

Husbands in the Mills, Wives in the Field: Male Migration, Left-Behind Women, and the Gendering of Rural Labour in the Kanpur Hinterland, c. 1880-1940

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Abstract

This article examines the gendered social consequences of male labour migration to the industrial city of Kanpur between roughly 1880 and 1940, a period spanning the city's consolidation as the principal textile and leather manufacturing center of the then United Provinces under colonial rule through the interwar decades of industrial expansion. Rather than tracing the economic mechanics of migration, it focuses on the women left behind in the sending villages of the surrounding Doab, particularly in the districts of Etawah, Fatehpur, Unnao and the rural hinterland of Kanpur district itself, from which the bulk of mill labour were drawn. The article argues that the housing conditions of migrant male workers, confined largely to single-occupancy lines and ahatas unsuited to family settlement, produced a structural separation of households that reshaped rural gender relations. In the prolonged or permanent absence of husbands, women assumed agricultural cultivation, cattle care and de facto household headship, amounting to a feminization of agrarian labour that generated both material hardship and new social and moral anxieties. Drawing on the Royal Commission on Labour in India (1929-31), the Cawnpore Textiles Labour Inquiry Committee (1938), the district gazetteers of the United Provinces and the vernacular press, the article reconstructs both the material conditions of these women's lives and the discursive anxieties that surrounded them. It contributes to the historiography of colonial labour by relocating the gendered costs of industrialization from the factory floor to the village household.

Keywords: Kanpur; colonial India; labour migration; gender; left-behind women; feminization of agriculture; textile industry; United Provinces

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I. Introduction

By the closing decades of the nineteenth century, Kanpur (Cawnpore) had established itself as the most important industrial city of the United Provinces, a centre of cotton textile manufacture and leather production whose factories supplied the domestic market and during the wartime decades, the British armies (Joshi, 2002). The city drew its labour supply, as Chitra Joshi has shown, largely from the surrounding countryside region, and the influx swelled markedly in periods of famine and agrarian distress (Joshi, 2002). The migration that built Kanpur's mills and tanneries was overwhelmingly male dominated as a German trade-union deputation that visited the city in 1928 observed that very few women worked in its textile industry (Schrader & Furtwängler, 1928). The men who filled the mills came primarily from the villages of the Doab, the fertile tract between the Ganges and the Yamuna, above all from the districts of Etawah, Fatehpur, Unnao and the rural hinterland of Cawnpore district itself, districts whose gazetteers record a predominantly agrarian economy (Nevill, 1903, 1909, 1911, 1916).

The historiography of Indian industrial labour has taught us to take the "peasant-proletariat" seriously as the workers did not sever their rural ties upon entering the factory but circulated between village and city (Chandavarkar, 1994; Chakrabarty, 1989). Rajnarayan Chandavarkar's study of Bombay showed how the labour market, migration and the rural connections of workers shaped the social organization of the working class, while Dipesh Chakrabarty's study of the Bengal jute mills insisted on the cultural world that workers carried with them into the factory (Chandavarkar, 1994; Chakrabarty, 1989). Yet this historiography has been, in significant measure, a history of men. Chitra Joshi has observed of Kanpur's radical trade-union politics that it was a male world, one that reaffirmed and did not contest the masculinized nature of the public sphere in the city; mass meetings during strikes were male affairs, and if women formed part of the audience, their presence

went unrecorded in official and unofficial reports (Joshi, 2002). The gendered consequences of this circulation for the women who remained in the village have received far less attention than the factory floor.

