

# A Study on the Social Well Being of Rice Mill Workers in Burdwan City and Adjoining Areas, West Bengal, India

## Abstract

The present communication bring into light on the social well being of rice mill workers in Burdwan city and adjoining areas. This socio-economic aspects are examined based on the field from 2002-2016. Gender discrimination with regards to job distribution is prevalent within milling operators. The paper examined the status of women workers in rice mill. So, far the role of trade union is concerned, they trying their best in its various bilateral agreements for social being of rice mill workers by providing various opportunities indirectly.

**Keywords:** Social Well Being, Rice Mill Workers, Burdwan City And Adjoining Areas

## Introduction

The welfare approach is of recent origin (1970s) and developed as a positive reaction to the positivist/spatial science tradition in geography, and to the quantitative approach and model building. Its emphasis is on 'who gets what, where and how'. The welfare approach in geography requires the development of social indicators for empirical identification of social inequality and injustice in territorial distribution (Adhikari, 1995). The approach becomes relevant here from the point of view of labor situation in this informal agro-processing sector. The traditional concept of informal sector emphasizes that there is no job security to the laborers that they usually live in squalid sub-standard houses; there is discrimination of work according to gender. The health and sanitation facilities literacy rates - all the indicators of standard of living are poor for rice mill workers. This is indeed a low income earning sector and exclusively meant for poor and unskilled immigrant labor from agricultural peripheries. However, it is also true that some participants in this sector earn a comparatively higher level of income than the daily wage laborers in other sectors of work offered by the urban economy of Burdwan. The cash wage earning, especially the slightly more assured work than the most irregular and labor intensive agricultural jobs in villages, also attracts laborers in rice milling work. For many rural poor women, a rice mill job is much better than working as a domestic help or as a field-hand. However, inequalities within and without continue to persist and take up diverse shapes in rice mill jobs. Identification of these social inequalities is crucial to the improvement of social conditions.

In investigating rice mills it is, therefore, insufficient to demonstrate that here the workers suffer disproportionately from poor housing conditions, nutritional deficiencies and low wages. These inequalities are dependent not only upon conventional locational considerations, but are found in job patterns, gender and such other hierarchies inherent in the social groupings.

A few words on social well being will not be irrelevant here. It will help us to focus briefly on human aspects of labor in rice mills.

In a genetic sense, the term 'social well-being' includes level of living, the quality of life, social satisfaction, social welfare, and standard of living. However, there are problems of defining and measuring almost all of the above features. The elaboration of concepts like social welfare, social satisfaction must depend to some extent on the time period, region and context of their use (Smith, 1973). Smith (1973) had established 7 'general criteria' of social well-being relevant to contemporary conditions in the United States. These are as follows:



**Papia Nandy Palit**

Assistant Professor,  
Deptt. of Geography,  
Barjora College,  
Barjora, Bankura, West Bengal,  
India.

## Income, Wealth and Employment

Under this category are income and wealth, employment status, and income supplements.

## The Living Environment

Under this category are housing, the neighbourhood, and the physical environment.

## Health

Health includes both physical and mental health conditions.

## Education

Education is a wide concept that explains not only the achievement, but also the duration and quality of knowledge-gathering.

## Social Order

Can be explained through features such as personal pathologies, family breakdown, crime and delinquency, and public order and safety.

## Social Belonging (Alienation and Participation)

Evident through democratic participation, criminal justice and the lack of segregation.

## Recreation and Leisure

Recreation facilities, culture and the arts and leisure available.

United Nations Research Institute for Social Development (UNRISD) defines and measures levels of living at the international scale. Using the framework provided by the research, it is possible to list 9 basic components of social well-being:

1. Nutrition,
2. Shelter,
3. Health,
4. Education,
5. Leisure,
6. Security,
7. Social stability,
8. Physical environment, and
9. Surplus income.

In our study of rice milling industry in Burdwan, the inequalities among mill workers, and those between workers and the owners had drawn attention of the trade union movements. They have now largely minimized such inequalities through active movements and interventions of various kinds. Of the above nine components of social well-being about six components are under the scrutiny by the Rice Mill Worker's Association, who ensure that the workers are provided with these basic needs.

## Nutrition

Rice Mill Worker's Association has emphasized upon the subsistence of the worker, but has not yet emphasized the nutrition levels of the worker – mainly women and the children.

## Shelter

In each rice mill, there are provisions of quarters for the workers especially for the migrant and needy laborers. The number of workers accommodated varies from one mill to another depending upon the size of the mill. For example there is facility of accommodating 25–27 workers in the smallest *chatal*-based mill – Laxmi Narayan Rice Mill Burdwan district. In contrast, Shanti Rice Mill - Burdwan's largest rice mill - can accommodate 226 workers. This compulsory free housing arrangement

for workers is the contribution of the movement of Rice Mill Worker's Association and has immensely helped in a better circulation of labour from rural hinterlands to the city.

