

**ETHNOGRAPHING WOMEN'S AGENCY: A CASE STUDY  
OF GENDER, KINSHIP AND POLITICAL ECONOMY IN  
KALACHANDPUR MANDI COMMUNITY, DHAKA,  
BANGLADESH**

by

Asfia Gulrukh Kamal

A Thesis submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies of  
The University of Manitoba in partial fulfilment  
of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

Department of Anthropology  
University of Manitoba  
Winnipeg, Manitoba

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**THE UNIVERSITY OF MANITOBA  
FACULTY OF GRADUATE STUDIES**

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## Abstract

The thesis is comprised of a case study of the changing political economy of Mandi beauty workers' community in *Kalachandpur* area of Dhaka City, Bangladesh. The marginality of Mandi beauty workers is apparent at different institutional levels: they are workers in a cosmopolitan labour market, they are one of the ethnic minorities in the dominant Bengali-Muslim setting, and they are also women in a male-dominated system. The changes experienced by Mandi women when they join the wage economy are located within social processes operating within and between these three sets of institutions. The research draws particular attention to processual understanding of the sociocultural structures that produce and constrain modes of agency among Mandi beauty workers, and how gender and kinship become important components in Mandi beauty worker agency.



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Last but obviously not least, I am thankful to my family which I think is not enough for the way they shared all of my struggles in completing this thesis.

## **Dedication**

I would like to dedicate this thesis to my mother,  
Shamim Mahipara Kamal

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## Chapter One

# INTRODUCTION

The history of indigenous minorities in Bangladesh has been a noteworthy subject in social science research for the past two decades. While the most prominent issue regarding indigenous communities was the movement by the Hill Tracts communities against discriminatory actions by the Bangladesh Army towards Chittagong Hill Tracts people (Chakma 2001; Guhathakurta 2004), the issues surrounding indigenous communities of the plains or riverine regions, known as *Shomotol*,<sup>1</sup> have also gained a considerable amount of attention. Mandis are one of the indigenous communities living in *Shomotol* who have been subservient to the State Government and its discriminatory rules since the British period (Cooper 1992). The major loss for the Mandi group was losing their land property to Government forestry projects and through application of laws (Gain 1989; Cooper 1992). The Bengali settlers who took control over Mandi lands both under the Government of East Pakistan and subsequently Bangladesh also intensified the problem. The result was migration of Mandis to different cities in the country.

My research is premised on this historical backdrop. It is an extension of my previous research, which covered the causes and effects of the migration of Mandi women from Tangail and Mymensingh regions (North East Bangladesh) to Dhaka who were recruited in the city beauty parlours (Gulrukh 2003, 2004). My previous research traced Mandi people's history in relation to their "minority" status in the country with particular focus on Mandi women's experience in migration to Dhaka City. In this study I build on my previous research since I believe that the history of Mandi women's community can be even better understood if it is incorporated within the deeply troubling issues of Mandi migrants.

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<sup>1</sup> *Shomotol* in Bengali is plain land. In research it has been referred as people or community living in non-hilly regions of the country. The word also refers to riverine land. Studies have used the word to describe communities living either close to rivers or forest (See Guhathakurta 2002, Ahmed and Chowdhury 2003).

I also noted that the emotional responses and the cosmopolitan experiences of the migrant beauty workers have been perceived in a special way by the local community members (Mandi settlements in different parts of the country) and have influence over the non-urban families. This group of women who had been providing major financial support to the communities living in the villages had their own network and communications that contributed to the formation of their urban Mandi community. It became apparent to me that this interaction between urban and rural families has led to the change in Mandi culture. Gender and kin relations, matrilineal property distribution in the families were affected by urban patriarchal Bengali culture. The situation led the Mandi families living in the city to experience class discrimination in a complex manner. Even though they have been a part of working class communities in the city, Mandi families living in the villages perceive city dwellers as upper class. Class difference has been in Mandi communities in the villages too, but the migration process has intensified the discriminatory system. These changes in Mandi culture both in urban and rural families stimulated my interest to know more about Mandi beauty workers' everyday life, relationships and bonds in the urban community. By focusing on the personal, family and community responses to questions related to these key factors of gender, class, kinship and matrilineity, how can the after-migration life of Mandi beauty workers be understood and how can attention to these issues bring out a clearer picture of the micro-processes at the heart of wage market politics?

The issue of women entering the wage economy is not a recent one, and research has examined the different kinds of discriminatory situations experienced by women workers over the past several decades in Bangladesh (Mohiuddin 2004; Halim 2001). While the general experience of Mandi beauty workers could be included in this research framework, their specific situation is different from that of Bengali labourers. Migration to, and participation in, wage markets has an impact on both patrilineal and matrilineal communities, however, in matrilineal communities the changing relationship to production creates significant dissonance.

Global capital has been gaining profit over local resources, and the socio-political situations in the respective areas are formed, as well as controlled, by the changing economic forces of the global capital market (Giddens 1990; Desai 2007). In the name of

development, multinational corporations (MNCs) have influenced the centralized economic system to maximize their profits (Rahman and Wiest 2003). The expansion of the fashion and beauty industry (Black 2006), garment industry (Rahman and Wiest 2003; Mohiuddin 2004; Mossman 2006), different development projects of the MNC's all over the world on forestry, environment, poverty reduction (Shiva 2000) have been parts of the globalization project. This structural process has victimized Mandis, along with many other minority communities in Bangladesh. My research is an effort to give a closer look at the globalization process and its overall impact on indigenous communities.

Mandi men and women started migrating to Dhaka and many other cities in Bangladesh after the state reform policy in 1980 (Parveen 2005). Their entrance into the Dhaka wage labour market has resulted in their absorption by the capitalist economy; feminisation of labour, reforms made to their urban communities, and has affected their role in daily livelihood strategies. All of these issues require detailed observation.

Having the above questions in mind, I organize my present study around the changing political economy of Mandi beauty workers' community in the *Kalachandpur* area of Dhaka City, Bangladesh. Building upon an examination of the political economy of matrilineal societies, this study among the Mandi is an attempt to understand everyday life experiences of Mandi beauty workers in the city. It is an attempt to understand the role of Mandi women's agency – how a group of Mandi women decide their lives through collective decisions and survive in situations contrary to their interests, and how Mandi beauty workers who are living under socio-political subordination perceive their lot, and whether their perceptions are helping them to gain some autonomy in the non-matrilineal urban culture.

#### THE ETHNOGRAPHIC SETTING

The Mandi society (approximately 64,280 according to a 1991 census (Ahmed and Chowdhury 2003: 230), is an indigenous society whose traditional area of habitation has been the Northeast plain area of Bangladesh. Mandi people, generally known as Garo, are one of the two indigenous (*Adivasi*) matrilineal societies in Bangladesh. They are a matrilineal community whose traditional practices include the inheritance of property through the female line. The more republican-style leadership of the community



had always asserted a certain degree of autonomy and independence from the dominant agrarian kingdoms of the Bengal region from pre-colonial times. It is assumed that the community did not preclude certain forms of symbiotic exchanges for mutual benefit at that time. The political, socio-economic and cultural changes initiated by British conquest and rule, including changes in land tenure policies, missionization, urbanization, clearing and reclamation of forest lands, and cash crop cultivation, led to the gradual erosion of traditional Mandi economic and cultural practices, changing their traditional practices (*ibid*: 232; Gain 1995: 12-18). These changes and erosion of the traditional Mandi means of production and lifestyles often led to frequent rebellions against the British (Bhattacharjee 1978: 104). These transformations only increased with independence from Britain, as well as under the newer economic policies pursued in postcolonial Bangladesh.

The more cautious state-controlled economic policies of the newly independent state of East Pakistan gave way to increasing economic liberalization and commercialization with the emergence of the independent state of Bangladesh in 1971. Earlier changes, coupled with the rapid pace of transformation resulting from these newer economic policies, have led to the increasing alienation from, and exploitation of, traditional forestlands, including lands that traditionally belonged to the Mandis (the disintegration of Mandi culture under different rule will be discussed in detail in Chapter Three). This led to the increasing displacement, migration and pauperization of peasant and indigenous communities, including the Mandi. More importantly, these transformations had a significant impact on the traditional matrilineal practices of the Mandi household economy, and on gender and kin relations. The effects of this alienation from forestlands were especially difficult for the increasingly displaced and proletarianized Mandi women, many of whom were forced to migrate to urban centers such as Dhaka and Chittagong in search of employment.

Mandi women began to migrate to Dhaka in search of a living by working on a contractual basis in the city's beauty parlours. Beauty parlours are an entrepreneurial venture for Dhaka's metropolitan middle classes, established as the informal occupation of a small member of middle class housewives. Hence, beauty parlours were rarely found in Dhaka in the early 1970s, but since the mid-1990s almost every middle class

residential area has at least one beauty parlour. Mandi women have been an integral part of the beauty parlour business since its inception.<sup>2</sup> Presently, almost eighty-five percent of the women working in the beauty parlours in Dhaka City are from the Mandi community (Gulrukh 2003: 21). Mandis designate female members as heirs to the family property and assume much of the parental responsibility, hence it is not surprising that they are the ones to search for and find alternative means of livelihood.

Within this backdrop, the study will focus on the period from 1975 to 2006, as it was during this period that we see the emergence and establishment of the beauty parlours employing Mandi women in Dhaka City. The study will focus mainly on one of the urban Mandi communities, Kalachandpur, located in the northwest part of Dhaka City (see Figure 1). However, other urban Mandi communities are also addressed to some extent, namely those in Mirpur, Dhanmondi, Gulshan, Banani, Uttara, Baridhara, Shantinagar, Malibagh, Ajimpur, Lalbagh, Mohammadpur, and Lalmatia of Dhaka City (see Figure 2). These are the areas where most of the beauty parlours are located and where some of the beauty workers' communities have been established. It is significant that most of these areas are also well known for having a high concentration of Bengali upper middle class residents.

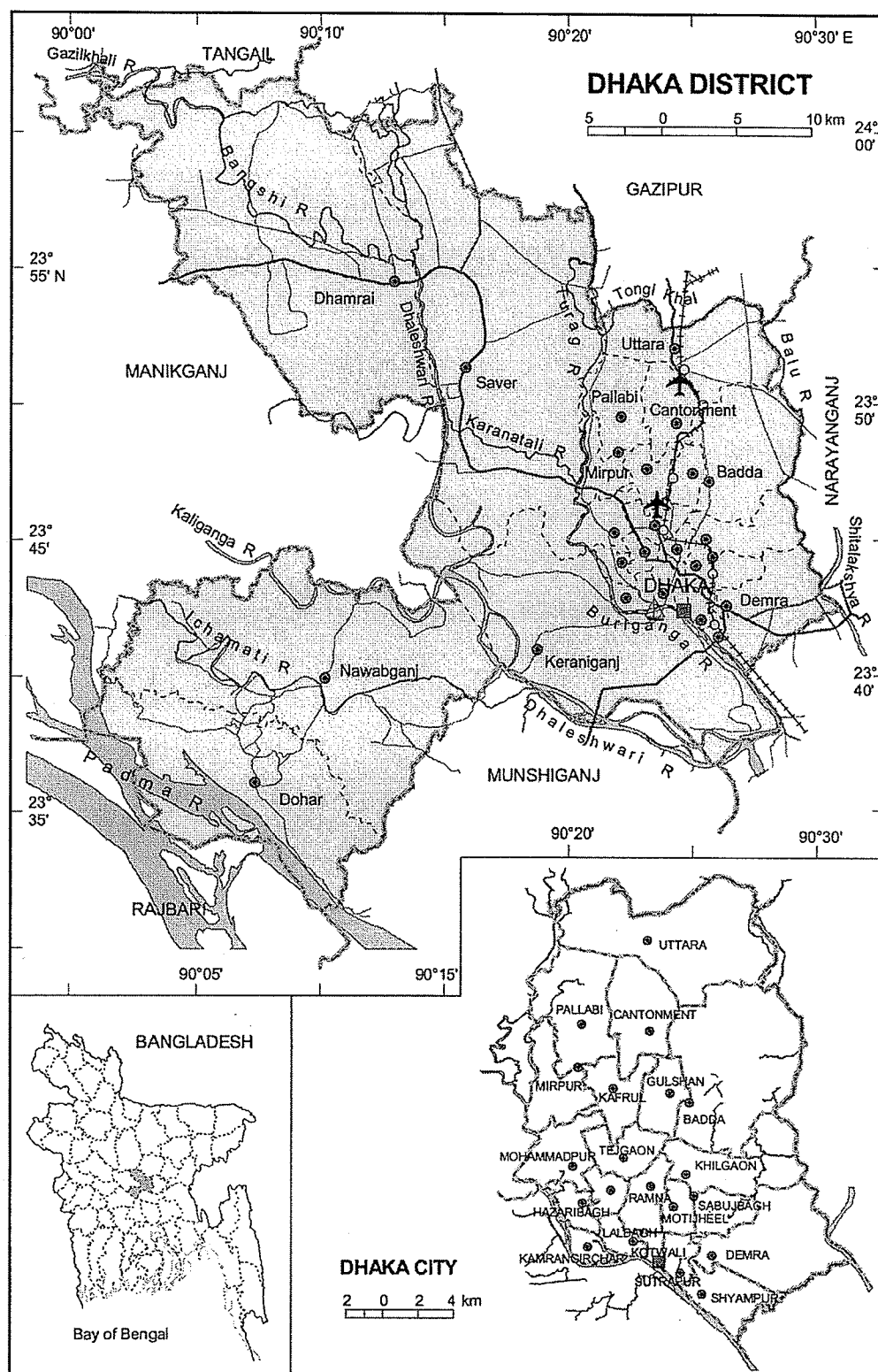
#### **SIGNIFICANCE OF THE RESEARCH**

As a field of scholarly investigation, the history of gender disparity in indigenous communities is not as old as many other histories of discrimination in social science. Anthropologists as early as Mead and Malinowski researched indigenous communities but studied gender in a broader social context and considered its relationship to socially ascribed roles (Barnard and Spencer 1996:584, 585). However, the scholarship of the past three decades in anthropology (as well as many other disciplines like history, sociology and political science) has made it clear that the centrality of indigenous women's issues lies in its relation to gender history under postcolonial states (Ahmed and Chowdhury: 2003: 228). This research is premised on the history of the relationship between the State and Mandi matrilineal community in post-colonial Bangladesh.