Samita Sen has observed that when men opted for circulation between town and country, wives and children undertook the actual labour of cultivation for the survival of "peasant-proletariat" households, even as men retained their status as heads of family and their proprietary interests in the village (Sen, 2004). This article takes that observation as its point of departure and develops it for the specific case of Kanpur and its hinterland. Its central argument is that the housing conditions of migrant male workers in Kanpur, confined largely to single-occupancy lines and ahatas unsuited to family settlement, produced a structural separation of households that reshaped rural gender relations in the sending villages. In the prolonged or permanent absence of husbands, women assumed agricultural cultivation, cattle care and de facto household headship, a feminization of agrarian labour that generated both material hardship and new social and moral anxieties, as colonial officials, reformers and local communities scrutinized and often pathologized the unsupervised, "husbandless" woman as vulnerable to economic distress and social suspicion.

The article draws on the published record of the Royal Commission on Labour in India (1929-31), the Cawnpore Textiles Labour Inquiry Committee (1938), the district gazetteers of the United Provinces and the vernacular press of the period, read alongside the secondary historiography of Indian labour and gender. In what follows, I first sketch the making of Kanpur's migrant labour force; then examine the housing conditions that underwrote the separation of households; next I trace the feminization of agrarian labour in the sending villages; and finally I analyse the discursive anxieties that surrounded the "husbandless" woman.

II. Kanpur and the Making of a Migrant Industrial Labour Force

Kanpur's industrial growth was rooted in the colonial military economy. The city's position on the Grand Trunk Road and its long connection with East India Company trade made it a natural site for the factories that supplied the army's textile and leather requirements, and by the nineteenth century it had become an important centre of both industries in north India (Joshi, 2002). By the mid-twentieth century the textile and leather factories of Kanpur, together with the host of small units that supplied them, employed over 80,000 workers (Joshi, 2002). By the interwar years the city was one of the principal destinations of rural-urban migration to cotton mill and factory work in the region and immediately after the First World War three new mills were established, and between 1930 and 1937 the total number of millworkers in the city increased by 31.2 percent (Gould, 2011). The city's industrial districts, the bastis and neighbourhoods clustered around the mills, were organized along caste and community lines as a pattern that was reinforced as successive waves of peasant communities made their way to the city (Gould, 2011).

The city's leather industry was of comparable importance. The tanneries and leather-goods factories, which supplied boots, saddlery and accoutrements for the army, drew their labour disproportionately from the leather-worker caste communities of the surrounding districts, and the neighbourhoods these workers built in the city became the basis of new community identities and of upward mobility for some sections of the lower-caste working population (Sharma, 2016). The labour force as a whole was recruited through a system of jobbers and sardars who drew workers from the surrounding districts, and those workers retained deep roots in their villages, to which they returned for harvests, marriages and festivals (Chandavarkar, 1994).

The workforce was overwhelmingly male. The 1928 German deputation reported that very few women worked in Kanpur's textile industry (Schrader & Furtwängler, 1928). This was not an accident of demand but the product of a gendered division of labour in which men migrated and women remained behind to reproduce the rural household (Sen, 1999). The colonial state, as Sen has argued, helped to achieve and foster a particular accommodation between capitalist and patriarchal forces that retained women's labour in the household and non-capitalist sectors, or at the lower end of the wage labour market while the more lucrative jobs in industry became the prerogative of men (Sen, 1999b). In Kanpur, as in the jute-mill world of Bengal, the city and its mills were a predominantly male world, and the migration that sustained them was a migration of men.

III. Housing, Circular Migration, and the Structural Separation of Households

The material basis of this separation lay in the housing available to migrant workers in Kanpur. The city's industrial districts were dominated by cramped, single-room tenements with the barrack-like lines attached to the mills and the ahatas, enclosed courtyards ringed by small rooms, that housed the bulk of the labouring poor (Gooptu, 2001). The ahatas of Kanpur were among the oldest forms of working-class housing in north India, and by the mid-twentieth century they had become bywords for congestion and squalor (Bremen, 1999). Both the Royal Commission on Labour in India (1931) and the Cawnpore Textiles Labour Inquiry Committee (1938) documented the inadequacy of workers' housing in the city and its overcrowding and its unsuitability for family life.