## Health

There is a growing health consciousness among the workers. For any ailment, the workers frequently go to the Doctor rather than using public hospital, where a long time is required for medical help. As per the contract of the union with the mill owner, the workers may enjoy medical leave. The mills having electricity must provide one connection for lightening each room. Even workers who work at high temperatures (such as fireman and *houze shramiks*) all day, the rooms have generator connections facility during power cuts. If the workers meet with any accident during the working hours, the mill owner must bear the expenditure for the treatment of that worker. Beside the above, '*Janata policy*' has been introduced by the owner for workers – which is a kind of life insurance, valid in case of accidental death with very low premium rates. According to the contract of 1986, the Rice Mill Worker's Association have emphasized that the quarters allotted to the workers must be made habitable.

For women workers, it has been noted that there must be provision of urinals within the mill's boundary and those mills, which have toilet, must let these be used by women. According to contract of Rice Mill Worker's Association with the mill owner, women workers during pregnancy can enjoy maternity leave of 45 days (15 days before and 30 days after delivery) with Rs 4 and a kilogram of common rice per day. For machine and *jharai shramik* there is provision for musk and white glass to protect the eyes. However, that is about all. The rice mill workers often suffer from ill health due to over work and exhaustion. The stress of adjusting to a new environment, may lead migrant workers from villages to alcoholism.

## Education

Education for all' has been the watchword of Rice Mill Worker's Association. Education is fundamental to an individual's enjoyment of certain recreational pursuits and to the fulfillment of democratic opportunities as well as to occupational status and social mobility. Similarly raising aggregate levels of education may be seen as an investment in human capital, which pays dividends not only in economic development and material well being but also in cultural development, social equality and political emancipation (Smith, 1973). Therefore, *Bongiyō Shaksharata Prasar Samiti*, a state-sponsored NGO, organized illiteracy eradication campaigns for rice mill workers with the help of Rice Mill Worker's Association. This attempt was fulfilled partly. The programmers use to take evening class in the *dhaoras* after sun down. Some of the male workers used to become drunk so all of them did not attend the class. For women workers they are rather shaky about reaching out to outsider teachers. After working for the whole day, they usually go for shopping and other household chores such as preparation of food and caring for the children, with

# Asian Resonance

little or no interest in studies. Naturally, 'lack of time' was the main excuse among women for not learning to read and write.

### Leisure

Leisure time is defined as the amount of time free from work, excluding the time spent in travel to and from work, the time spent on domestic work and the estimated 10 hours a day spent in sleeping, eating and dressing. The working hours of the rice mill workers are 8 hours. After the duty hour, the majority of male workers pass their leisure time by sleeping, drinking, playing and marketing (as they work hard). But the women workers get little time as leisure because their engagement in domestic chores. Leisure is necessary for revitalizing the spent-up energy during work. The age of retirement of the workers of the rice mill is 58 years. With increasing age, their physical strength decreases and their tiredness increases. So leisure is essential for social well-being to all.

### Security

Security is a heterogeneous component, depending upon prevailing political, legal and economic systems and related in a complex manner to many other aspects of social well-being. Basically security has two important dimensions – the first, security of the person or public safety, second, the security of the way of life – in other words being able to maintain a given level of well-being once it has been achieved. But in our case of study, the security of the worker's way of life is increasing because they have provident fund, gratuity and enjoy after retirement allowance. The owners (as with contract with Rice Mill Worker's Association) have introduced *Janata* policy for the workers. Even in a rice mill if the owner want to replace the *chatal*-based mill by fully dryer based mill, the owner would not disappoint/cut off the additional workers from his mill (though the workers are not required due to establishment of drier). The total number of workers must remain the same as before and after modernization. So the social security, job security of the workers all is improving – thus gradually achieving formal characteristics from the informal one.

How far have the jobs in rice mills been assured by the Trade Union? This aspect may be understood from the levels of wage/salary fixed by the bi-lateral contracts (given below in Table 1 and Figure 1).