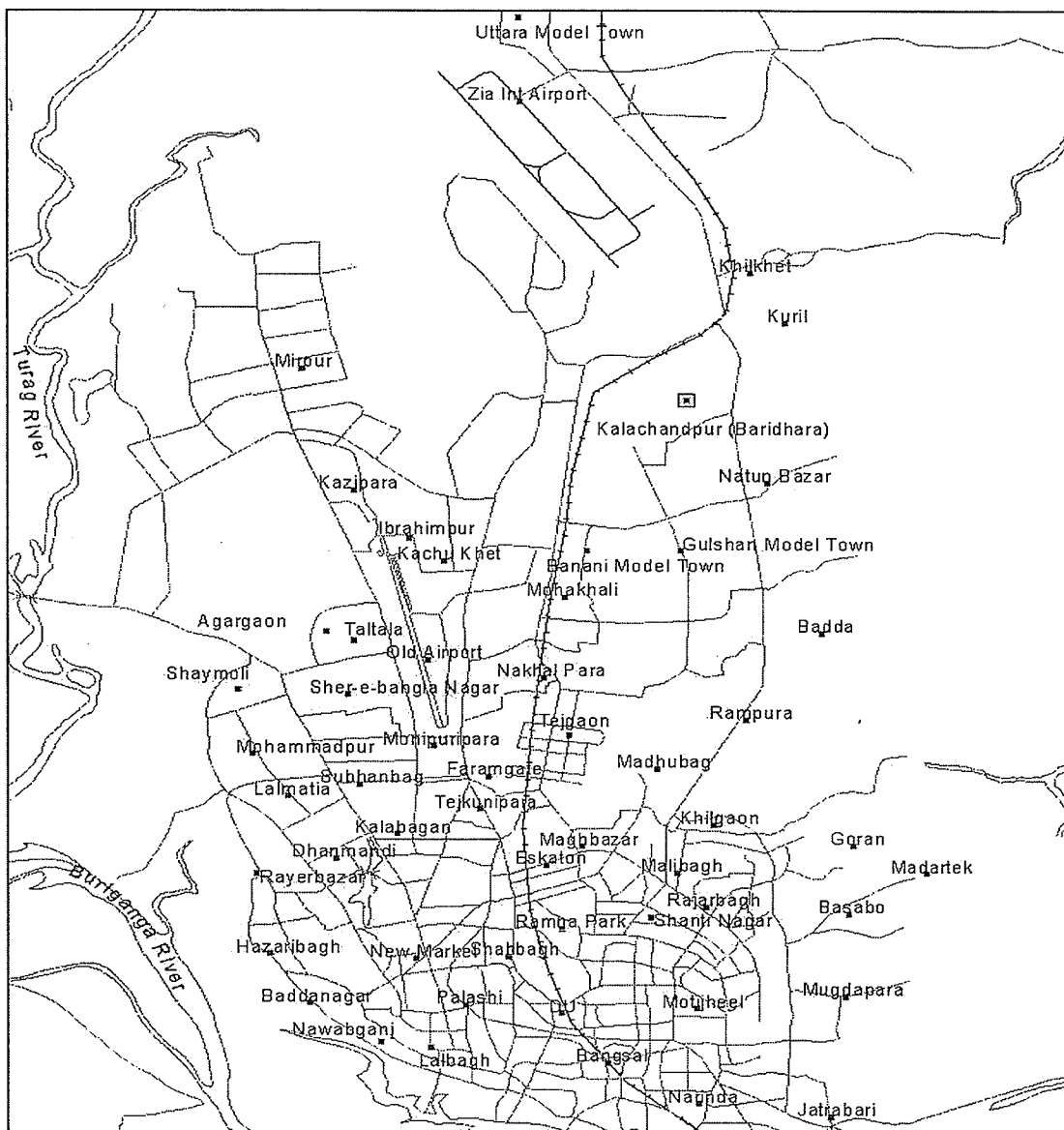
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<sup>2</sup> It has been illustrated in previous research on Mandis (Gulrukh 2004:7) that Bengali consumers perceive Mandi phenotypic features to be similar to those of Chinese beauticians, who are deemed to be the pioneers of this profession and are believed to be experts.

**Figure 1: Map of Dhaka District, Dhaka City, and Bangladesh**  
 Source: [http://www.dcdhaka.gov.bd/map\\_dhaka.gif](http://www.dcdhaka.gov.bd/map_dhaka.gif)



**Figure 2: Map of Research Area Kalachandpur □, Dhaka, Bangladesh.**  
**Source: IWM (Institution of Water Modeling), Dhaka, Bangladesh.**



The British left South Asia in 1947. However, the history of internal colonialism under the Pakistan state continued over Bangladesh until 1971. The history of internal colonialism still continues and this time the victims are the indigenous communities under the Bangladesh state. Documenting history of discrimination against the Mandi community from the colonial period to present day Bangladesh has been a part of the study.

The cosmopolitan labour market in post-independence Bangladesh was established by the rapid expansion of industrialization, the invasion of aid agencies and the formation of labour-intensive state policy (Siddiqui 2001). The demands of the labour market led to the recruitment and reproduction of different categories of workers. In the Mandi case in Bangladesh, the dissonance rests with the masculinist discourses of the State, Islam and the capitalist market. The study aims to understand the impact of these institutions over Mandi beauty workers life.

Through this research I have tried to understand the experiences of the Mandi beauty workers living in Kalachandpur area with an effort to understand how these women's groups interact with each other in different situations, interpret their own experiences and decide their lives. Even though Mandi women came to be the focal point of discussion in the research, the research as a whole has been an attempt to understand the social and political role of both Mandi men and women in the city. I have tried to understand the impact of urban settlement on the whole community. Starting my research with women workers in the community was especially effective because Mandi political economy is largely defined by beauty work as a profession or an occupation. My intention in this project has been to highlight the experiences of these beauty worker women.

Agency indicates the capacity of men and women who, facing contrary situations, try to break down or negotiate with the new power relations in the society (Ortner 1996: 1-3). Through a focus on agency we can understand the strategy of struggle of these women in everyday life. While doing my fieldwork my notebooks were filled with my feelings of astonishment to see these beauty workers show the most positive attitude and hope for the best result in the worst situations of their lives, how they have been practicing their sisterhood and strengthening their will to challenge many troubles they

face. I wanted to analyze my experience of their practice of subjectivity, autonomy and their coping capacity; consequently, the issue of agency became one of the central focuses in the research.

#### **RESEARCH PROBLEM**

The research at its heart is the processual understanding of the sociocultural structures that produce and constrain mode of agency among Mandi beauty workers, and how gender and kinship become important components to it (Mandi beauty workers agency).

The problem is organized under several research questions:

- What is matrilineal agency in the Mandi context? How much is it a response to Mandi beauty worker's migration to the city? What was the nature of agency amongst Mandi women before migration?
- To what extent is Mandi women's agency related to the changing political economy of Mandi urban communities? How does women's agency affect the economic situation of Mandi families living in the rural areas?
- How much is understanding of gender and kinship in local Mandi community being affected by the formation of urban agency? How extensive is the impact on the Kalachandpur Mandi people's life under the same conditions?
- How aware are the beauty workers of the formation of the agency, and how are they trying to identify their future life choices out of the present situation when surrounded by Bengali patrilineal families?

The research problem is contextualized through discussions in the following.

#### **STUDY LIMITATIONS**

There are several limitations of this study. One is the fact that research time in the field was limited for the investigation of such complex themes. The nature of my research required intensive fieldwork inside the community, but the amount of time I actually had was not enough to come to know the whole community. I was always in a rush to establish rapport with whoever was around me and always felt my job to be very purposive.

Another limitation of the study is that the data I collected may not be representative of the larger Mandi community. My sample of interviewees was opportunistic, and certainly not random. I myself knew that for a broader understanding of the Mandi community in Dhaka it would have been good to have interviewed Mandi women and men living outside Kalachandpur, i.e., in other places in Dhaka. The information presented in the study is insufficient to reflect the variation across Mandi urban communities in Bangladesh or even in Dhaka City. However, the study does raise issues worthy of further examination across a wider urban context, including Mandi women's employment beyond beauty parlours.

In a broad frame this study discuss about the problems and negotiations of indigenous women workers in the city which, like many other Bengali and indigenous women workers in the city, involves issues like prostitution, violence against women, women and child trafficking. Given the limited scope of the study, these important issues could not be addressed. This is another limitation of the research.

#### **ORGANIZATION OF THESIS**

The study is presented in six chapters. Chapter One relates the aim of the thesis, research queries, ethnographic setting, methodology, study limitation, participant profile and overview of the thesis organization. Chapter Two describes my experience in fieldwork and the description of the study area. Chapter Three consists of theoretical understanding, and review of the literature. This chapter brings out the sociopolitical background of Mandi peoples in Bangladesh and the impact of institutions like the State, Islam, Christianity and systems of globalization over Mandi locality. In the theoretical part of this chapter I also discuss matriliney and agency from an anthropological perspective. Chapter Four consists of a discussion of the formation of Mandi women's agency in Kalachandpur community in the context of their initial experience after coming to Dhaka. The discussion in this chapter involves the historical background of Mandi people's migration to the city from the late 1970s to the present time and their present experience at work in beauty parlours. This chapter focuses mainly on Mandi beauty workers public life. Chapter Five contains a discussion of Mandi women's formation of agency within the family and community. It is about Mandi beauty workers' life at home. Most importantly this chapter sheds light on gender relation in the Kalachandpur Mandi

household. Chapter Six reviews the principal research findings and ends with a discussion of future research possibilities.



## Chapter Two

# METHODOLOGY AND FIELDWORK

Ethnography, like fiction, no matter its pretence to present a self-contained narrative or cultural whole, remains incomplete and detached from the realms to which it points. (Visweswaran 1996: 1)

The anthropologist has to be also a novelist able describe the life of a whole society. And I knew that I became an anthropologist right after the moment I decided my research field. I knew that was the beginning of my being inside a room with layers of identities involving my class, religion, language, nationality and above all my “outsider” status. The methods used in fieldwork make up one of the central dynamics shaping anthropological research. The experiences I have had in the research tell me that the “room” I have mentioned with layers of identities decides the ultimate method that the researcher is going to use in the field. I observed, I participated in my research community life, and I tried to state the plot of my novel in my field notebook with a constant struggle of writing something that I did not really know – things that are continuously changing according to the situation in the field. I wrote, I erased and wrote again. I remembered Sarah C. White:

Penelope, the wife of Odysseus, was troubled by suitors during her husband’s absence. She announced that she would marry none of them until the web she was weaving was completed. Each night she then unpicked part of the work she had done during the day. This, above all, is my experience of research. With each stitch what was done earlier unravels, as these new findings show the further questions that needed to be asked, in order to understand more fully the material already gathered. (White 1992: 5-6)

This chapter contains my field experience that influenced my research methods. I describe in general terms how I saw my research community during my fieldwork, I sketch the history of the community in relation to my research objectives, and finally and

most importantly, I address issues around the participants or interviewees of my research who helped me through this difficult process.

#### RESEARCH AND FIELDWORK PLAN

As a first step to begin my fieldwork in Dhaka, Bangladesh, I wanted to meet my friends who helped my earlier project. *Nokmandi*, the Mandi Welfare Association in Dhaka, had supported me all through my earlier research by providing basic information about locations and about people, and also guiding me in different situations. This time the organization also helped me a great deal, and I was welcomed from the beginning to interview staff members working there. My intention was to find their migration story – how and in what situations they decided to come to Dhaka. After a few days of interviewing one of the staff members introduced me to his wife who has her own beauty parlour in Lalmatia, Dhaka. This friendly woman offered me to visit her parlour where I met some beauty workers and also found information about Kalachandpur and some other small Mandi communities situated in different places in Dhaka City. I took a tour to most of the areas and found Kalachandpur as the place to start my research. The primary reason is that it is the largest of Mandi communities, and secondly, I was introduced to a beauty worker in Kalachadpur who was my very first interviewee. The owner of the parlour in Lalmatia took me to Kalachandpur and introduced me to one of her close friends who works in one of the very reputed parlours in the area. After my first day of meeting with that Mandi family, I spent two more days to understand Kalachandpur as a community. I spent my first two days in the field in crowded places like markets, rickshaw<sup>3</sup> stands, and bus stands, and tried to talk to people about the history of Kalachandpur community and the perspective of common people in the area.

