of male domestics in Calcutta Urban, the migrants were more than 75 per cent (see Table 8 in the next section).

Table 5: Employment Behaviour of the Displaced and the Host Women in Calcutta Industrial Region in 1951

Category of Work	Percentage of displaced women in total female workforce of different categories	Percentage of displaced women in total displaced women workers in selected categories of work	Percentage of women (excluding displaced women) in selected categories of work
8 (Health, education and public administration)	15.37	18.09	9.19
8.1 (Medical and other health services)	20.49	9.00	3.22
8.2 (educational services and research)	18.11	6.51	2.72
9 (Services not elsewhere classified)	8.59	46.69	45.87
9.1 (Domestic services)	10.63	42.23	32.77
All	8.45	100	100

Note: What do we mean by Host Women?

Source: Population Census, 1951

The refugee women must have replaced the migrant male domestics from the neighboring states in substantial numbers. They could possibly do so by applying a wage cut. The migrant male domestics from Bihar, Orissa and UP had come to the city singly, often leaving behind their families at rural homes. Compared to the poorest section of the destitute refugee women they had therefore a better fallback position and more responsibilities. Arguably they had to send some money home out of whatever small amount they received as wages³¹. The refugee women, on the other hand, in their frantic search for the means of survival were often ready to work at lower wages than the migrant males. Such women, often destitute and in search of a safe shelter sometimes offered to work even in return for food and accommodation only. The particular emphasis in the newspaper insertions on widowed women or destitute women [nihshai (helpless)/ nirjhanjhat (unencumbered)/ anatha (destitute)] as preferred domestics needs some explanation. Among the displaced population a significant section was single women or women with children unaccompanied by any adult male member of the family. They were shifted to various camps after their arrival on this side of the border. Contemporary reports indicate that such women from all levels of society, including college girls as well as illiterate rural women were kept in camps the conditions of which were horrible. There was an acute shortage of accommodation in the camps, and floating barges were rented for their shelter³². Finding a shelter was in any case a great problem for large sections of the newcomers who had no previous roots in the city. Even educated young men gave insertions in newspapers offering tuitions to children for food and shelter in lieu in some well to do family in post-partition Calcutta. These insertions were published in columns titled 'ahar o basathan chai' (food and shelter sought) often mentioning that the applicants were from the other side of Bengal (Jugantar, 28 March, 1954; 27 March; 4 April, 1956). Newspaper insertions usually preferring middle aged destitute widows as full time domestics and cooks offered food and shelter followed by a meager salary, evidently in order of priority. Some even substituted the word salary with the word pocket money indicating the lesser importance of money compared to the employers' assurances of secure and possibly permanent shelter (Jugantar, 4 March; 11 March; 16 September, 1956; 12 December, 1960). Some (Jugantar, 14 March, 1954) formulated the insertion like this: food, shelter and some salary will be given also (khawa thaka o betan-o dewa hoibe). Some (Jugantar, 23 January; 28 March, 1954) even invited women

³¹ Premankur Atarhi (1890-1964) in his memoir, *Mahasthabir Jatak* has noted that in his childhood the Bihari servants in Bengali middleclass homes in Calcutta saved enough from their meager salaries to make remittances to their families in Bihar. (De's Publishing, new edn. Kolkata, 2009, p 27). This seems to be also the case with the domestics from UP and Orissa.

³² A report in *Amrita Bazar Patrika* (15 June, 1950) quoted in Gargi Chakravartty, *Coming out of Partition: Refugee Women of Bengal*, BLUEJAY Books, New Delhi, 2005, p 49.

to work for food and shelter only declaring the employers' inability to offer any wage at all or a meager amount of rupees 1 or 2 as pocket money (Jugantar, 9 May, 1954). Moreover some employers preferred children and particularly girl children as full time domestics as early as the 1950s (Jugantar, 23 April, 1954; 15 December, 1960).