**Table: 1**  
**Burdwan District Rice Mill Workers' Wage/Salary, 1986-2002 (Wage/Salary in Rs)**

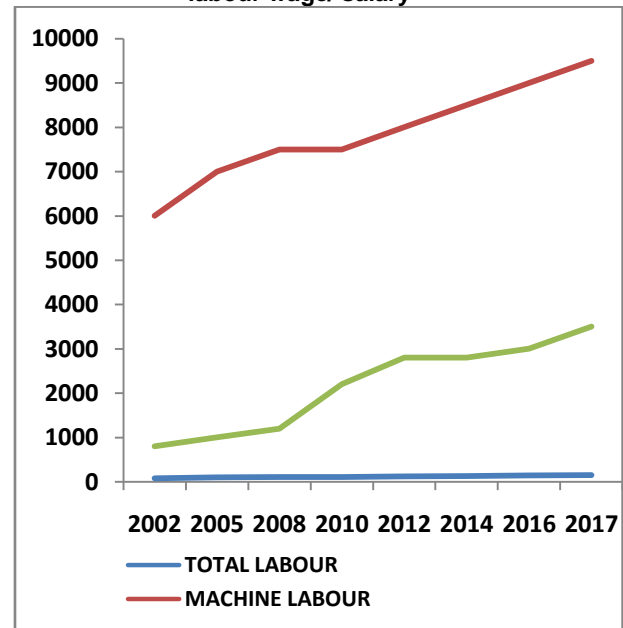
Year	Total Labour	Machine Labour	Monthly Staff (minimum rate)
2002	80	6000	800
2005	100	7000	1000
2008	110	7500	1200
2010	110	7500	2200
2012	120	8000	2800
2014	130	8500	2800
2016	140	9000	3000
2017	150	9500	3500

**Source:** Bilateral contract paper between Rice Mill Workers Association and Rice Mill Owners Association of Burdwan District

### N.B.

All blue collar workers usually get one kilogram of common rice every day along with their daily wage.

**Fig: 1**  
**Graphical representation of temporal changes in labour wage/ salary**



### Social Stability

Although good relations with other members of the society are felt to be a fundamental human need, this is the most ambiguous and culturally relative component of social well being. Thus most would agree economic stability and social stability are 'good things', but we must also recognize the importance of the rights of the mill worker to strike, to protest and in some circumstances to promote social revolution.

### Physical Environment

There often exists a negative relationship between environmental quality and economic development. The environment of the habitat as well as the working environment must be healthy in order to generating the energy to work of the worker. There

is a growing awareness for improving the quality of the physical environment around the worker.

### Study Area

The study area is extended between  $23^{\circ} 11'$  to  $23^{\circ} 21'$  north latitude and  $87^{\circ} 46'$  to  $87^{\circ} 57' 45''$  east longitude spreading over about 108 square kilometres in Burdwan city and its surrounding 6 *Gram Panchayats*. These are Belkash, Bagar II, Saraitikar, Rayan I, Baikunthapur I and Baikunthapur II. Burdwan acts as the main urban focus and the regional focus for this region where agro-processing industry has grown in a concentrated manner.

The areas lying just beyond the municipal boundary of Burdwan city have close physical and economic links with Burdwan and form our study region identified on the basis of diversities of rice mills and similarities in agricultural development. This region forms a part of the agriculturally prosperous near-flat plain of the Ganges and its tributary Damodar, the *Banka nullah* (local name for a small stream) flows through the region from the west and forming a meander in the middle of the city. The Damodar River cuts through the south of the region and has proven to be a major physical barrier in the expansion of rice milling in the trans Damodar region.

### Aim of the Study

The main objective of the present investigation is to make geographic enquiry to assess the social well being of rice mill worker in Burdwan city and adjoining areas.

### Database and Methodology

The present study is based on both primary as well as secondary data and various Government offices have provided maps. Data related to the number of rice mills in the district have been collected from the office of Burdwan Town Rice Mill Owners Association. Data related to the nature and actual size of the mill, the actual numbers of workers in the individual mill etc. All collected from the *Shramik Bhavan* (Labour Union Office). The total number of rice mills in the Burdwan region was 52 at the time of survey out of which 35 percent rice mills were selected for study. The survey was conducted with the help of a structured questionnaire. The questionnaires were filled in by conversation with the rice mills owners. Authenticity of the information supplied by the mill owners were compared with the data made available from *Shramik Bhavan*.

### Women Worker

Women workers have always formed a separate category in the labour market, concentrated in certain specific occupations called 'pink collar occupations' (Howe, 1977), and under particular type of organization and working conditions. Many of the studies on women in India and elsewhere have shown that women's employment activity as well as their development are governed not by the principle of free choice in the labour market but by ideological and gender considerations (Shah *et al.*, 1996). Hence, the conditions under which women sell or withdraw their labour power tend to be different from those in which men sell or

withdraw their labour power. The socio-economic characteristics of women workers, their familial obligations, lack of mobility, societal expectations, etc. determine not only their job entry point but also their bargaining power. It is due to the combination of such factors that women are over-represented in the 'pink collar', occupations with poor pay, low status, routine and hazardous jobs, temporary, seasonal or casual nature of work. Even within the same occupational categories they receive lower salaries (Auster, 1996, Giddens, 1990). While studying on women's work and information sectors in Burdwan, West Bengal Ghosh (2001) reveals that women's employment in the rice mills and nursing homes have failed to produce any spectacular change in gender relation within and outside family.