During my three-month fieldwork in Kalachandpur (January to March 2006), I made a few visits to Mymensingh, Madhupur and Durgapur, where most of the Mandi villages of the country are located. My aim was to understand the interaction between rural and urban families. Here again *Nokmandi* guided me to find Mandi beauty workers' families. In those visits I focused only on interviewing family members living in villages,

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<sup>3</sup> Rickshaw is the most common transport in Bangladesh. The vehicle is attached to a bicycle, and is basically like a large tricycle. It is designed to carry a maximum of two passengers and one driver.

and also with other Mandi people living in village, to learn about their ideas on migration, the beauty worker profession, and Mandi society in Dhaka.

#### ETHICAL COMMITMENT AND INFORMED CONSENT

As an anthropologist I believe one of the most important tasks prior to fieldwork should be the preparation for proper accountability to the research subjects. My preparation started with the approval of The Joint-Faculty Research Ethics Board (JFREB), University of Manitoba. Before going to the fieldwork I translated the JFREB approved consent form to Bengali so that all my participants could understand clearly the purpose of the project (see Appendix A).

At the beginning of all of my interviews and group discussions I explained my research objectives and reviewed the consent form before any participant signed it. I made sure that everything written in the form was properly understood by the research participants. People who were not directly connected to my research but contributed to my field notes with their in deep insights into Mandi political economy (for example, the Coordinator of *Nokmandi*, Ranjit Ruga, or the Director of Bangladesh Indigenous People's Forum, Sanjeeb Drong) gave me their permission to use their actual names. Apart from these two participants, all names of interviewees mentioned in this thesis are referred to with pseudonyms. Pseudonyms were assigned to protect the anonymity and confidentiality of the informants. There is no intentional correspondence between a pseudonym and any living person.

While interacting with women and taking notes on their personal lives, I tried my best to adhere to the code of confidentiality; I kept all written information anonymous in my field notes. However, in several group discussions in *Nokmandi*, Bangladesh Indigenous People's Forum, and Mandi family gatherings in Kalachandpur, information was openly shared with the prior consent of participants. The open discussion added a challenging approach where I tried to answer all questions asked by the participants. I believed the flow of information should be equal, and ensured that the interaction between me and the research participants was not one-sided. I tried to be an honest and respectful learner in the process. As an outsider it was my duty to establish a non-exploitative relation with every research participant. However, I had to carry through all my research the painful question whether my gradually growing personal relationships

with participants would allow me to adhere to appropriate ethical guidelines while seeking required research information. Anthropologists have found the process difficult (Harrell-Bond 1976; Gow 2002; Colic-Peisker 2004). This situation of participant observation is complex. On one side the process provides “an intimate knowledge of face to face communities and groups” (Marcus 1995: 99) and on the other hand the intimacy between researcher and research participants stalls the journey “by questions of ethics and one’s own selfish interests, threatened by politics and the unknowability of social facts, and compromised by efforts to remain both engaged and neutral” (Kelly 2004: 16).

It is from this grounding, I believe, that the foundation of accountability to the research participants becomes stronger. After the major part of the interviewing process was done, in an open discussion with parlour workers I gave them my word that I would translate my work into Bengali and deliver them some copies. Several times I tried to share my field notes with some of the participants and wanted to get their comments on my write-ups on Mandi communities. I received different types of comments and felt that my research truly was based on equal participation. I did this to acknowledge their participation in the work as well.

Last but not least, interviews recorded during fieldwork were transcribed and recorded tapes were destroyed after transcription. While doing my fieldwork, every week I sent my field notes and recorded interviews to be stored in a safe place away from my field home. Upon my request, my notes and recorded interviews were locked for protection. While writing my field notes, I used pseudonyms so that if notes or recordings were lost or stolen in the field, the data would be protected. However, nothing like that happened, and I believe I had successfully protected information I received from research participants, recorded interviews and written field notes that only I read, analysed and used as data for my research project.

#### **DESCRIPTION OF THE FIELD AREA**

At the beginning of my research it was difficult for me to decide on my exact field area since I did not know precisely where it was located. I was generally aware of a few Mandi communities in Dhaka, and after I made several contacts among the Mandi communities in the central city, I was given directions to Kalachandpur, which is approximately 9 to 10 kilometres north of the central Dhaka commercial zone (i.e., the

Motijheel commercial area), which is half a kilometre from Baridhara Residential area (see Figure 2). Geographically, it is an area of 1.15 square kilometres<sup>4</sup> with more than 6,000 inhabitants. Of the inhabitants living in the area, there are approximately 3,500 to 4,000 Mandi, 1,000 Bengali Christians, and the rest (between 1,000 and 1,500) are Muslim Bengali families.

It was difficult for me to get information from Dhaka City Corporation about Kalachadpur. When I tried to get information from the city Ward commissioner (for example, I wanted to know since when Kalachandpur was officially registered as an area in city corporation documents, information regarding the number of people living there, what the area boundaries of Kalachandpur are, how many people are listed as voters, etc.), I was informed that it is a four-month process (my experience, however, is that it is more than a four-month process because my application received no response and I am still waiting!). Therefore, my sketch of the locality is based on the knowledge of inhabitants, which I consider to be more authentic and pragmatic, and methodologically appropriate for the nature of my research. When I first made inquiries about the community, I realized that most of the people from the Muslim community do not know about the development of this Mandi community.

Although hidden from view, the area is just behind the most high-class locale of the city, Baridhara. Baridhara also is known as the diplomatic zone, since most of the foreign embassies and many international hotels are located in the area. Most expensive private schools, banks, multinational companies, shopping malls, and beauty parlours are located in Baridhara, as well as in Gulshan and Banani, two other diplomatic and upper-class residential zones. Baridhara was established in the early 1980s. Kalachadpur Mandi community was founded out of the rising needs of Christian workers in the Baridhara residential and business community. Mandi people who had accepted Christianity as their religion naturally got preference for jobs. Mandi women living in the community work as cooks, maidservants, and housekeepers in the embassy offices and homes of foreign ambassadors. Ninety percent of Mandi women living in the area work as beauty workers since the three biggest and top-ranked beauty parlours are situated in the area. I was told during the interview that these beauty parlours not only pay high salaries but also are

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<sup>4</sup> Institute of Water Modeling (IWM), 2000, ArcView GIS Statistics, IWM Dhaka, Bangladesh.

providing special training now.<sup>5</sup> Male members of the community mostly work as security guards, gardeners, housekeepers, and cooks working in the same places. Given the relatively favourable work environment, the question arises why Mandi Christian people are coming into the area and not Bengali Christians. My study suggests that a higher proportion of Mandi Christians are more marginalized and lower class, whereas the percentage of Bengali Christian lower class is less than that of the Mandis in the country. Bengali Christians also have greater opportunity to work in many other Bengali communities as well as have better opportunity for education. Mandis have reduced access to work opportunities and education because of their ethnic identity.

My first impression of the community came from the sudden contrast between Baridhara and Kalachadpur that comes into sight just after one takes a right turn from the Pakistani Embassy lane. Kalachadpur is a 25-minute rickshaw ride from Embassy lane. After the turn there are no organized high-rise apartment communities or hedged gardens with security guards and spacious parking lots.

The entrance to Kalachandpur is a stereotypic community setting like many other small city suburb communities of Bangladesh – very narrow streets, with small shops on both sides. When the directions become clear to one, the area then seems more familiar. The area starts with the local bazaar. It is a small place surrounded by different kinds of shops, from grocery to low cost furniture, clothes, shoes, etc. The shopkeepers are mostly Bengalis. The shops were built beside the narrow alley, which is the entry way to Kalachandpur area. After more than 25 shops the alley turns two different ways: one way goes to the open vegetable, fish and meat market, and the other goes to the residential area.

After a twenty-minute walk from the bazaar one can see the main residential area. I asked a young boy of approximately thirteen years of age to show me the way; he directed me to the east with a question “are you looking for the Mandi “*matri*” area?”<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> One of my interviewees told me, “Now-a-days, certificates are important. They give us training conducted by famous beauticians from India. When our customers know that we have training from Bollywood beauticians, they trust us.”

<sup>6</sup> Later I came to know that, amongst the Bengali Muslims, it is a joking matter that, in Mandi communities, men do not work and everything is mother-centered. *Matri* in Bengali means related to mother.

The residential section starts with an open and more spacious area than the local bazaar area. There are rows of houses built one after another without any boundaries or walls in between them, and this is where most of the families have one-bedroom apartments. In some places I found three- or four-bedroom houses shared by three families. I was informed that they experience scarcity of electricity and water, and I saw the very poor sewerage system throughout the area. I came to see how many households fit into such areas, and the density of living. Consequently, the relationship between Bengalis and Mandis is not particularly positive. I noticed the class differences between Mandi families. There are Mandi families living in the area for ten years or more. These families have more power and authority over the newcomers.

Some informal interviews of Mandi men and women living in Dhaka (mostly related with the Mandi Welfare Association and Bangladesh Indigenous People's Forum) revealed that the Kalachandpur area became a Mandi community in the early 1980s (before that it was a barren field and no one was living there), a little before the time when the Mandi community in their village areas began losing their lands due to the Government's extensive forestry projects (Timm 1991: 24). This was the time when the city was expanding with a large number of migrant labourers from other parts of the country seeking jobs in the city. The actual history of deprivation starts from the independence of the Bangladesh State, when the Mandis realized that there was no consideration of their rights in the Constitution (Mohsin 2003: 49), and when the continuation of the Enemy Property Ordinance of 1965<sup>7</sup> was used to confiscate Mandi property (Timm 1991: 25) – yet another reason for the sudden loss of Mandi resources. The consequence was Mandi migration to the city, as I noted from an earlier period of research (Gulrukh 2004). Mandi women started to come to Dhaka as maidservants to the Bengali middle class homes in the city (Nokmandi Publication-1 1994) as “innocent” and “trusted” servants in the late 1970s (Gulrukh 2003: 9-11, 15-17). While tracking the ways in which class differences came to the urban Mandi community in Kalachandpur, I realized that the scenario is not very different from that of the Bengali community. Mandi

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<sup>7</sup> Enemy Property Ordinance also known as Vested Property Act was one of the reasons of India-Pakistan war in 1965. According to the law, the Pakistan government confiscates the property of the enemy community. After the war ended, some properties were given back to the Pakistanis. However, Mandis were victimized. Even after 1971, when Bangladesh became a country separate from Pakistan, Bangladesh took no steps to release Mandi property confiscated during 1964-1965. (Timm 1991:21, 25-27).

working women in the family (and sometimes men) need an extra caretaker to look after their child; most of the time the newcomers are family members – another person back home who lost their land and needs a place to stay until they can find a job in a beauty parlour or some other place. Some of the families bring their aged parents. In many of the Mandi families women are the sole earning members of the community and the husbands take care of the children. Class-consciousness and the adaptation to Bengali attitudes in the Mandi community were things I had to remember all along as a “salutary” reminder. The increasing authority of the state over Mandi life was evident, as was the increasing poverty. The gradual involvement of Mandi women in the city labour market penetrated the communal economic structure they used to practice back in the village and gave birth to a more pronounced class hierarchy between Mandi newcomers and the Mandi host families in Kalachandpur. However, the dynamics of class division became more complex with the formation of women’s agency, and that is where I started to gain my understanding of the community.

Mandi-Bengali relationships inside the community are hierarchical as well as complicated in many different aspects. First of all, coming from the majority population, Bengali Muslims dominate both Bengali Christians and Mandis. Inside the community most of the landlords of the houses and the shopkeepers are Bengali Muslims. Furthermore, Mandi Christian families suffer from a sense of inferiority because they are from a *matri*-cultural society and do not know how to play a part in the predominant patriarchal arrangement. Twenty percent of Mandi men try to find alternative ways to show their authority over their wives, for example, by beating children while taking care of them, returning to their villages and selling land to bring money to the city. These men hardly form an easy relationship with the Bengali men. The substantial social organization differences between the Mandi and Bengali peoples in Bangladesh explain why it is not easy for Mandi men and women to accommodate to Bengali culture. As a result of these complex differences, Mandis look forward to a generation of authentic non-Bengali Mandi culture. Many of the Mandi parents are sending their children back to the local school where they can be closer to their Mandi traditions.

Apart from visiting with Mandi in their residences, I had the opportunity to visit hostels run by beauty parlours. These make up another category of Mandi residence that



produces class differences between Mandi families living in the rented one-bedroom houses and those living in the hostels. The Bengali owners of the beauty parlours rent two or three apartments in the 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> floor of six-storied apartment houses located at the edge of the Kalachandpur area. They call them “parlour hostels” and allocate rooms for single unmarried beauty workers. Hostel dwellers consider themselves similar to high-class apartment-living Bengalis and usually do not mix with the married Mandi beauty workers living in central Kalachandpur unless they are relatives. Married Mandis and other members of Kalachandpur, on the other hand, think that these women living in the hostel are a curse to the community since they are adopting the city life too fast and are leaving the traditional Mandi culture.<sup>8</sup> However, over all these dissonances, female economic activities were evident all over the community, and I was stimulated to track the ways in which agency was taking shape between individuals.