From the frequent insertions for maids and cooks in newspapers one can get a fair idea of the salary structure and the nature of work the domestics were expected to perform in Calcutta during the years immediately following the partition. Most insertions wanted full time help. Part time maids and others were presumably employed more through local networks than through advertisements. Full time women domestics were generally expected to perform a wide range of combined activities ranging from washing, cooking, looking after the children, housekeeping etc. Most insertions, however, avoided the declaration of specific duties to be performed. 'All types of household chores', 'cooking etc.', 'cooking and household chores' were the usually preferred phrases. A typical example runs like this: "Wanted an unencumbered lady to help in cooking and household chores for a small family. Shelter less refugees will be preferred. Salary between rupees 10 and 15" (Jugantar, 17 March, 1957). Salary for such combined activities mentioned above ranged between as low as rupees 7/8 and rupees 15 a month along with food and shelter (Jugantar, 3 January, 1954; 29 April, 1956). Some advertisers wanted women domestics and housekeepers who had 'some education': "Wanted a lady with some education to help running a small family. Salary according to ability" (Jugantar, 11 March, 1956). Some even wanted their cooks and domestics to be also able to tutor their children and in such cases 5-10 rupees extra salary was offered (Jugantar, 11 March, 1956). However, in the few cases where advertisers wanted male domestics (only 15 cases in 1956 as compared to 150 insertions for female domestics in the same year published in Jugantar) salary offered ranged between rupees 15 and rupees 25 (Jugantar, 6 January, 1955; 1 July; 28 July; 20 September, 1956). In only one case (Jugantar, 22 May, 1956) where the advertiser preferred a boy child domestic, the salary offered was rupees 10. Another striking difference was in the nature of duties to be performed by men and women domestics. In the case of male domestics advertisements usually specified the nature of jobs to be performed in this way: "wanted a male cook" or "wanted a male domestic for cleaning and washing" (Jugantar, 6 January, 1955; 1 July; 28 July; 20 September, 1956).

That women in general (some insertions also mentioned the preference for female domestics from WB)³³ and refugee women in particular were increasingly being

³³ Omkar Goswami (1990) notes that distress migration from the rural hinterlands to Calcutta city was quite prevalent even before the partition. This internal migration probably was the source of maids from WB.

employed in middleclass homes in post partition Calcutta because they could be hired at lower wages than men, does not seem to be the only reason behind female-preference. The nature of jobs expected to be performed by full time female domestics as described in the insertions indicates that they were substituting many of the household duties traditionally performed by middleclass women themselves. This sort of substitution was arguably necessary at least to a certain extent because of the increasing participation of middleclass women (many of them refugees again) in paid jobs outside, in post 1947 Calcutta³⁴.

Unlike the single male migrants from the neighboring states the refugees immigrated as families. They had therefore families to support and compared to the family units of the host population the refugee families were often larger in size³⁵. The refugee men competed well in the Calcutta job market but their wages were often not sufficient for a family of 5-6 members to survive. Around rupees 100 was considered to be a decent salary in Calcutta of the 1950s, though it was hardly enough to make two ends meet³⁶. Displaced women therefore had to participate in paid workforce more frequently than women in the host population. Refugee families of middleclass origin could no longer stick to their traditionally antagonistic attitude towards women working out. On the other hand they took special care to educate their daughters so that they might enter the job market with some qualification and be able to get 'respectable' jobs. Scholars have pointed out the enormous struggle by the middleclass refugee families to get themselves and particularly their women educated³⁷. On the basis of government survey reports Joya Chatterji has argued that the literacy rate of the refugee population in general and of refugee women in particular was not only significantly higher than their counterparts in the host population in the early 1950s, it was increasing in a faster rate as well. In 1950 literate women among the refugees were four times higher than women in the host population. This shows that many were already literate or had some education at the time of immigration. According to Joya Chatterji, by 1955 there was a 60 per

³⁴ Joshodhara Bagchi, "Women in Calcutta: After Independence", in Sukanta Chaudhuri (ed.), *Calcutta: The Living City*, II, Oxford University Press, Calcutta, 1995. Bharati Ray, "Women in Calcutta: The Years of Change", in Sukanta Chaudhuri (ed.), *Calcutta: The Living City*, II, Oxford University Press, Calcutta, 1995. Joya Chatterji, "Spoils of Partition".

³⁵ See, Gargi Chakravartty, *Coming Out of Partition: Refugee Women of West Bengal*, Bluejay Books, New Delhi, 2005.

³⁶ Government of West Bengal, *Rehabilitation of refugees: A statistical survey, 1955*, State Statistical Bureau, Alipore, 1956.