Women's needs in the workplace are categorized into two – strategic and gender, the first indicating critical issues such as opportunities to work and the latter implying the specific needs of a woman (such as the provision of a separate toilet or creche etc.).

We have seen that the rice milling industry of Burdwan employs a significant number of women workers. However, by virtue of being an unorganized industry, there is no special recognition of the role and needs of women workers in the rice mills. This neglect of gender needs is characteristic of the entire gamut of agro-processing industry - starting from the smallest husking or oil/*chira* mill to the most sophisticated rice mill-cum-bran solvent plant.

However, the trade union has, in its various bilateral agreements, begun to incorporate gender issue. This increasing awareness is evident in issues related to health, sanitation, protection of women's worker from physical assault/ molestation and in safety of children during the working hours of their mothers.

In traditional rice mills (whether it is only *chatal*-based or mixed type) a major portion (per cent of total workers) of worker is female and they are employed in *chatal* based works like spreading of raw paddy on the yard for sun drying, winnowing, sun-drying of wet paddy, piling up of raw paddy, covering of piled raw paddy by large straw cones during sudden showers, etc. For these activities women in Burdwan mills work in the open, under the scorching rays of mid day sun, not much different from the *jua kali* sector of Kenya.

The bilateral agreements between the Rice Mill Owner's Association and the Rice Mill Workers Union are beginning to ensure job security, personal health, civic amenities, and some amount of leisure for all workers. Women workers enjoy all these facilities. In addition, they get certain special facilities. These are as follows.

## Toilet for Women Worker

In 1986, a provision for toilet was made for women workers within the boundary of the rice mill. As per the contract, their toilets must be built where not in existence already. In this year too, the issue which drew the greatest attention of the union was the construction of a bathing place for women workers.

## Maternity Leave

Already in existence in 1989, there was a clause offering 21 days maternity leave with one kilogram rice and Rs 3 per day for food.

## Maternity Benefits

Regarding other maternity benefits, another clause in the 1993 agreement was that 15 days prior to the delivery, women workers would get a kilogram of rice each day (for 15 days) and after the delivery for 30 days she would get a kilogram of common/good quality rice including Rs 4 as daily allowance.

## Conclusion

We have discussed social well-being of rice mill workers and have shown that many of them are in this job due to poverty. Finally, we have looked at women workers' situation in this industry. Gender discrimination with regards to job distribution is prevalent within milling operations. Women are not allowed to enter the machine room giving proof of male dominance in technical work. In rice milling industry, women are considered to be brainless, unskilled (without offering infrastructure to train women) and full of patience. For this, in *chatal*-based or mixed type mills they are mainly appointed for work on *chatal* and perform the monotonous job like spreading of paddy on the yard, frequent rolling, drying, winnowing and cleaning of paddy. Besides *chatal* jobs, male workers perform all other skilled and machine work. In rice mills there are two categories of workers – white collar, including office staff and machine operator paid on a monthly basis, and blue collar including *chatal shramik* and machine *coolie* (*shramik*) paid on a daily basis. It is notable that the status of women in rice mills becomes lower with increasing modernization. This survey is an essential part of our theoretical standpoint of categorizing rice mills as informal industrial units. The survey results established well our thesis that these are unorganized industrial units having characteristics of informality in varying degrees.

Among the industrial workers in general, rice mill workers are at the lowest level in terms of prestige. However, they have a little better amount of job security and wage, mostly due to the active role adopted by the trade union in the region. The rice mill workers, thus, are in transition between the agricultural laborer and industrial workers in the formal sector where entirely capitalistic production relations are prevalent.

The social well being of rice mill workers has also been critically analyzed. From these discussions it is clear that the trade union has been trying their best in its various bilateral agreements for social being of rice mill workers by providing various

opportunities indirectly. The trade union has yet to take up issues related to women workers.

It has been revealed that the rice mill workers lie at the lowermost stratum of the economy of Burdwan region with their rural roots, impoverishment and changing social and family structure. As evident from the study, the rice mill workers live a reality that straddles both 'rural' and 'urban', and creates a new form of synthesis of these two forms of economy. They also represent how the first generation migrants struggle to survival in a radically different environment of industrial relationship as against the rural ones.

New Government has been come into force in Rice Milling Industry. Trade Union or Workers' Union has been abolished and job the protections of the workers are in a threatened state. Bonuses of the workers are very irregular. One of the noteworthy changes is that abolishment of Jonata Policy of the workers. From the traditional Rice Mill has been replaced by Modern Rice Mill, consequently most of the milling operation has been done automatically and Math Shramiks are abolished. After the introduction of Drier Mill the Math Shramik has been transformed into the Drier Shramik. The wages has been enhanced on the basis of their work load /work pattern, the wages structure has been reformed.

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