#### GAINING ACCESS – CHAMELI’S HOUSE

Ethnographic research involves prolonged interaction with others, yet anthropological discourse conveys the understanding gained in terms of distance, both special and temporal. (Callaway 1992: 30, quoted in Amit 2000: 3)

Gaining access to the field was the most difficult part of my fieldwork. As a middle class Bengali woman I had access to anywhere in Kalachandpur. However, from the beginning my “high class” status/authority did not help me to gain trust amongst the community people. I experienced various shadowy looks that made me feel like an alien and almost invisible. People did have some curiosity about my appearance and work, but first gazes led me to believe that their first impression of me was not good. Chameli was my first interviewee.

For the first one week after my introduction to Chameli’s family I realized that I became an unacceptable burden for them. The head of the family, Chameli, who was six

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<sup>8</sup> My understanding of the situation was different than that of the Mandi people in Kalachandpur. The rate of migration is higher since the late 1990s. In Dhaka City I saw a few parlour hostels in Dhanmondi area where both single and married families are bound to live in the same room. These are the top floors of the parlours made for beauty workers. Both males and females are allowed to live there. When I asked about this, one of the interviewee told me they have no choice, that it is convenient to live close to work, and that they do not have enough money to rent houses for their families in this part of the city. The living conditions are not only unhygienic in those hostels but also allow other people to refer to Mandi beauty workers as “sluts”. In the hostels of Kalachandpur only women are allowed. However, I saw a few married women living there with their children because they could not bring their husband or families to the city.

months pregnant at the time, returned from her work. I saw the irritated and tired look that she gave me. The family had two children, one seven and the other five years of age, and both of them were very reluctant to even say hello. The boy who was closest to his mother was anxious and upset, thinking that I was taking her mother away from them.<sup>9</sup> One evening he even expressed his thoughts to his sister, saying that “she is going to take away another evening.” Initially I went there in the evening so that I could meet Chameli and start talking to her, but she usually came late. While waiting for Chameli, I tried to communicate with the children, her husband Robert, and also the private tutor of the children. Sometimes none of them were at home and I waited outside most of the time talking to the shopkeeper of the grocery shop situated opposite to Chameli’s house. My effort to become close to Chameli’s family and at least make time for one interview with Chameli was in vain initially. Most of the time, I had to sit in between a quarrelling couple. I had to try to speak with them [the couple] while managing to contend with the children. In some of my initial meeting with Chameli and her family, the situation got worse since my visit brought some unwanted guests to their place. These people were mostly Mandi men living in Kalachandpur area and were invited by Chameli’s husband, Robert. All these people wanted to chat with a “Canadian researcher” who is a Bengali Muslim and has a shaper nose than the Mandis.<sup>10</sup> These guests were invitees by Chameli’s husband and his efforts to bring honour to the family.<sup>11</sup> Chameli had to host the guests. Certainly she had good reasons to dislike me. After a whole week of tiring evenings in Chameli’s house, I gave up hope of interviewing Chameli. It was then that Julee called me, saying Chameli was inviting me to her house for lunch that Sunday. I was invited along with some male community members who were known in the community as “educated” and “wise”. Chameli’s friend Ruba and her cousin Dina also

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<sup>9</sup> The boy, the eldest, repeated several times expressions heard from his parents. Pointing at me, in his Mandi language he shouted something like “You Bengali bitch, get out of my land.”

<sup>10</sup> To my surprise, the nose issue came up several times while I interviewed Mandi people in Kalachandpur community. “You have a beautiful sharp nose”, commented a beauty worker from the parlour hostel. I felt like an Aryan invader inside the Dravidian small houses!

<sup>11</sup> Several times Robert told me that he is unemployed and he does not have any guilt about that. Traditionally Mandi men do not consider official work important like Bengalis. It is important for Mandi men to bring honour to the family in different other ways, for example, his contribution in my research is bringing honour to him and his family. And that is why he considers himself more important than a Bengali man who goes to his office everyday and brings home money. For me, however, the statement came more as his sense of insecurity rather than his assertion of self pride.

joined the gathering. Ruba works in a beauty parlour and Dina is one of the housekeepers in the Malaysian ambassador's residence. I went to Chameli's place early and found that it was Chameli's son's birthday. I went back to the bazaar and bought a small cake and a toy helicopter. It was the first time the children in Chameli's house started communicating with me.<sup>12</sup> I played with them until other guests came and found that they by now had finally become somewhat fond of me. After a long lunch, the drinking party started. Mandis make rice beer at home, inside the house, that they call "*chu*". A ritual in every Mandi house is to offer beer to the guests and make them drink a full mug all in one time. Not being very fond of alcoholic beverages, I nonetheless realized that my spontaneous participation could make both of us (me and the Mandi hosts in the party) comfortable. With Dina and Ruba on both sides of me, I drank the full mug at one time. I had passed a critical test and from that time on I was permitted to stay in Chameli's house as a paying guest. I could never leave the thought out of my mind that I was playing the purposive role in the play.

Chameli and her husband Robert were married in 1998. They met each other when Chameli used to work in one of the parlours in Dhanmondi residential area and Robert worked as a security guard in a NGO office in Baridhara. Chameli left her old job and after their marriage moved to Kalachandpur where she has been receiving a better salary than the previous one; Robert left his job after Chameli's first raise in salary. When I started interviewing them, Chameli seemed angry because Robert did not try to find a job like Bengali men in the city, and he is not good at looking after children either. "The only thing he is good at is making *chu* and socializing with Mandis in the communities", Chameli said to me once. Robert's version is quite different. He believes that by not working he is maintaining the practice of Mandi cultures in his household, which is not maintained in many other houses in Kalachandpur community. He told me several times that Mandi men do not work a lot in the village. It is their duty to socialize and manage the household property, and he has been doing that properly. In addition, he said that for him "it is not an honour to work under Bengalis". When I met Robert's neighbour, a Bengali Christian family living next door, the women of the house said to me that Robert

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<sup>12</sup> Later Robert told me that they wanted the boy to behave on his birthday otherwise he would not get any gifts!

was fired from his job and was replaced by a Chakma<sup>13</sup> BA graduate in the post of both security guard and clerk. For a Mandi man the complexities and agonies of a male identity involving class, authority and professional lead roles seem more intense and diverse than those of Mandi women. The situation provides materials for examining growing complexities of gender relations inside the communities, a subject to be discussed in succeeding chapters.

### **A GENDERED FIELD**

Issues of gender in the field have been a very important component of ethnography. In different situations, how women in the field gain access, how they deal with issues like security and sexuality, or whether their experiences have been more difficult than that of male field workers – all these are issues recently discussed in ethnography and feminism (Bell, Jahan and Karim 1993). Ethnographers experience the pain of their privileged positions on the basis of class, education, race and gender, which adds another dimension to fieldwork. Vulnerability for a female ethnographer is more intense in the field since it is constructed and decided from the perspective of patriarchal social taboos, norms – particularly pertaining to gender and sexual relationship – believed and practised by people living in the researched community. As Golde says (1970: 5-6), female ethnographers have “more pressure to conform to local gender ascriptions than do male fieldworkers”. In this project the complexity also lies in the position of a female researcher like me who is studying female workers. I entered into the field as a privileged woman with intention to do research on lower class non-privileged beauty workers. All through the process I was painfully aware of all kinds of classed “rights” I had over them inside the Mandi community, yet in several situations I felt marginalized carrying my female identity. In a few cases my privileged identity did not even provide me enough privilege to talk to the woman of the house because the male member would not allow it. Again, I should say that after some initial difficulties my entrance in to many houses was easy only because I was woman. For example, I went to the women’s hostel and spoke to the girls without any difficulty.

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<sup>13</sup> Chakmas are one of the indigenous groups living in the hilly regions of Southern parts of the country. Later I found that it became a myth among the Mandis in the city that the percentage of educated peoples among the Chakmas is higher than other indigenous groups living in Dhaka City.

Traditionally in Bangladesh women have constraints on access over several components of everyday life. The range could be from education to mobility, from decision making in the home to birth control. Even though poverty has forced women in Bangladesh to come out of their domestic periphery, women's mobility is not accepted widely (Kabeer 1988). Even though both women in the cities and in the rural areas are going out mostly without *burkha*,<sup>14</sup> the concept of *purdah*<sup>15</sup> is being associated with women's social image and is viewed through a patriarchal lens (Kabeer 2001: viii). Therefore, presence of women in male dominant public spaces is considered provocative and offensive in most of the cases. Unlike many other indigenous women and Bengali women, Mandi women are considered (by Mandis) as braver and more capable of working outside their own cultural periphery. Despite this belief of Mandi people, in their urban community life I saw Mandi beauty workers suffer within their own household. The situation is not unexpected since the urban Muslim majority adheres to a patriarchal family structure.

I entered into Kalachandpur, my fieldwork with my middle class, educated, dominant majority member identity and, despite all these empowering attributes, I was marginalized as a woman in the field. I was reminded repeatedly that I am a woman and I need to be aware of my boundaries and spaces.

It started with my encounter with the Criminal Investigation Division (CID) police in Kalachandpur on the second day of my research. I was asked the purpose of my research and what I had done to that point. A man in civilian dress was not only asking me questions, but also followed me to my residence in the Dhanmondi area. State surveillance over common life is not something new in Bangladesh (Odhikar 2005, Human Rights Watch 2006; *Shomokal* (Dhaka) 2006), and in addition, my visit was during the time of the national election preparation during which time the political situation is commonly unstable. Later Robert informed me that he also had to answer a series of questions about my whereabouts in Kalachandpur. The police officer asked Robert whether I was living there alone or not, whether or not I was bringing any male

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<sup>14</sup> A veiled costume mainly worn by Muslim women to practice *purdah*.

<sup>15</sup> A concept and norm in Islam that woman should cover their body, stay inside the house, and speak and laugh silently. Woman should do this to be safe and secure inside the house and to take care of the household properly. It is an ideology that secludes women from public life.

companion, and also whether or not I had any relationship with him. The CID staff also threatened me by saying a woman should not walk around with unknown people in a much unknown area which might cause trouble. However, after the second meeting with this man, I never again saw him during my three month stay in the Kalachandpur area. His presence alerted me to the significance of my identity as a woman. I am convinced that I was noticed in the field area because I am a woman. Later I met an NGO staff member, Tara Shikdar, who was conducting a health care survey in the area. She told me that interrogation of female newcomers into the community was common, and that is why they were always carrying their ID card with them. She said, "we know that this is a routine dialogue between the police and us during election, but the approach and queries they have for women are rougher and more harassing than for men. It is worse when they come to the houses for interrogation where we go for our interviews and surveys."

Security was another issue that always reminded me of my gendered space in the field. During our evening tours to the houses I remember that Robert, Chameli's husband, was always cautious about avoiding certain areas he believed were not safe enough. Several times I myself had encountered drunken groups commenting on women walking in the street in the late night.

Even though my research has focussed on women's agenda, I have always found very useful guidelines to come from male members of the community. I believe the primary reason is their availability in the sense that most of the Mandi men were at home during the days and, even if they were not, they had no interest in supporting women in household work in the evening. Male members spent their times, as I saw during my fieldwork, enjoying *chu* and gossiping with friends. The secondary reason is their sexual interest in a single unmarried woman. Wherever I went to conduct interviews, I had to reveal my identity as a single unmarried Muslim woman coming from Canada in order to draw a line of difference and identify myself as similar or closer to a foreigner. It was easy for them to call me a brave Bengali slut who has persuaded Robert purposively. Sometimes they (Robert's Mandi friends) commented that he is lucky to have a "sharp nosed" around. Such comments were frequent and common for the first several weeks until some of Robert's friends found that I understood the Mandi language. My

interpretation was that their silence still did not replace their very patriarchal perspectives of a Bengali middle-class woman.

At the very beginning of my fieldwork when Chameli came home late, several times I chatted with Robert, and often the children's tutor joined us. Frequently I found myself vulnerable in these meetings, considering what the neighbours are thinking about my image, my safety and my purpose of being with the family. Due to my excitement of doing fieldwork I never seriously thought of my risk of being alone with two adult men (and two children) who are strong enough to assault me. However, after the first two weeks of interaction with Chameli, Robert and their neighbours, I was allowed to go to the nearby tea stall where I could sit and talk with people (mostly Mandi and Bengali men) and could wait until Chameli was back from her work.

My personal relationship with Robert grew and changed gradually. He realized that I was taking his comments seriously (also I was partly doing his job by taking care of the children so that he could spend more time to have *chu* with friends). Robert sometimes helped me to translate comments of interviewees. His support with the language helped me to understand different customs and attitudes among community people, which added depth to my data. In addition, he made my entrance into the community more relaxed as he introduced me as his "old friend". I must agree that, no matter what he might have had in his mind, our relationship was relaxed and not contrived when we moved around inside the community, sometimes even late at night with two or three of Robert's friends. Women members did not cooperate so much with me at the beginning; like Chameli, their initial look was cold and unwelcoming. After twelve hours of work it was not easy for them to have patience with my "odd" queries. However, I did not have any open conflict or tension with any of them that might relate to sexuality or speaking with men in their community. Chameli had no problem sending her husband with me all around Kalachandpur, something she told me later on when we became close.