³⁷ See, Chatterji, "Spoils of Partition", and also Chakravartty, "Coming Out of Partition".

cent increase in the rates of literacy among refugee women³⁸. Much of this struggle bore at least some fruits. It has already been noted (Table 5) that a substantial percentage (18 per cent) of displaced women succeeded in getting jobs in the upper levels of the services sector which included health, education and public administration as against only around 9 per cent in the case of the women in the host population. Consequently as early as 1951 more than 15 per cent of these jobs (taking into account the total volume of women's work in urban WB) were dominated by the women in the displaced population. The significant presence of literate and even educated women and men among the destitute and frantically job hunting population also lowered the value of education in the market. Men with college level education were ready to offer tuition for bed and board (Jugantar, 16 January, 1960). Employers could expect their cooks also to act as a tutor or could offer the same pay to a cook and a tutor (Jugantar, 30 January, 1960). However, the social impact of women joining the rank of professionals in increasing numbers was tremendous. As the self settled displaced population lived in clusters in and around the city of Calcutta the incidence of women going out for jobs from a particular locality could be identified sharply. The working *bhadramahila* was thus an increasingly important phenomenon in urban WB. However, in spite of the inhibition of the *bhadralok* to women's work outside home as referred to earlier, economic pressure following the Depression and the Second World War, had already dragged at least some of them out to take up paid employment³⁹ even before the partition. The working *bhadramahila* was also a potential employer of full time domestics and cooks. It is interesting to note that newspaper insertions in the 1950s wanting full time help for cooking, home management and looking after the children were often published in the names of women (17 March, 31 March, 1957; 1 February; 14 November, 1960).

Information in Table 6 strengthens our argument further. It is seen that in Calcutta city in 1953 the incidence of employing domestics, as expected, is most frequent in the highest expenditure class. It is likely that each of these households is employing at least one and, some of them more than one domestic. However, it needs to be remembered that though the incidence is much lower in the lower expenditure classes, together they are likely to generate a sizable demand for domestics. This is simply because the number of households in the lower expenditure classes is significantly higher than that of the highest expenditure class. Arguably most of the working *bhadramahilas* belonged to the expenditure classes from Rs 100 a month onwards. It is worth noting that at least some families in the expenditure class of Rs 51-100 a month also employed domestics.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Women particularly in families with no adult or able males started working as stenographers, telephone operators, in the Food Rationing Department etc. (Ray, 1990; Bagchi, 1990).

Table 6: Distribution of Domestic Servants per Hundred Households According to Different Expenditure Classes in Calcutta city, 1953

Household Expenditure (Rs. Per month)	Number of Domestic Servants per Hundred Households
0 – 25	...
26 -50	...
51 – 100	0.5
101 – 200	4.1
201 – 300	17.7
301 -500	49.4
501 and above	108.2

Source: NSS Report No. 17, Report on Sample Survey of Employment in Calcutta, 1953.

We have already noted that the duties to be performed by the fulltime domestics included cooking, other household chores and often looking after the children. The nature of the duties implies that these were to be possibly performed in the absence of the housewife who went out to work outside. Short stories by Narendranath Mitra published during the 1950s and the 1960s in Bangla aptly portray middleclass and lower middleclass families (many of whom were immigrants) whose women went out for paid work leaving their homes in the care of female domestics (for example, *Abataranika*, later made into a classic film titled *Mahanagar* by Satyajit Ray)⁴⁰. In *Abataranika* we find the maid performing the wifely duties such as looking after the children, making the beds etc., a fact which the husband of the working wife accepts grudgingly. In many other short stories Mitra portrayed how maids and cooks (often full time) were becoming a necessity for those middleclass families whose women went to work and also how poor refugee women were often seen to cater to this new social need⁴¹. Such necessity has also been borne out by contemporary memoirs. Pramila Dutta, a refugee woman teaching in a school in post-partition Calcutta, in her memoir *Phire Dekha*⁴², gratefully remembers

⁴⁰ Narendranath Mitra, “Abataranika”(1950),reprinted in Narendranath Mitra, Galpamala 1, Ananda Publishers, Calcutta, 1986,pp.122-143.

⁴¹ Some of the other stories by Mitra portraying refugee women in domestic service in post 1947 Calcutta and the dates of their first publication are: ‘Dwicharini’(1950), reprinted in Galpamala 1, pp.157-168; ‘Purna’(1953), reprinted in Galpamala 2, 1989,pp.143-153.; ‘Mulya’(1953) reprinted in Galpamala 4, 1994,pp.118-129.