The inadequacy of workers' housing was not peculiar to Kanpur. The "mill lines" of Calcutta were crowded with migrant labourers too and the private bastis offered small houses with little light and poor

ventilation and open drains (de Haan, 1997). In Bombay the chawls of the mill districts housed the labouring poor in conditions that colonial observers repeatedly condemned. The National Commission on Labour's retrospective account grouped the ahatas of Kanpur with the labour camps of Bombay and the bastis of eastern India as the characteristic housing of the first generation of Indian industrial labour, housing that had become, over time, only more miserable and congested (Bremen, 1999). What distinguished Kanpur was the extent to which this housing was a male space. The mill lines and ahatas were quarters designed for single men, not for families and the overwhelmingly male character of the workforce meant that the family could not be housed in the city but to be remained in the village.

The consequence was a structural separation of households. Men lived in Kanpur as single sojourners and their wives, children and parents remained in the village, where the family's land, cattle and house continued to anchor the household economy. This pattern of circular migration, in which men moved between two residences while women remained fixed in one, was characteristic of Indian industrial labour more broadly (Chandavarkar, 1994; de Haan, 1997). But in Kanpur, as elsewhere, it had a specific gendered logic. The city offered no space in which a family could be reconstituted, so the family was reconstituted in the village around the labour of the women who stayed behind. The household, in other words, was split across space as its productive core in the mill and its reproductive core in the fields.

The separation of households was not a static condition but one that periodically erupted into public view. In 1937-38 Kanpur's mills were convulsed by a general strike, the largest in the city's history, in which workers demanded higher wages and the recognition of their union (Joshi, 1999; Wani, 2025). The strike brought the city to a standstill and earned it the epithet of the Red City (Lal Kanpur), and it ended with an agreement to constitute an enquiry committee to examine the workers' demands (Wani, 2025). The Cawnpore Textiles Labour Inquiry Committee which was appointed by the Government of the United Provinces reported in 1938, confirming the precariousness of working-class life in the city and exposing the uncooperative behaviour of the mill owners in the investigation (Wani, 2025). The committee's report, together with the Royal Commission's evidence is one of the richest records of the conditions under which Kanpur's migrant workers lived, and of the households they had left behind in the villages.

IV. The Feminization of Agrarian Labour in the Sending Villages

In the sending villages of the Doab, the absence of men transformed women's work. The district gazetteers of Etawah, Fatehpur, Unnao and Cawnpore describe a countryside of small peasant holdings in which the family farm was the basic unit of production (Nevill, 1903, 1909, 1911, 1916). When the male head of household migrated to the city and the burden of keeping that farm productive fell on the women he left behind. As Sen has shown for the jute-mill hinterland of Bengal, wives and children undertook the actual labour of cultivation for the survival of "peasant-proletariat" households, while the absent husband retained his status as head of family and his proprietary claims in the village (Sen, 2004).

This was not a new phenomenon in the sense that peasant women had always worked in the fields. The historiography of rural north India has insisted on the centrality of women's labour to the family holding, from the peasant women of colonial Awadh who served as agricultural labourers on their own family lands (Jassal, 1998) to the women of the United Provinces countryside whose field labour sustained poor households (Moosvi, 2020). The Dufferin Inquiry of 1887-88, which surveyed rural conditions in what is now Uttar Pradesh, documented the extent to which women's labour sustained poor households and the ways in which caste customs shaped women's access to work outside the home (Moosvi, 2020). What migration changed was the scale and the responsibility. Women who had worked alongside husbands now worked in their place, managing the full cycle of cultivation, tending the cattle, and assuming de facto headship of the household, taking decisions about sowing, hiring, credit and the education of children that had previously been reserved for men.