I must admit that until I started looking at my field notes later after coming back to Canada I could not consciously and clearly identify many of my preconceived ideas or some of the thoughts in my mind during fieldwork. Why did I not encounter any open resistance from any women nor receive any direct hint from any of the Mandis about how

they perceived my relationship with men in the community? Is it only because I am from an educated middle class and I have a sharp nose? Or why did men accept me easily as a friend? Is it only because I am a woman? In three months, why not even once did Chameli express her thoughts about me as a single woman staying with them and going out to many places with her and her husband.<sup>16</sup>

At first I felt that they wanted to get rid of me as quickly as possible; I felt it probably did not matter whether I was a man or a woman, or what my is my social class. I thought I was simply an unwelcome burden to their already struggling life. Therefore, I thought that I might get resistance from people in the community. My preconceived notions<sup>17</sup> made me think that men should openly resist me (just like the CID police officer), for the same reason that I thought women socialized in patriarchal norms should also resist my communication with men in the community and should not accept my denial of socially-ascribed space for a single unmarried woman. I was within the constructed social norms and wanted to see women in their socially ascribed roles and men in theirs. However, my patriarchal upbringing and ethnically empowered position made me confident; I thought I could get inside the community anyhow, and easily. But these assumptions were only partial reasons for their behaviour towards me.

These partial reasons were so strong in my mind that they did not allow me to see my miscommunications with Mandi people, or their easy-going attitude towards me (despite class and cultural barriers) in light of the discomfort of historically-based inequalities between Mandis and Bengalis. The ethnic difference I had with the Mandis always was there in the field in a strong but silent way, and no matter how hard we tried, none of us could reduce the gap or the discomfort. I realized through experience that it could be a discomfort with deep historical roots – “in the context of a struggle for autonomy and self existence against a prevailing dominant culture” (Karim 1993: 90). Mandi beauty workers’ silence or Robert’s easy-going friendship (which empowered him

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<sup>16</sup> However I must add that my single women status made me their family friend and a sister. Unlike Robert, Chameli introduced me as her sister.

<sup>17</sup> I realized that being a part of the Bengali middle class my thoughts were unconsciously assimilated with the stereotype gender ideology which made me see things certain ways and build up my preconceived notions. However, by “preconceived notion” I also meant that Mandi people as an oppressed, helpless people are ignorant of their own situation. Secondly, as a member of the dominant Muslim middle class community, I thought that talking to people and gaining access inside their community would be easier. This thought was particularly strong since I had previous experience working with Mandi people.



over me because he was my guide and one of my key informants) can be seen as resistance towards me, a sense of negation and empowerment over Bengalis, conceived within themselves as an unresolved wish. Again by standing on the ground of historically-based inequality, I cannot overlook the amount of honesty and sincerely these people bestowed on me during my struggle of doing fieldwork. On several occasions I realized a field can be gendered for an ethnographer and so can it be for the research participants. It can be a space occupied with historically-built power norms shared both by researcher and participants. It is this power norm that shapes the response and actions of people sharing the space. There were Mandi and Bengali men who were shy to communicate with me upon our initial meeting. When I had meetings with beauty workers in Chameli's place, we had to arrange for their safe return. And for the married women, sometimes I had to talk to their husbands and inform them of the purpose of my work. Many times Robert explained to male and female participants that I could be trusted even as a Bengali.

My intent in writing this section is not to trivialize gender by making it a single discussion subject of ethnography. Gender is a very essential notion, but only part of its problems can be understood if not linked with issues like class, ethnicity and political economy. I felt that the experience I had as a woman and as an ethnographer should be analyzed in the context of Bangladeshi culture. Through this process I have learned that gender in the field cannot be seen as a separate component since it is part of a wider system of social relations deeply rooted in history.

#### **INTERVIEWS AND DATA ANALYSIS**

The research is based on anthropological qualitative methods. The intent was to apply a holistic approach to the participants' experience of life and to step forward with a non-discriminatory relationship between the researcher and the participants. Participant observation has been one of the most important methods applied all through the fieldwork. It was applied to emphasize the collaborative participation of the researcher and the research participants for study inquiry. The process brings out the emic understanding (Morse 1994: 37) of the role of the research participants – that they can be the observing participant and deliver their perspectives and experiences to the research topic. This research has its principle focus on women and their agency, and their

everyday life experiences in the city. This approach has demonstrated the indispensable role of the women in the study – as a subject and as an observing participant.

Another important role that qualitative research methods play in the research is finding out the pragmatic purpose of the study. My study, as I have informed above, is based on an earlier three-year research project on the migration history of Mandi women in the city. The historical background I researched in my previous ethnographical work gave a realistic shape to the current project by adding a glimpse of the present history of the same people. Issues of migration, ethnic discrimination, and religion were discussed with the interviewees with the intent to learn about their understanding of the actual situation/impact of various social institutions on Mandi families in the urban community. Open-ended interviews in most of the cases developed issues discussed by the interviewees –issues that initially went unnoticed in my queries, yet issues that are most relevant (see interview schedule).

### *Interview structure*

After gaining access to the community, the next step was planning for interviews. I started scheduling a monthly get-together with beauty parlour workers, their family members and anyone interested to join from the community. This was followed by scheduled interviews of approximately one to three hours in length. Beyond that I had group interviews of community people three times in gatherings I arranged in Chameli's place. In these group meetings we had approximately 14 to 18 participants each time. During my three months of fieldwork I had scheduled fifty semi-structured in-depth interviews, but could carry out to completion only 29 of them. The unfinished interviews were short and were those I could not complete due to scheduling problems for the research participants and also lack of time for rescheduling. Nonetheless, the incomplete short interviews of some half hour in length provided me with considerable insight into Mandi culture. With consent of the interviewee, most of the interviews were tape-recorded. I took notes for the other interviews with permission of interviewee.

### *Interpreters in interview sessions*

Robert and Chameli, who had accompanied me in many of my interview sessions, also played the role of interpreter where needed. Mandi people living in the city are not

very fluent in Bengali. Family members living in the city but who are not working in wage jobs have less communication with Bengali life and culture, and thus less fluency in Bengali. In these cases Robert or Chameli helped me understand their thoughts. Sometimes without them, when I did not understand a word or two, family members or neighbours living near the interviewee were able to help. Female family members not working in the parlour were often shy to come out and give an interview; some times they brought with them a favourite person with whom they felt most comfortable, – such as a friend, daughter, or husband – to accompany them and to interpret their views. In these cases I took notes instead of tape-recording because of the discomfort of the participants. My knowledge of the Mandi language helped me guide the interpreter to ask questions precisely and to interpret exactly whatever the interviewee said. Interviews taken with the help of an interpreter were more time consuming than other interviews since I wanted to talk in detail with the interpreter about the discussion and also get their feedback on the discussed topic.

The interpreters supported me a lot by their time, effort and interest to my research. I made sure my interpreters were invited in the group meetings/discussion where I offered food for all participants to enjoy. For Robert and Chameli, I wanted to give something useful for their household as a token of our developed relationship. Chameli had the hobby of cooking and wanted a cooking pan that she saw on television. I was happy to offer the gift to them.

### *Data analysis*

After fieldwork was over, I first read my entire set of field notes, highlighted the parts I thought most important and relevant to my research, and wrote these into a separate notebook. I made a list of the 29 interviews I considered most complete and transcribed them. Before proceeding to data analysis, and while I was still in Bangladesh, I went through daily newspaper articles and articles from an environment magazine written about Mandi people in Bangladesh.

From field notes, transcribed interviews and articles I found some similar experiences narrated by the Mandi people that helped me understand one major issue, landlessness. I started looking at my literature review on landlessness in Mandi community and how it started. I realized that the issue is related to important themes like

colonialism, state control, ethnic discrimination, present day gender relation and property inheritance practice in Mandi community. I focused on the major issue and started to write a historical background followed by the theoretical section of the thesis (which is now the Third Chapter of this thesis). This historical background and literature review helped me understand how to organize the rest of my write up by dividing it in smaller sections. After having a clear idea and writing a draft historical background, the most important part for me was to summarize my thoughts of writing the thesis in the first chapter which was a very difficult and long process. I wrote Chapter One, which is basically introducing the research and its problems. Second major part was to introduce the field area, introduce the research participants, explain the field work experience, ethical challenges and write about data analysis all of which I tried to compose in Chapter Two. After these three parts were done, I started writing the rest of the thesis. The data analysis and the write up went on simultaneously. I had to go back and forth to make changes in previous chapters, consult the history and theory chapter and also consult the transcribed field notes and sometimes notes from many of the incomplete interviews to clarify issues I was writing. Last but not least, narrative approach was applied all through the thesis to explain the data.

#### **PROFILE OF RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS**

Despite the limited scope of the study, I tried to interview Mandi beauty workers from different backgrounds. The twenty-nine major interviews were conducted in the three month fieldwork period. Among those interviewed twenty-one were beauty workers working in beauty parlours near Kalachandpur, four of them were female family members living with the beauty workers family, and four were men, relatives of beauty workers living with the beauty workers family.

Among the twenty-one beauty workers, ten were from Tanagail Madhupur area, six from Mymensingh Haluaghat area, and the rest from Mymensing Durgapur area. All of them came to Dhaka in search of a job between 1985 and 2006. Among them, ten were unmarried single women living either in a hostel or with families and friends. Eight of them were married women living with children and family. One interviewee was a single mother, divorced three months after marriage. The rest were married women living with relatives and friends in the city.

This chapter of my thesis is an attempt to explain how the thesis came to take its shape and how the fieldwork experience informed, and was informed by, methodology and theoretical understanding. This research offers in-depth inquiry on the relationship between structure and power in the context of women's agency. During my fieldwork, I spoke with men and women and tried to follow their opinions to decide my subsequent research steps. After the fieldwork, the analytical part begins with Mandi beauty workers after they initiate their migration experience.

### Chapter Three

## REVIEW OF LITERATURE AND THEORETICAL ANALYSIS

The issue of political, economic and cultural domination over minority people is global (van Schendal and Bal 1998: 13). The Mandi case is one of those. The socio-political life of Mandi people has been threatened by number of factors in different periods: elimination of indigenous rights from constitutions, different land usurping projects by the government, the impact of Christianity and Islam and, above all, the effects of urbanization in post-colonial Bangladesh.

#### POLITICAL DOMINATION IN THE BRITISH PERIOD

Colonial governments usually encouraged the various agents of detribalization; this was the path of progress. (Leach 1989: 44)

There is not much information about Mandi origins in the pre-colonial period. They have been known as one of the ancient matrilineal communities in South Asia who have cultural practices similar to South East Asian mountain area people whose language originated from Tibeto-Burmese Mongolian custom (Playfair 1909; Burling 1980; Cooper 1992). Mandis have been living in Meghalaya State, the North East part of India for centuries. However, research documentation only records information on the Mandi from 1800 (Burling 1963, 1980; Cooper 1992). According to Cooper, in the pre-colonial period land ownership in Mandi society was based on ancestral law; land properties were transferred from one group to another by small battles (Cooper 1992: 87). After the British annexed in the North East part of India, they enacted different rules to take over Mandi lands. One such rule was passed in 1822; the British called it "X Regulation", which declared the North East part of India as one single territory named North East Rongpur covering most of the Mandi living areas (*ibid*: 86-87). Followed by the enactment of the additional rules in 1825, the British Government conducted several

military invasions in the southern part of the Mandi area and took control over their lands (Cooper 1992: 86). By 1835, the western part of the Mandi area was under British control. However, the central part of Mandi lands was never conquered by the British (*ibid*: 86-87). This free land of Mandis had little contact with the other Mandi communities. Studies indicate that the Mandi had been a very brave and politicized group of people who put up a good fight against the British army to win their freedom (van Schendel 1985; Cooper 1992; Gulrukh fieldnotes 2003) The Indian Succession Act enacted in 1865 declared land rights for Hindus (Ilbert 1902). This act, however, allowed the exemption of indigenous land rights, which means Mandis were legally permitted land ownership.

Yet Mandis could not enjoy their freedom for a considerable time. From 1867 to 1871 the British army continued their raids over Mandi villages (Cooper 1992). Mandis fought vigorously and their victories remained behind the scene compared to the well-armed band of British soldiers. It was the beginning of Mandi experience with colonialism that actually started “to sow the seeds for the complex land-rights battles” (Cooper 1992: 88). The struggle for land rights continues to this day for Mandis living in Bangladesh.