⁴² Pramila Dutta, *Phire Dekha*, Calcutta, 1998.

how she had been able to go out for work leaving her child in the custody of a very responsible old maid. Thus the paid maid was emerging in a new social role of housekeeper cum caregiver in post 1947 Calcutta. This was a role which the male servants were not expected to perform. Housekeeping was introduced as a new category within Division 9 in the 1961 Census and showed some concentration of women in this sphere. Newspaper insertions in the 1950s reflect a corresponding social demand for women housekeepers. The gradual breakdown of the traditional joint families with a number of adult women and the emergence of nuclear families composed of husband-wife and children also must have necessitated the urban middleclass preference for full time female domestics⁴³.

Away from Home: The Case of Girl Children Domestics

Being unable to feed me anymore after thirteen years of marriage my husband, an agricultural labourer, asked me to go to the city and earn my living by working as a domestic there. (reported a domestic worker, Kalidasi, from the South 24 Parganas and working in Calcutta in 1976)⁴⁴.

The refugee women were not the up-country male domestics' only competitors in the job market in post independence Calcutta. Internally migrating female domestics, like Kalidasi were also found to be plenty in Calcutta in the Census estimates of 1971. While discussing the issues of women and girl children domestics of Calcutta, *Towards Equality* (1974)⁴⁵ reported that some women migrated to the city for employment from the districts of WB not as part of a migrant family. These women often assisted by their very young daughters, reported to have left their sharecropper husbands at home to earn a living by working as domestics. This trend of 'women only' migration to meet the increasing preference for female domestics in the city was corroborated by a newspaper report based on a survey among the city maids. The case of one of the respondents, Kalidasi, from the 24 Parganas has already been mentioned at the beginning of this section. Another, named Minati (cited in the same report) from the Sunderban area of

⁴³ The gradual decrease in the size of the refugee families which initially often tended to be larger, has been noted by Kanti B Pakrashi in his 'The Uprooted: A Sociological Study of the Refugees of West Bengal, India', Calcutta, 1971.

⁴⁴ A report on domestics in *Ananda Bazar Patrika*, December 11, 1976.

⁴⁵ Government of India, *Towards Equality: Report of the Committee on the Status of Women in India*, Ministry of Education and Social Welfare, New Delhi, 1974.

the same district and around seventeen years of age also reported to have migrated singly to work as a live-in domestic in the city⁴⁶.

Internal distress migration of women and men from the rural hinterlands to Calcutta city can, however, be traced long back to the waning years of colonialism. From the late 1920s and early 1930s Calcutta and its suburbs started experiencing the migration of poor labourers from rural Bengal. They, if lucky, got jobs as domestics but generally made a living as petty workers and beggars. Goswami (1990) points out that this type of migration was closely related to the agrarian crisis in Bengal, which though started earlier, was much intensified during the years of the depression from 1930 to 1938. This is also likely to have played an increasingly important role in feminizing domestic service. The 1921 Census shows that the main suppliers of these female domestics to Calcutta city were the six districts namely, the 24 Parganas, Midnapore, Dacca, Hooghly, Howrah and Burdwan. Of the total 10,528 female migrant domestics to Calcutta in 1921, 23.86 per cent came from the 24 Parganas and another 23.41 per cent came from Midnapore. An interesting feature of the migrant domestics from within Bengal (in case of at least some districts) was that the proportion of females was very close to that of males (Table 1). A closer look at Table 1 indicates that women moved for employment in comparable numbers with men when migration took place within short distances. With the increase in distance the share of women migrants decreased.

This continuous process of rural-urban migration before partition, reached its peak during the famine of 1943. Among the large numbers of starving people who migrated to Calcutta from the rural areas in search of food, many were women and children⁴⁷. Studies have shown that during the 1943 famine many women and children were abandoned by the earning male members of the family⁴⁸. Migration related to rural

⁴⁶ An earlier survey among the part-time maids living in the kasba area of the city in the early 70s (Nranjan Halder, Samatat, 1974) found that all the eighteen women domestics interviewed were migrants to the city. Three of them had come from Bangladesh, thirteen from the South 24 Parganas and two from the Howrah district. Three among them were young girls between twelve and fifteen years of age who had migrated to the city along with their mothers (also among the respondents). We have already noted that newspaper insertions in the early 50s show that some families in Calcutta preferred girl children as domestics (Jugantar, 23 April 1956).