The contemporary literature offers a useful vocabulary for this historical experience. Chetan Choithani has argued that the two most frequently cited impacts of male migration on left-behind women are "improved autonomy" and "increased responsibility," and that these two pathways pull in different directions: the autonomy women gain in managing households is offset by the burdens and vulnerabilities that responsibility entails (Choithani, 2019). The evidence from the Kanpur hinterland suggests that both dynamics were at work in the colonial period, but that the second outweighed the first. Women acquired a measure of practical authority over the family farm, yet they did so without the security of title, credit or legal standing that would have converted that authority into durable power (Jassal, 1998; Moosvi, 2020).

The term "feminization of agriculture" belongs to the contemporary literature, but the phenomenon it names has deep historical roots. Recent scholarship has shown that the rising share of farm work undertaken by women in India is driven largely by the out-migration of men, and that it carries no necessary relationship with women's empowerment; indeed, it is often better described as a feminization of agrarian distress, in which women's growing contribution adds to already heavy work burdens (Pattnaik et al., 2017). Contemporary studies of left-behind women in north India similarly find that the increased responsibility assumed by women in

migrant households is offset by material hardship, insecurity and the persistence of patriarchal constraint (Choithani, 2019). The material conditions of these women's lives were hard. Remittances from the city were irregular and often inadequate; the women who managed the family farm in the husband's absence did so within the constraints of caste and community norms that limited their mobility and their access to the labour market (Jassal, 1998; Moosvi, 2020). The feminization of agrarian labour in the Kanpur hinterland was thus not an emancipation but a redistribution of burden: the same patriarchal order that sent men to the city assigned to women the doubled labour of field and household, without the resources or the recognition that would have made that labour sustainable.

The invisibility of this labour in the official record was itself significant. The categories through which the colonial state understood the countryside, the census and survey categories of cultivator and agricultural labourer, tended to render women's work invisible, counting the family holding as a male-headed unit even when the man was absent (Moosvi, 2020; Jassal, 1998). The feminization of agrarian labour was thus doubly obscured: it was real in the fields, but it did not register in the categories through which the state and its officials described rural society. The women who kept the farms of the Doab productive in their husbands' absence appear in the sources less often as farmers than as the dependents of absent men, a misrecognition that compounded their material insecurity.

V. The "Husbandless" Woman: Moral Anxiety and Discursive Scrutiny

The feminization of agrarian labour was accompanied, and complicated, by a discourse of moral anxiety. The woman who managed a household in her husband's absence occupied an ambiguous position in the gender order of the village and the colony. She was, on the one hand, an object of sympathy, a woman burdened beyond her station; on the other, she was an object of suspicion, a woman whose unsupervised presence in the fields, the market and the public spaces of the village invited questions about her conduct and her virtue.

This double construction of the mobile or husbandless woman has been traced by Charu Gupta in the Hindi print-public sphere of colonial north India, where migrant women were represented as both innocent victims and guilty migrants, insiders and outsiders, in discussions that linked gender, caste, sexuality and morality (Gupta, 2015). The vernacular press of the United Provinces, including the Allahabad daily *The Leader* and the Kanpur daily *Pratap*, carried extensive commentary on the industrial city and its workers during the strikes and enquiries of the 1930s, commentary in which anxieties about the morality of the industrial labouring population were never far from the surface (Wani, 2025). These anxieties must be read against the background of a public sphere that was itself profoundly masculine. The trade-union politics of "Red Kanpur" (Lal Kanpur) was a world of men, in which the presence of women went unrecorded (Joshi, 2002), and the press that reported the strikes and enquiries was written by and for men, framed by assumptions about proper gender conduct (Wani, 2025; Gupta, 2015).

The colonial state itself participated in this moral economy. Sen has shown how a variety of interests opposed to women's, especially married women's, migration produced a view of women's mobility as inherently suspect, and how this culminated in the colonial state's legal prohibition in 1901 of women's "voluntary" migration to the Assam plantations, an explicit endorsement of male claims on women's labour within the family (Sen, 2004). In the industrial cities, the stigma attached to women who lived and worked outside the domestic sphere was acute. As Sen observes of the jute-mill world, the mills and the city were a predominantly male world, and poor urban women who lived and worked in it were confronted with frequent sexual harassment and the stigma of being seen as sexually immoral (Sen, 1999b).