#### **POLITICAL DOMINATION DURING THE TIME OF THE EAST PAKISTAN STATE**

Mandis followed an agro-based economy based in ancient practices (Jansen 1987). At the end of the British period and the birth of the Pakistan State, the total Mandi locality was divided between India and Pakistan at the time of the 1947 partition. According to Cooper, partition borders “were drawn arbitrarily under the Radcliffe Boundary Award announced during the Partition, and reflected political rather than cultural consideration” (Cooper 1992: 90). Mandis living in the East Pakistan zone (present day Bangladesh) continued wet rice cultivation and *Jhum*<sup>18</sup> cultivation, which had been their traditional practice. Mandis had the practice of cultivating land under communal ownership. After Partition in 1947, the wetland cultivation led them to adopt

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<sup>18</sup> *Jhum* cultivation is a process in which farmers clean a piece of land, cultivate crops on the land until the land becomes unfertile or barren. They leave the land for natural recovery and go to another piece of land. Sometimes the process could be a cycling cultivation between several pieces of land. *Jhum* cultivation is a practice of the Indigenous farmers in the highland and hilly regions of the North East part of India. *Jhum* is a practice for Bangladeshi Indigenous communities too. It is well known that the cultivation process is conducive to ecological balance (Mali 2003, Rasul 2005). *Jhum* cultivation is similar to slash and burn or swidden (or shifting) agriculture (see Haviland 2004: 165) where the farmers burn the field after cultivation.

private land ownership as a “natural consequence of the system” (Mohsin 2003: 52). The system allowed an individual household to own wetland. Households that got a chance to cultivate a particular piece of land for the first time could own the land (*ibid*). *Jhum* cultivation or the cultivation in highlands was practiced along with wetland cultivation. *Jhum* lands were also owned by individual households. It has been said that this kind of cultivation system after Partition was responsible for weakening Mandi ancestral practices (*ibid*). First, Mandi communal practices were converted to private ownership. Second, since the State law did not allow registering lands using female names, Mandi matrilineal practices were partly affected (*ibid*: 52-53).<sup>19</sup> Mandi female landowners of that time expressed that many of their lands remained without registration, which caused even further problems. Anyone could come to take over Mandi land saying that it was illegally owned. By “anyone” Mandis meant mostly the Bengali settlers (Gulrukh fieldnotes 2003). The problem of Mandi land was intensified by the banishment of the Zamindari system in Pakistan State in 1950 (Mohsin 2003: 52). Mandi areas under Zamindari territory were handed over to the Government Forest Department. Mandi agricultural lands were declared as *Khas*, or Government owned lands, where Mandis could only cultivate the wetlands and could only hand over cultivation rights (i.e., use rights) to the future generation. In other words, they did not have any authority to sell the land. Later the Pakistani government assured Mandi rights over wetlands. They could own the land after cultivating the land for a long period of time. *Jhum* lands, or the forestlands, were never recognized as Mandi property. In fact, in 1995 the government of Bangladesh banned *Jhum* cultivation.

In 1962, the Pakistani Government allowed Bengali citizens to settle in the Mandi Madhupur area. The Madhupur forest zone was declared as national forest and many of Mandis living in the area were forcibly evicted (Cooper 1992; Gain 1995). By taking over Mandi property Bengali control over Mandis increased during this period. The domination over Mandi land continued under the Pakistani state. In 1964, the Government of Pakistan took control over most of the Mandi ancestral lands in the

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<sup>19</sup> Mandis of Madhupur were under the rule of the Zamindar of Natore in 1927. Research suggests that during this time Mandi female ownership was recognized and wet rice lands were allowed to be registered under female heirs. Mandis paid a yearly tax and were allowed to live in the area without further difficulty (Khan 2000). However, according to van Schendel, the Zamindars did not disturb Mandi communities because they had a strong history of resistance (van Schendel 1985).



Madhupur and Tangail areas (Mohsin 2003: 53). The State control over Mandis was continued through the 1965 Vested Property Act or the Enemy Property Ordinance. The enemy property ordinance resulted from the 1965 India Pakistan war (Timm 1991: 21). The effect of the law on Mandi lives added another level to their marginality. The law was a consequence of Hindu-Muslim conflicts; while enacting the ordinance, the Pakistan Government included all minority groups and took control of their lands. According to Father R.W. Timm, "the law of vested property has been applied indiscriminately and illegally against all minorities, whether religious or ethnic" (1991: 21). The enemy property act over Mandis and other indigenous minorities was very abusive; in 1984, and later in 1989, the Government of Bangladesh stopped enactment of the ordinance in any new case. Research done by BRAC (Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee) in the 1990s has shown that 75 percent of the "enemy property listing" was false (*ibid*: 21-22, 25).

#### **POLITICAL DOMINATION UNDER THE BANGLADESH REGIME**

So long as the uncertainty of colonialism continues, the national cause goes on progressing, and becomes the cause of each and all. The plans for liberation are sketched out; already they include the whole country. During this period spontaneity is king, and initiative is localized. On every hill a government in miniature is formed and takes over power. Everywhere – in the valleys and in the forests, in the jungle and in the villages – we find a national authority. (Fanon 1963:131)

The marginality of Mandis in independent Bangladesh was not any less than what they had been experiencing since the British period. The Bangladesh government not only excluded minority rights from the constitution but also launched different forestry projects, taking over their land. After the liberation war of 1971, the government of Bangladesh manufactured a strong sense of Bengali nationalism. The government claimed to have declared a very social, democratic, as well as secular constitution. Mohsin quotes the definition of Bengali nationalism written in Article 9 in the constitution of Bangladesh 1972: "The unity and solidarity of the Bengali nation, which deriving its identity from its language and culture, attained sovereign and independent Bangladesh through a united and determined struggle in the war of independence, shall be the basis of Bengali nationalism" (The Constitution of the People's Republic of Bangladesh, Ministry of Law 1972: 5, quoted in Mohsin 2003: 50).

*"They ask if we eat frogs"*<sup>20</sup>

It is very evident from the definition that the State discourse was not providing any recognition for minority culture or rights. The celebration and monopoly of Bengali nationalism in Bangladesh thus have brought about the annihilation of indigenous people's rights and culture. After the independence of Bangladesh the visibility of indigenous minority in the country was never an issue for the Government of Bangladesh; rather, they were always considered as "sub", "backward" or "minor". In the 1991 census of Bangladesh, apart from the dominant majority group, 27 other groups of people were mentioned as a part of the population. These 27 were referred to as *upajati* (tribes or subgroups) (Ahmed and Chowdhury 2003: 229). In Bengali, *jati* means nation. All indigenous communities living in the country were categorized as *upa-jati*. *Upa* is a prefix added to mean "sub", which makes indigenous groups sub-nations (or subordinate). In the school textbooks there is no history background of the minorities living in the country. Instead, they are defined as *upajati*, who are "ant-eaters" or snake eaters (Social Science text book, grade five 2006: 25; Murad 2001: 34, Bal 2000: 25-28). The state politics of exclusion of indigenous minorities also can be seen in the cartoons shown from the textbooks written for the primary school students published by the Bangladesh Textbook Board. These cartoons describe a scene where *upajati* groups are serving the Bengali king in an ancient court. This picturization is a clear celebration of the superiority of Bengali sharp-nosed citizens over the Mongolian blunt nose *upajati* groups (Bal 2000, Murad 2001: 23).

Minorities were also titled as "backward" in Article 28 of the Constitution of Bangladesh 1994. It has been said, "nothing shall prevent the state from making special provision in favour of women and children or for the advancement of any backward section of citizen. (The Constitution of the People's Republic of Bangladesh. Ministry of Law. 1994: 20, quoted in Mohsin 2003: 51). Obviously the "backward" groups were the non-Bengalis who are not considered civilized enough to consider as Bengali citizens. Nationality exclusively belongs to civilized Bengalis and all other citizens can be "sub"-national/tribes and obviously "non-Bengali". This necessarily means that in postcolonial

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<sup>20</sup> The title of this section is inspired by Ellen Bal's work on the Mandi-Bengali relationship in Bangladesh, *They Ask if We Eat Frogs* (2000).

Bangladesh the situation for Mandis remained the same as during the colonial regime when they were described as “a savage and warlike people, addicted to head hunting”(Burling 1980, referred in Cooper 1992).

#### **FORESTRY PROJECTS AND DOMINATION OF THE GOVERNMENT OF BANGLADESH**

In 1984, under the Government of President Ershad, the Madhupur area was declared as national forest one more time without sending any notice to the local inhabitants. Not only were Mandis not allowed to reclaim, register or pay tax for their lands (Khan 2004: 9), but the declaration was followed by a “sustained period of hostility towards the Garos, including evictions, kidnapping, and other forms of violence” (Cooper 1992: 93). This story remains the same for the next two decades as the Bangladesh Government repeatedly took over Mandi land without notice in the name of the Government forestry project. At first the forestry project was a collaborative project of the Bangladesh Forest Institute Development Corporation and Forest Department of Bangladesh Government funded by the Asian Development Bank (ADB) in 1987, taking over more than 6,000 hectares of land (Gain 1989, 1995, 2007; Cooper 1992). The second project was funded by the World Bank in 2000 (Khan 2004). While the former project was for the introduction of commercial monoculture of rubber plantations in Bangladesh (Cooper 1992; Gain 1995; Gulrukh 2004; Mohsin 2003), the latter project was a declaration to launch thirteen different national parks in the Madhupur area, apparently with eviction of 16,000 Mandi inhabitants from those villages (Khan 2004). The Bangladesh Government continued its forestry projects in Mandi land, declaring a plan to make an “Ecopark” in Mandi and Khasia land in 2003. The project started with a plan to build approximately 3,000-acre wall around Mandhupur Mandi forest. The situation led to major turmoil between Mandis and Government officials. In 2004, during peaceful Mandi protest against Ecopark project of Forest Department of Bangladesh, Piran Snal, a Mandi villager, was killed by open gunfire by the Forest Department guard towards the demonstration (Gain 2007).<sup>21</sup> The event was followed by more than fifty false cases against Mandi villagers put forward by the Forest Department. In March 2007,

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<sup>21</sup> Shooting at Mandi people in Madhupur forest area is a regular practice of the forest department guard. In August 2006, six Mandi women were wounded by forest department gunfire. They were collecting firewood from the forest and not warned before the gunfire started (Khalil 2007).

the Government of Bangladesh assigned an investigation team on these false cases. Cholesh Richil, a Mandi leader and activist, was arrested, brutally tortured and killed by the Government Police Force (The Daily Star March 2007). Mandis have been cheated out of their own lands and the situation has continued with the same brutal force. The Bangladesh Air Force team is also responsible for the eviction of two Mandi villages and destruction of 500 acres of *sal*<sup>22</sup> forest is in Madhupur. They are using the land for their target practice (Khalil 2007). From 1927 to the present, the Government of Bangladesh has declared many times “statutory confirmation” that Mandis will get their property rights and not be evicted from their lands (Cooper 1992: 93). However, the practical history was presenting an upside down view of the progress of minority rights under State control.

#### RELIGIOUS DOMINATION

Religion is not simply a set of symbols that has an impact on human minds and motivations.<sup>23</sup> Rather, the power of religion stretches its arms from law (social and religious) and negations (fire of hell, death, sin, fame) to social institutions (family, school, city, church) and the human body (fasting, praying, obedience and guilt) (Asad 1993). According to Asad, religion can be understood by its power (*ibid*). It is the “power” that determines and makes the moods and motivations of people living in the society, not the “symbols” (Ahmed and Chowdhury 2003: 304). Looking at religion as a system to spread motivation through symbols is to neglect the fact that the power of religion is in part to make histories of minority peoples ahistorical (Wolf 1982).<sup>24</sup>

<sup>22</sup> Sal trees can be found in Bangladesh, Nepal, northeast part of India, and south of Himalayan forests. It is useful for its natural fuel oils for forest dwellers (Mali 2003).

<sup>23</sup> According to Geertz, “A religion is a system of symbols which acts to establish powerful, pervasive and long-lasting moods and motivations in men by formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic” (Geertz 1973: 90.)

<sup>24</sup> Eric Wolf (1982: 5) argued that the method of looking at history of others can be misleading if it is told as a “story of moral success” and is presented as “a story of how the winners prove that they are virtuous and good by winning”. Wolf also argued that this kind of representation is denial of agency and simplifies the value of society whose history is being told. He says this method is the creation of “a false model of reality” (*ibid*: 6). According to Wolf, history should acknowledge the complexity of the events and account how “some relationships gained ascendancy over others” (*ibid*: 6). Wolf gave an example by explaining how the expansion of colonial capitalism from the West had impact on indigenous political economy. He connected this structural power with the modes of production and found it as the cause behind the politics of historical (mis)representation of indigenous communities. Wolf argued that colonial capitalism decided the control, consumption and allocation of social labour (*ibid*: 80).

Religious domination over minority peoples has been recognized as one of the most marked global hegemonic paths to validate the process of colonialism (Said 1978). State and colonial authority made their official entry into indigenous lands through religious campaigns, missionization in particular. In fact, “the idea of ‘religion’ was central to the civilizing mission of imperialism, and was shaped by the interests of a number of colonial actors in a way that remains visibly relevant today” (Dubois 2005: 113). The foundation of the modern State was rooted in the proliferation of religion, and the idea brings out a clearer picture of the historical transformation from imperialism in the colonial period to that in the modern state (van der Veer 2002: 173-175). Indigenous communities in Western Canada, North America, China, India and many other parts of the world had experienced many prolonged projects of state and colonial missionaries. Many of the indigenous groups were affected under the process. They lost their resources for living and their traditional practices. Research on the economic and social changes in indigenous communities living in the forest confirms that the changing social and political behaviour of indigenous communities are a consequence of the policies and practices imposed on their lifeways either by state or missionary actions (Wax and Wax 1978: 27; Butler and Menzies 2001; Kelkar, Nathan and Walter 2003). Christianity and states worked hand in hand as patriarchal authority over indigenous communities and worked as initiators of their changing social and economic life. For Tsimshian women living in British Columbia, for example, the missionary actions stopped traditional seasonal migration and made them live close to Church while the State-forced reserve was cornering the population into small “reserved” areas (Butler and Menzies 2001).