⁴⁷ The Bengal Destitute Persons Ordinance allowed the colonial police to hound out thousands of such Famine-destitute and drive them away from the city. However, many probably remained and started a new life inside the city in water pipes and beside railway lines (Goswami, 1990).

⁴⁸ For example, Bina Agarwal, "Social Security and the Family: Coping with Seasonality and Calamity in Rural India", *Journal of Peasant Studies*, 17, pp. 341-412.

dispossession, continued after independence, but has not received due scholarly attention as academicians became busy studying cross-border migration following the partition. The internally migrating destitute women also must have swelled the lower rungs of the economy mostly as petty service workers such as domestics. Let us remember the trend reported in Tables 2 and 3. Insertions in newspapers during the years immediately following the partition wanting female domestics also indicate a distinct preference for women from within WB at least among a small section of the advertisers side by side with the obvious preference for refugee women (Jugantar, 28 February; 7 March; 21 March, 1954). A typical example of insertions in the situations vacant column preferring a woman domestic from WB ran like this: “wanted a middle aged unencumbered female for household chores. Food, accommodation and a salary of rupees 8 to 10 offered. Only the residents of WB need apply” (Jugantar, 21 March, 1954).⁴⁹ A piece of statistical information may be worth noted here. In 1961 men and women constituted around 94 per cent and 6 per cent respectively in the total volume of migrant workers to the city. Over the twenty years the share of migrant women workers just doubled. The 1981 Census data show that among the total volume of migrants for employment from the rural areas to Calcutta city, women constituted some 13 per cent.

Table 7: Migrants in Other Services: Calcutta Urban, 1961

Migrated from	Male	Female
Rural areas of the state	40,732 (17.88)	19589 (51.11)
East Pakistan	71,047 (31.18)	13,420 (35.02)
Bihar	71,376 (31.33)	3,369 (8.79)
Orissa	18,765 (8.24)	556 (1.45)
U.P.	25,904 (11.37)	1391 (3.63)
Total	227824 (100)	38325 (100)

Note: Percentages are given in the parentheses..

Source: Population Census, 1961

⁴⁹ On the basis of her interviews with refugee women Chakravartty in *Coming out of Partition* (p89) notes that maids from East Bengal did more work for less pay which often led to confrontations with maids originally belonging to WB.

**Table 8 : Domestics (Housekeepers, Cooks, Maids & Related Workers):
Calcutta City, 1961**

Category	Male	Female
Total domestics	73,919 (100)	34,109 (100)
Migrant domestics	55,716 (75.37 per cent)	24,627 (72.20 per cent)

Source: Population Census, 1961

Table 7 reveals that, in 1961, around half of the migrant female service workers to Calcutta came from the rural areas of the different districts of WB, followed by Pakistan. On the contrary, male migration for service work was still dominated significantly by the up-country workers. The second largest supplier of male service workers was, of course, Pakistan. Male migrants from within the state, absorbed in service work were meager. Narrowing down further, we find that domestic service, as a category was mainly the domain of migrants in 1961 Calcutta. Secondly combining the results of Tables 7 and 8, it can also be argued that it was the up-country male migrants on the one hand and female migrants from the rural areas of the state, on the other, who dominated domestic service in Calcutta during the early 1960s. Moreover, the 1961 Census data also confirms the increasing incidence of refugees joining domestic service, a trend which we have noted in the last section. The partition might have played a crucial role also in intra-state distress migration in general and that of girl children in particular. It has to be noted in this context that many refugees settled in the districts⁵⁰. However, as only the 1951 Census gives information separately on the 'displaced population' and the total population, it is not possible to get an estimate of the percentage share of the refugees either in different services or in rural-urban migration from the later censuses.

The post partition years in Calcutta also witnessed an increasing participation of girl children in the job market, often as domestics. While we don't get enough information on girl children's paid work from the 1951 Census, the 1961 Census provides the total number of working girl children and also the estimate of their sector wise participation. Table 9 shows a continuous increase and quite significant at that, in girl children's work force participation rate (GCWPR) in urban West Bengal over the two decades from 1961 to 1981. Further, we find a very sharp increase in the percentage share of working

⁵⁰ Among the districts of West Bengal, other than Calcutta the main concentration of refugee settlement was in the 24 Parganas followed by Nadia. See Chatterji, "Spoils of Partition".

girl children in the total volume of female workforce in 1971 over 1961. A steady increase in 1981 is also discerned⁵¹.