The state's interest in these women was framed, moreover, in the language of protection. The factory legislation that regulated women's work in industry was justified as protection but operated, as Sen has argued, to retain women's labour in the household sector or at the lower end of the wage labour market (Sen, 1999b). The same protective idiom, applied to the women left behind in the villages, cast them as dependents in need of male oversight rather than as workers in their own right, and it underwrote the official unease with their independence. To manage a farm, to deal with moneylenders, to move through the market, was to step outside the bounds of protected dependence, and it was precisely this transgression that drew the scrutiny of officials and reformers.

The women left behind in the Doab villages were not, of course, urban women. But the anxieties that attached to them were of the same order. Their assumption of masculine responsibilities, their visibility in the fields and the market, their management of money and their dealings with moneylenders and labourers, all rendered them legible to officials, reformers and neighbours as women who had slipped the bonds of proper wifely dependence. The official record, from the district gazetteers to the labour enquiries, registered this unease: the "husbandless" woman appeared in these texts less as a productive farmer than as a figure of vulnerability and suspicion, a woman whose independence was read as exposure. Missionary and social-reform commentary on mill-town family life, which this article engages through the secondary literature, belonged to

the same discursive field, framing the industrial labouring family as a site of moral danger in which women, whether in the city or left behind in the village, were the principal objects of concern (Sen, 1999a; Gupta, 2015).

The result was a paradox at the heart of the feminization of agrarian labour. Women acquired responsibility without authority, and visibility without recognition. They managed farms, households and children in the absence of their husbands, yet their competence was read not as capacity but as danger, and their independence as exposure. The moral economy of the village and the colony thus worked to discipline the very women whose labour made the migrant household viable, subjecting them to scrutiny precisely because they had taken on the work of men.

VI. Conclusion

This article has argued that the gendered consequences of Kanpur's industrialization were felt most acutely not on the factory floor but in the villages of the Doab from which its labour was drawn. The housing conditions of migrant workers, confined to single-occupancy lines and ahatas unsuited to family settlement, produced a structural separation of households in which men circulated between city and village while women remained fixed in the countryside, assuming the burden of cultivation, cattle care and household headship. This feminization of agrarian labour brought material hardship and new moral anxieties, as the "husbandless" woman became the object of both sympathy and suspicion.

The argument has implications beyond the specific case. It suggests that the costs of colonial industrialization were gendered in ways that the factory-centred historiography has tended to obscure, and that the reproduction of the industrial labour force depended on the unremunerated labour of women in the sending regions. It also suggests that the contemporary feminization of Indian agriculture, so often treated as a recent phenomenon, has deep historical roots in the migration systems of the colonial period (Pattnaik et al., 2017). The women who tilled the fields of Etawah and Fatehpur while their husbands worked the looms of Kanpur were the predecessors of the women-headed farming households of today's rural India, and their history deserves a place in the story of Indian industrialization.

The argument also points to avenues for further research. The sources are, inevitably, uneven: the women themselves left few records, and they appear in the official and press record largely as objects of commentary rather than as authors of their own accounts. This article has therefore reconstructed their experience indirectly, through the reports, gazetteers and press commentary that documented their circumstances, and through the interpretive frameworks of the secondary literature, in the spirit of the labour history that has sought to recover the forgotten worlds of Indian workers (Joshi, 2003). The gendered history of the sending villages, the remittance economies that bound them to the industrial city, and the ways in which women's agricultural labour was counted, or not counted, in colonial statistics all await sustained archival investigation. What can be said with confidence is that the feminization of agrarian labour in the Kanpur hinterland was not a marginal by-product of industrialization but one of its central conditions: the mills of Kanpur ran on the labour of men whose households were kept alive by the unremunerated work of women in the villages of the Doab.

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