Mandis came under a British missionization project during the early 1800s (Burling 1963; Gulrukh 2003). South Asian populations had experienced missionary campaigns in the 15th century through the entrance of Portuguese Jesuits (Wolpert 1993: 138); hence it is assumed that Mandis also came into contact with missionary personnel prior to British colonialism (Burling 1963, 1997). According to Burling, American Baptist missionaries came to Mandi communities in the Northeast part of India prior to British Colonial occupation (sometimes around 1800), but the “intensive Christianization began only after the occupation of the hills” (Burling 1963: 19, 312). Missionaries initiated many development projects in the community, such as building schools and

hospitals (Burling 1963, 1997; Gulrukh 2003; 2004). Government entry into these areas was strengthened with missionary activities (Gulrukh 2003). Presently, 85 percent of the total population consider themselves to be Christian (Khalil 2007) and many of them are grateful to the religion for their support in educating the Mandis. However, the Christian religion has replaced many of the communal values and cultural practices, including traditional music, dancing and wood crafting (Burling 1963:313) <sup>25</sup>. Christian missionization obviously had impact on Mandi matrilineal lives. With the patriarchal values of Christianity, the centrality of men in the household was rationalized, and compelled the families to adopt a nuclear family arrangement rather than living in joint families. Presently, most of the families living in the city are nuclear families (Gulrukh 2003, 2004 field notes). The situation became worse with the settlement of Bengali citizens on Mandi lands. The situation led to many mixed marriages between Mandis and Bengalis. A small number of Mandis became Muslim (Khalil 2007) after independence in order to be a part of their landed properties they had lost during the war partition (Gulrukh field notes 2002). In Mandi areas of present-day Bangladesh, both Christianity and Islam have penetrated Mandi social values (Gulrukh 2003: 29). The traditional practice of maintaining property through the female line is still a custom, therefore women in the Mandi community have the responsibility to stabilize the financial situation of the family and household. However, women's role in income generation and in public appearance is judged in terms of patriarchal social norms (Gulrukh 2003: 11), and they are considered *Kumla* (weak) (Gulrukh fieldnotes 2003, 2004).

The public discourse in Mandi communities in Bangladesh accepts missionary organizations as the most helpful and active agents for Mandi communities.<sup>26</sup> However, the real picture is different. It has been noted in research that it was the missionary attendants who supplied Mandi women (and sometimes men) to serve as loyal and

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<sup>25</sup> In post-colonial Bangladesh Mandi people got tremendous support from Christian missionaries in the villages. The missionary schools provide free education, accommodation and food for girl child in particular. Mandi people became Christian massively convinced by the support they got during their struggles in liberation war.

<sup>26</sup> On the other side, Reverend Eugene E. Homrich, pastor at Saint Paul's Church, Pirgacha, Modhupur has been known for his criticism of Government forestry projects in Madhupur (Khalil 2007). He also risked his life to save many Mandi people from the Pakistani Military during the liberation war (Gulrukh fieldnotes 2002-2003). However, the action of a single person does not change the role of a patriarchal institution.

faithful servants for household work or any other services in Dhaka (Gulrukh 2003: 14). Many of the beauty workers had started their lives in Dhaka working as maidservants under middle class housewives (Nokmandi Publication 1, 1994).

Having its origin in colonialism, Christianity played a major role in replacing Mandi culture in subtle authoritarian ways. In the name of peace and emancipation it destroyed their defensive spirit. Even though the Ecopark movement in the Mandi region has made many people active in speaking up for their rights, most of the Mandis of the present generation can barely recall their past history of resistance against the British army and landlords in the colonial period. In his ethnography of a Garo community, Burling declared Mandi people to be liberal minded, peace loving and living harmoniously with Christians and Muslims (Burling 1997: 175). This sketch is a misrepresentation of reality. It disguises the fact that Christian missionary ideologies are responsible for defining a pseudo-assimilation between Mandis and Bengalis, between Christianity and *Shangsharek*,<sup>27</sup> and thus in a non-confrontational way bash the traditional “Mandiness”. This assimilation indicates the single culture formulation under the process of globalization (Rankin 2003), the new form of colonialism.

The truth is that the more their community is getting close to this “harmonious” assimilation process, the more they are going far from their origin and identity. In terms of communal living they are losing unity around the use of property. In the name of their being liberal-minded, they are becoming more submissive. For the Mandi community, two masculine institutions – Christianity and Islam – have slowly replaced their traditional matrilineal practices with a patriarchal gender ideology.

#### MATRILINY IN ANTHROPOLOGY

Matriliny is one of the principal concepts in my study. The Mandi matrilineal institution and its kinship system have gone through different changes in periods of colonialism, urbanization and modernization. This research focuses on the history of these changes in Mandi matrilineal communities in Bangladesh, which, for clarity of arguments proposed in the research, is grounded in anthropological conceptualizations of matrilineal institutions.

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<sup>27</sup> Shangsharek is the religion that Mandi people used to practice in the pre-colonial era and before the missionization process entered Mandi communities (Burling 1963).

In anthropology, Lewis Henry Morgan studied the matrilineal institution in 1877. Morgan's *Ancient Society* presented kinship systems in the society in terms of human advancement. His study was a comparative analysis between matrilineal and patrilineal systems and he considered matrilineal systems to be "less advanced" (Nogbri 2000: 361). Engels advanced the theory by relating this with capitalism and patriarchy. According to Engels (1884), the change in human kinship was due to monogamous marriage, capitalism and the foundation of the State. Matriliney for Engels was therefore not only more advanced than partiliny but also had its origin in a society without class. Matriliney for Engels was the foundation for subsistence economy and communal relationship. Murdock's (1949) view of patrilineal systems was that it was responsible for weakening matrilineal systems. According to Nogbri, Mudrock saw matrilineal systems as "closely tied up with patrilocal residence, as this involves a man in life long residential propinquity and social participation with father's patrilineal kinsmen" (Nogbri 2000: 362). Aberle (1951) tried to understand matrilineal institutions by combining Engels' and Murdock's ideas. His proposition argued that matrilineal institutions do not have the capacity to produce sufficient surplus since they are "confined to a narrow ecological niche" (Nogbri 2000: 362). Goody (1956) also supported the idea that matrilineal institutions are not capable of forming a strong economic base by production and that is the principal cause behind their gradual collapse.

Kathleen Gough's works have been most valuable for understanding the disintegration of matrilineal institutions. Instead of focusing on issues discussed by fellow researchers, she focused on structural change in the matrilineal communities, and she related the problematic to the market economy. According to Gough, kinship change in modern matrilineal systems should be understood "in terms of growth in social structure as a whole, stimulated by external economic factors" (Gough 1952: 86).

Gough compared sixteen matrilineal societies based on her own and fellow researchers' data to understand the disintegration processes in different communities. Her studies identified that, despite differences between matrilineal communities, all of them were exposed to the same market economy. The change at the end has been the same, since all of these communities were connected to a "unitary market system", where produced goods, land, and labour are privately owned (Gough 1961: 640; Nongbri 2000:



362-363). Gough argues, "the capitalist market system is of course based in the fuel technology of industrial nations, and it is the economic relationships with these nations which primarily brings about the modern kinship change" (Gough 1961: 640).

Thus Gough's study emphasizes the importance of understanding the political reasons behind the changes in matrilineal institutions in modern societies, and the grounds on which these societies were forced to enter the specific commodity exchange system of the industrial states. The system is manipulated by the market forces as the commodity market demands raw materials from the local communities and at the same time looks for new markets to trade their newly manufactured goods produced from the industry. According to Gough (1961: 637-641), Nayers in India, and some Southeast Asian societies like Minangkabau, had to settle for low cost labour work or low paid salaried work required by the State political institutions and market economy.

Gough examined the changing political economy of the matrilineal communities in the colonial period as well. Drawing attention to the influence of colonialism over the matrilineal communities, she argued that the disintegration of the traditional political function of a matrilineal community was the consequence of contact with European colonizer. There were many local communities, both matrilineal and patrilineal (also see Eggan 1941), that had changed after coming in contact with colonial forces and their system of rule.<sup>28</sup> The colonial encounter for matrilineal communities was significant in Gough's disintegration theory in the sense that she took these changes as essential facts to understand the transformation of social structures in matrilineal communities and related that with the market economy. Drawing upon her in-depth study of the Kerala Nayar community in contact with European colonizers, who also had gone through many changes in their kinship and traditional political structure, Gough (1952) asserted that cultural contact with European colonizers was part of the cause for changing political and economic structure of matrilineal communities. It is the external economic factors that

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<sup>28</sup> In anthropology there were studies where similar changes in matrilineal institutions were analyzed. (Eggan 1937; also consult Gough 1952). All of them had a common claim that it was the impact of colonial culture – missionaries, foreign settlers, State personnel – that had imposed the European kinship morality that led to many matrilineal institutions changing to bilateral inheritance. Communal relationships were replaced by nuclear families and conjugal-based households. These major transformations were different for each of the matrilineal groups and were described in terms of degree of difference in acquaintance with "white culture" (Spoehr 1947: 224-230). Accordingly, the changes that came about in each matrilineal society were variable in relation to degree of exposure.

shape the cultural, social and economic structure of a community. As Gough (1952: 86) argued

Kinship change among the Nayers is not explicable in terms of the concepts of “culture-contact” or “cultural borrowing” but rather in terms of growth in a social structure as a whole, stimulated by external economic factors. Changes in the Nayar kinship system, correlated with changes in local organization, appear to have taken place in response to changes in the technology and economic organization of the society as a whole. They can therefore only indirectly be attributed to European contact.

Here Gough’s argument can be interpreted giving equal importance to the privatization process and directly and indirectly related socio-political causes behind it. Colonial impact over matrilineal communities includes expansion of colonial education, non-farm wage labour, and increased commodification of daily life. Growing capital accumulation, rapid urbanization (colonial and post colonial), State agricultural policy promoting new equipment,<sup>29</sup> requirement for a variety of occupations in the market that make the local communities more mobile – all of which can also be considered as the “external economic factor” related to the market economy. These factors influence the decrease of the effectiveness of kinship system. The causes of disintegration – the expansion of the market economy and cultural domination over minorities – therefore can be seen as a powerful interactive social system taking support/backing from each other. This disintegration or change in social structure caused by this cultural and economic social system is also determined according to the way the local community responds to these methods of exploitation. These issues are discussed in some of the studies that expanded Gough’s disintegration theory. An in-depth understanding of Gough’s theory sheds light on the birth of globalization as well as state domination over indigenous life.

After Gough’s disintegration theory, researchers looked at disintegration of matrilineal communities through the lens of market economy privatization. Some have elaborated their theory putting emphasis on structural flexibility or resilience of matrilineal institutions at the center of discussion. According to Nongbri (2000), the

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<sup>29</sup> State constitution and agricultural policy promoting the new products in the market influenced peasant lives, both indigenous and the majority, communities both matrilineal and patrilineal. Here a good reference can be the State agricultural policy in Indonesia which became the reason for disintegration of the Minangkabau matrilineal community (Blackwood 2000: 4-5; also see Sanday 2002)

resilience theorists assert that “matrilineal descent groups, far from being riddled with instability and conflict and thereby doomed to extinction, in fact possess a high degree of resilience and vibrancy, which has helped them to successfully adapt to changing conditions” (2000: 363). Karla Poewe’s study of the Luapula of Zambia and Leela Dube’s research on Lakshadweep Island (a group of islands in Arabian Sea off the coast of Kerala) , are two of the many works that utilize resilience theory.

Poewe tried to understand the disintegration of matrilineality by looking at gender relationships and the individual response of men and women towards the gradually changing market economy. According to Poewe, the flexibility and structural instability within Luapula matrilineal community comes out of the distinctive association with, and dissimilar perception of, men and women about their traditional matrilineal ideology. For men in the community it is the individual, and for women it is more communal. Men in the society try to have personal control over their savings. According to Poewe, it is productive individualism that is an idea embodying an essential element of capitalist economic production where individual producers look for an ideology supportive of private ownership (Poewe 1981: 15). Women in the community go for a different action, which Poewe refers to as “distributive communalism”. In order to strengthen their relationship and alliance, they distribute their resources to their kin members on the mother’s side. The sexes also behave differently while making their communication with Christianity and Church. Men stabilize their individual commercial interest by staying in touch with Church and thereby neglecting the matrilineal ideology, which is responsible for their limited control over wealth. Women, in comparison, neglect Church and prefer to strengthen their relationship from the mother’s side, and thus consider their marital bonds as secondary. By recognizing the different perspectives of men and women, Poewe indicates the incapacity of matrilineal ideology to maintain strong kin ties and identify matrilineality as a system for potential disintegration.

It is important to note that Poewe’s study has gender as a major determinant under Luapula culture to understand the disintegration. First, Luapula men going in an opposite direction to women indicates the structural opposition between men and women in all societies irrespective of the conditions of partiliny and matrilineality (see Ortner 1974, Lamphere and Rosaldo 1974). Second, the sketch of gender relations in the context of

Luapula culture puts Poewe's work in the frame of looking at gender in a culturally specific background (see Yanagisako and Collier 1987; Strathern 1987). Poewe's method is to analyze men-women relationships in local circumstances in the context of a structured socio-economic order. The method looks at gender relations through the lens of historicized relationships. Both are widely accepted arguments in social science theory that make her work come to the fore. Her theory, influenced by Gough's idea of matrilineal disintegration, has an in depth insight on individuals' contest and negotiation with changing political economy. The study also can be interpreted as an indication of the process of the ability of local communities to recreate and reconstitute them in the context of powerful social process.