Let us now try to find out whether this increase in GCWPR was in any way related to distress migration also. The 1981 Census tells us that more than 50 per cent (3514) of total girl child workers (6522) were migrants from the rural areas of the state. It is interesting enough to note that the incidence of migration from the rural areas of the state is just half in the case of working boy children (13803). The 1981 Census revealed yet another remarkable feature of rural-urban migration for employment in WB. For the first time girl children had emerged as a major constituent of rural-urban migration of females for employment. We find that the gender dimension of children migrating for employment, not only changed dramatically, but was also reversed. If we take a 20 year canvas, we see that in 1961 boys (0-14) years⁵² constituted around 93 per cent and girls around 7 per cent in the total volume of children migrating for work to Calcutta. Twenty years after girls (0-14) years constituted 53 per cent of all children who reported employment as the reason of their migration from the rural areas of the state to Calcutta⁵³. This was not all. In 1981 girl children below fourteen years were around 20 per cent of all women who came from the rural areas of the state to Calcutta for employment. Twenty years back girls below fourteen years constituted a meager 0.83 per cent of all women migrant workers to Calcutta. This makes two things clear: first, girls outnumbered boys in terms of migration for employment and second, the increasing importance of girl children in the urban female migrant workforce. Moreover, migrant girl children from the rural areas constituted around 54 per cent of the total volume of girl children engaged in different divisions of work in the city in 1981. As around 88 per cent of the working girl children were engaged in domestic service in Calcutta in 1981, it can reasonably be concluded that those who migrated for employment were mostly employed as domestics. Domestic service was thus emerging as a new job market where migrant girl children substituted adult women. Let us also remember that girl children outnumbered boy children in domestic service in 1981 for the first time in Calcutta (Table 4). Incidentally, girl children were found as helping hands for their migrant

⁵¹ It needs to be noted that already in 1977-78 (NSSO 32nd Round) GCWPR was the highest in Calcutta city among the four metropolises.

⁵² This includes all migrants.

⁵³ We have already documented that female migration for employment to Calcutta was mostly intra-state. Therefore, the case of girl children migrants from all areas to Calcutta for work in 1961 and that of girl children migrants from the rural areas of the state to Calcutta for employment in 1981 are largely comparable.

mothers working as domestics in the early 1970s' Calcutta (reported by "Towards Equality") and were preferred by at least some middleclass families as early as the 1950s as noted earlier.

Table 9: Girl children's work participation rate and their percentage in total female workforce during 1961 to 1981

Years	GCWPR	Percentage of girl children in total female workforce
1961	0.24	1.88
1971	0.50	5.04
1981	0.86	6.33

Source: Population Census 1961, 1971, 1981

It needs to be reiterated that the internal migration we have talked about is primarily distress migration caused by shortage of food in the rural areas. This is why during the 1980s internal migration decelerated as a consequence of the rural institutional reforms⁵⁴. But, as the land reforms were not all pervasive⁵⁵ migration to the city in search of food continued by the lowest orders, the main source of domestic servants for the urban elite. Even in 2004, West Bengal Human Development Report notes a substantial amount of distress migration from agriculture and industries to services. Incidentally in urban WB more than 50 percent women work in the services as reported by the NSSO, 2005-06, dominated by the low-paid manual services. This is, however, an all India feature during the post economic reforms⁵⁶.

⁵⁴ Pabitra Giri, "Urbanization in West Bengal, 1951-1991", *Economic and Political Weekly* pp3033-3038

⁵⁵ See for a critique of the land reforms in West Bengal, "Dipankar Basu, Political Economy of 'Middleness': Behind Violence in Rural West Bengal", *Economic and Political Weekly*, April 21, 2001, pp.1333-1344. Haris Gazdar and Sunil Sengupta, "Agricultural Growth and Trends in Well-Being in Rural West Bengal" in Ben Rogaly et al (eds.), *Sonar Bangla? Agricultural Growth and Agrarian Change in West Bengal and Bangladesh*, Sage Publications, New Delhi, 1999, pp.60-91. Dwaipan Bhattacharyya, "Politics of Middleness: The Changing Character of the Communist Party in West Bengal (1977-90)" in *Sonar Bangla*, pp.279-299.

⁵⁶ Jeemol Unni and G Raveendran (2007), 'Growth of Employment(1993-94 to 2004-05): Illusion of Inclusiveness?', *Economic and Political Weekly*, 42(03).

But West Bengal has an unique feature also. The 1981 Census revealed that at least 500 more girl children migrated from the rural areas of the state to Calcutta for employment than boy children in the same age group. In 1991 this movement of girl children for employment to Calcutta continued. The gender gap in such migration also widened. The number of boy children who migrated from the rural areas to Calcutta for employment during the same period was almost 1000 less. Incidentally, according to 1991 Census, the number of migration of girl children for employment to Calcutta from the rural areas of the state was the highest among all metropolises from their rural hinterlands. WB was also the only case where girl children outnumbered boys in migration for employment. In a survey conducted in 1997 Ananya Roy found in a village named Tetultola in the South 24 Parganas that almost all houses sent their very young unmarried daughters to Calcutta in order to meet the increasing urban demand for girl children live-in domestics. There she located such houses from which young daughters went to the city one after another. On the basis of much larger samples, Save the Children (2004, 2006) documented the same trend.

Concluding Remarks

The large scale migration of girl children for employment outnumbering boys in the same age-group and often substituting adult women is particularly unique in a state which has a historically low female work participation rate. Such migration which probably began sometime in the 1970s singles out WB in its record of gender based discrimination. It is moreover a case of a strangely morbid form of patriarchy which hinders adult women to work out but forces girl children to participate in paid jobs. Here comes the crucial role of the family in matters regarding migration. When parents and brothers stay at home in more numbers and young daughters go to work in a far off city, this is obviously not a case of autonomous, but of forced female migration. The family calculates the comparative advantages and decides to part with the most vulnerable member. However, the family calculates according to the market demands. Thus when market demanded women domestics and there was also a supply of increasing number of women labour, the up-country migrant male domestics were pushed out of the Calcutta middleclass homes during the 1950s and the 1960s. In the 1970s the market tilted towards girl children domestics. This dynamics of market, however, has not been elaborated in this paper⁵⁷.

⁵⁷ See in this context, Raka Ray, "Masculinity, Femininity, and Servitude: Domestic Workers in Calcutta in the Late Twentieth Century", *Feminist Studies* 26, no.3 (Fall 2000), pp.691-718. Deepita Chakravarty and Ishita Chakravarty, "Girl Children in the Care Economy: Domestics in West Bengal", *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol XL111, No 48 (November-December 2008),pp.93-100.

The continuing migration of girl children from the rural areas to the city for employment seems particularly alarming when we take into consideration the regular abuses these isolated domestics meet with at employers' houses (Save the Children, 2005?; 2006; newspaper reports). Newspapers often carry reports on such abuses ranging from murder to rape, brutal beating, keeping in starvation etc (Dainik Statesman, March 7, 2007; Bartaman, May 19, 2007; Anandabazar Patrika, February 25; September 28, 2008; November 7, 2009). Such news, however, fail to create much stir in the life of the Calcutta elites. Rights activists in the city do not place the issue on their priority list. This seems all the more unexpected in a state which historically takes pride of its supposedly advanced level of consciousness. The Bengali literati who used to articulate a lot on their 'cordial' relationship with domestics in memoirs and fictions till the 1950s and the 60s now seem to keep their lips tight on the issue. The only notable contemporary piece of writing on the relationship between domestics and middleclass employers is a novel titled *Kharij* (1979) by Ramapada Chowdhury⁵⁸. This is a story about the death of a migrant child domestic due to the negligence of the employers in a middleclass home in Calcutta in the 1970s. Interestingly the dead child was portrayed as a boy. The story was later made into a film of the same name by Mrinal Sen in 1981. Sen also portrayed the child domestic as a boy and not as a girl while in reality there already was a much higher incidence of girl children working as domestics than that of their male counterparts in Calcutta in the 1970s.

⁵⁸ Ramapada Chowdhury, *Kharij*, Ananda Publishers, Calcutta, 1979.

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