Dube (1996) also asserts the structural flexibility of matrilineality and marks it as a major cause for political and economic change. Her argument draws from her research on matrilineal communities in Lakshadweep Islands that converted to Islam, a strongly patriarchal religion. Dube argues that structural conflict and flexibility is not a distinguished trait of matrilineality only; this is a trait that also belongs to patrilineal communities (Nongbri 2000: 365). Dube's theory of resilience is most significantly questioned by its simplified notion of gender relations. She asserts that in Lakshadweep women have considerable autonomy and influence over men (1996: 177-179). She also states, "it seems that women in matrilineal societies are free of any intensive and oppressive control. Asymmetry and oppression are suggested to be absent from Lakshadweep" (*ibid*: 177-178). Gender bias is structurally related to family and kinship and is determined by the social order (Yanagisako and Collier 1987; Nongbri 2000). For example, studies that have examined economic empowerment (gaining property from the mother's line) or cultural norms empowering women in the society also involve factors like women's constraint in mobility or sexual division of labour in the household (Menon 1996; Nongbri 1998, 2000). Gender relations in the society have their origin in the socio-economic structure, and the process is historical. The fact cannot be seen only in terms of matrilineal kinship, nor can it be generalized with one single example.

Even though from two different perspectives, the strength of Gough's and Poewe's disintegration theory lies in its emphasis on structural elements and the transformation of matrilineal political economy by the invasion of industrial nations.

Gough's perception of considering colonizers and their cultural and administration power as a part of the political economic change certainly indicates the relationship between imperialist expansion, state power and the market. Similarly Poewe's understanding of matrilineal disintegration – considering gender relations and individual responses of men and women – also adds to the understanding of the changing social structure of a specific community. Both of these works are essential to understand the study I am making of the Mandi beauty workers in Dhaka.

In present day social science the three elements – imperialist expansion, state power and the market – are considered the fundamental base for analyzing the structure of the globalized economy and the neoliberal trade system affecting local communities. Therefore it is necessary to examine the relation between global and local economy determined by globalization processes that I discuss in the following sections.

#### ON MANDI MATRILINY

In the pre-colonial period the Mandi economy was based on agricultural products. They subsisted on *jhum* or shifting cultivation as well as by collecting forest resources. The land property (for cultivation and living) was owned and controlled by the community and was mainly managed by the clan head or the Nokmas. The youngest daughter of the Nokma family inherited the property – a form of ultimogeniture. The Nokma household was usually the oldest household in the community. The husband of the inheritress, mainly the youngest daughter, had custody of the land. However, he did not have any authority to decide anything on disposition of the land or the land produce; these decisions depended on the consent of the inheritress as well as that of the community. All clan members had equal rights over the land properties which included their rights to grow food, hunt, and fish. Parents without daughters had to adopt a daughter from the wife's nearest female kin (wife's sister). The husband of the inheritress was selected from the father's clan (ideally father's sister's son) who moved into his wife's house (uxorilocal residence). Any other daughters who were not inheritresses usually stayed with or close to the family of the inheritress and were allowed to share land produce. The uxorilocal residence pattern always made room for all the daughters and their husbands. In Mandi practice, men cannot inherit property under any circumstances. Any property of a man that he achieves by himself belongs to his mother

or sister. A husband is allowed to take care of his wife's property. When divorced, the husband has to leave the wife's house without anything except his clothing.

In the pre-colonial period, women in Mandi matrilineal communities played a major role in *jhum* production. Not only that, but women had more knowledge of *jhum* production than men. Collecting forest resources like fruits, honey and wood had been women's responsibility. Women took care of the household orchard.

Women's authority, particularly senior women's (more specifically the mother of the heiress) power within the household was situated within and informed by matrilineal ideology. The customary practices that reserved their authority include matrilineal inheritance, matrilineal (specifically uxorilocal) residence, and the custom of passing land and house from mother to daughter. All these practices meant for women to decide ancestral ceremonial practices, manage and control all subordinate kin, and decide over household resources. For men, the situation meant protecting land and household and other material resources, and take care of own and sisters' children. Thus, mother's brother or "uncle" became a priority male relation in Mandi matrilineal system.

#### *Transition of Mandi matrilineality from the precolonial period to the present time*

Mandis were economically self-sufficient. Their structure of social organization led to a secure system (matrilocal residence and matrilineal inheritance) that confirmed the production flow. The emergence of British colonialism led to some radical erosion of the strong economic and social base of Mandi social organization.

The British colonial regime put pressure on the Mandi economy in several ways. First and most important was the policy against *Jhum* or shifting cultivation; second, this led to shrinkage of *jhum* land. The growing Mandi population in a limited area faced economic challenges. Third, the situation was made worse by State policy on promoting wet rice. The shift from *jhum* cultivation to wet rice cultivation was damaging due to the lack of skill, shortage of water in the hills, all of which led to insufficient production of food. Fourth, Mandis consequently needed supplementary income sources: selling forest products in local market, selling agricultural wage labour or the searching for a completely unknown profession.

The economic damage and the privatization of land caused by the British State policy brought several transformations in Mandi social structure too:

- a) One of the major consequences was the increase of income differences between households. Those who survived in wet rice cultivation were doing better than the others, which gave rise to a class issue within the same village.
- b) The change of profession and income activities brought the change in the distribution of labour in Mandi household. Women who played a major role in *jhum* cultivation were not involved in wet rice cultivation due to the use of the plough. The role of women was merely the helper of men in the field. Also, when the forests were being reserved by the State, women were not involved in any kind of forest resources either. The control of crop and cash both were men's business.
- c) Privatization of communal land and men's involvement in agriculture undermined the matrilineal inheritance practice. First of all, the amount of land was reduced and then the gradual decline of women's contribution to land led to the erosion of social legitimacy of women's traditional claims to land.
- d) The growing importance of men in agriculture was emphasizing the importance of neolocality and virilocality in the Mandi area, which was strengthened by the strictly patriarchal Christian ideology. In Mandi matrilineal practice during the precolonial period, non-heir daughters and other female kin were allowed to live close to the heiress household. Due to the reduction of land and insufficiency of cash crops, these females were not allowed to use the heiress daughter's lands. Due to the subsequent economic crisis, these families started looking for alternative income strategies which led to migration to different parts of the country. In many places the Mandi matrilineal practice was losing its strength due to the situation.
- e) Among the *Nokrek*<sup>30</sup> families, men usually were the managers of household resources and had greater control over resources, land, and decision making. The control over cash and crops gave them a certain amount of authority, and

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<sup>30</sup> *Nokrek* is usually the surname of the Nokma household members. Nokma household is usually the oldest household in the community who takes care of the community property.

in some Mandi villages men they were given jural power, which sometimes became a permanent jural authority inside the community.

- f) The situation led to the growing importance of mother's brother as "Man" of the family.
- g) The introduction of Christianity reduced the sexual freedom of Mandi women. Just as among the Nayars (see Gough 1952: 83), Christianity had a strong criticism of Mandi sexual morality.

Despite all these transformation, Mandis are still practicing a matrilineal system. In Mandi matrilineal communities, women enjoy a certain amount of freedom which is similar to the Nayars (Menon 1996: 142-145) and different from Muslim matrilineal communities. The self-independence of Mandi women grew out of certain kinds of customary practice. It has been strengthened by their migration to the city since the job market is providing economic independence principally to women. When Islam came to South Asia as a patrilineal institution and became a form of social organization, many of the matrilineal communities started to become bilateral (Agarwal 1994: 100). This is not the case with the Mandis. Having Christianity as their prime religion, Mandi matriliney not only has survived as a descent system, but also has continued to inspire women's independence. However, I must say that, even though Islam and Christianity follow patrilineal descent and inheritance, the domestication of women in these two religions is different. Islam has certain kinds of *Sharia* laws that enact rules for women such as *purdah*. In Christianity, patriarchal values work more within familial rule, which, for Mandis, is strictly matrilineal. Then again I should say that conversion to Christianity of Mandi people has weakened many of their ancestral practices. Many of the traditional rituals centered in their matrilineal household have lost their importance nowadays. The responsibility of women as sole breadwinner of the family maintains the major principles and format of matrilineal kinship in the community, which is intertwined with traditions of matrilineal responsibility and the job availability in the modern capitalist urban society. Therefore, besides Christianity, the force of modernization is another issue that comes repeatedly into my mind. While discussing modernization, one has to remember that education has been a difficult experience for Mandi women in comparison to that of the Muslim women in the Mandi community.



Even though education did not come to their lives to change their perspectives towards modernism, the salaried employment in the beauty parlours, together with the spirit of individualism and rationality, have effected both the Christian and non-Christian Mandi women . The process of change brings its own contradictions. Traditions are too deeply ingrained in the people to allow the swift change towards modernization. Modernization in Mandi community came as a process of changing gender and kin relationships, and their political economic conditions. While researching, when I looked back to Mandi women's status and their situation in the changing social organization in the local villages, I realized that women's agency in different classes in the Mandi community existed from the beginning. Upon migration to the city this power of agency was challenged by many structural barriers as well as has achieved a deeper dimension in terms of understanding of the urban life. All these will be discussed in the forth coming chapters.

#### **GLOBALIZATION IN THE RESEARCH CONTEXT**

Globalization has been most significantly understood by its "association with the homogenizing impact of global capital" (Desai 2007: 403). The expansion of economic markets into one single world market was the result of this homogenizing development (Giddens 1990; Manuel 1996). A single integrated market has made the flow of capital transnational (Armbuster et al. 1998, 2003; Grewal and Kaplan 1994; Desai 2002; Giddens 2000), diminishing the interference or power of nation-states. The transnational character of global capital makes it fluid and flexible (Desai 2002; Ahmed and Chowdhury 2003). It influences individual localities by existing in multiple spaces. According to Grewal and Kaplan, global capitalism spreads its "scattered hegemonies" through the process (Grewal and Kalpan 1994, quoted in Desai 2002: 403).

This flow of global capital is maintained, produced and controlled by international financial institutions and transnational companies and brings out a trade system that is a "composition of international transaction" (Sassen 2007: 200). These financial transactions or increased liberalization of trade markets across borders and regions were made possible through the advancement of information technology and transportation,

and by new national policies in finance for the state.<sup>31</sup> Thus, economic globalization has been marked as a cause behind the “intensification of worldwide social relations which link distant localities in such a way that local happenings are shaped by events occurring many miles away and vice versa” (Giddens 1990: 64).

The consequences of global economy for local places have been varied. The free trade global market is responsible for the collapse of national industrial economies and their replacement by private corporate high tech companies and a rising unemployment problem. Globalization and associated policies operate within a system that acts as a single autonomous global institution that spreads its profit-gaining projects asymmetrically. It is the Third World that has most faced the burden of a globalized economy.<sup>32</sup> Third World countries are providing low cost labour for the multinational industries. The infinite supply of labour for the industrial future is founded upon “agro industrialism, landlessness, hyper-urbanization and environmental deterioration”<sup>33</sup> (McMichael 1996: 216). Globalization and its power thus disempower every locality, affects economically and socially every social group and relations between men and women living in the society. However, the level of impact of the global capital economy on women is higher than on men due to the asymmetrical gender relationship based on structured ideological differences and gendered division of labour in the society (Afshar 1985; Boserup 1987). The globalization process perpetuates the gender division of labour by sustaining this asymmetrical gender ideology and also by increasing women’s economic status based on class and ethnic differences. The following discussion will shed light on this issue.

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<sup>31</sup> For example, the Uruguay Round and the formation of the World Trade Organization (Moghadam 2007: 137).

<sup>32</sup> The Third World has become “islands of enormous privilege” for the multinational corporations in the globalized world (Chomsky 1994:19). The replacement of human resources with high tech machines has increased the unemployment problem and Third World countries are the most negatively affected. Unemployment is particularly high in Third World countries (World Bank 1995: 29)

<sup>33</sup> How locals are affected by different capitalist projects of globalization demands deeper and more complex analysis. Global-local interaction has many dynamic consequences as well. We cannot overlook that, while the global market gets profit from the local, the global flow of people, images and different ideas from different cultures create a new kind of local environment (Appadurai 1990).

## WOMEN AND GLOBALIZATION

The emergence of a globalized economy has affected women in different ways. First of all, the heightened demands of labour due to the expansion of capitalist industries have included women as cheap labour in the market. Women's inclusion in the labour intensive paid jobs as low cost labours and as consumers of the products of globalization have become one of the integral parts of a successful market strategy. Women's unpaid reproductive and domestic work, perceived as their primary duty, has not been reduced. The gender-biased structural barriers preclude women's rights for education, land or any productive assets. The double workload limits their life into narrow income earning activities, reducing their opportunities for productive life. The demand for foreign workers in the industrialized countries led to a high rates migration of both men and women. However, women as both skilled and unskilled workers have been entitled to less remuneration than men. Globalization has increased landlessness, homelessness, and unemployment (Polakoff 2007: 7) all over the world and women's lives are mostly affected since they are the ones who bear the procreative spirit and become active to recover whatever contrary situation they face in crisis period. They are struggling against the conditions imposed upon their families and children, as well as fighting against everyday threats of domination by international finance institutions. These issues are addressed specifically in the following discussion in relation to my research context.

One of the major consequences of economic liberalization is the feminization of labour. Economic globalization has integrated massive transactions of capital, including labour capital. The change of immigration rules and the increasing flow of labours crossing borders started when the developing countries encountered more foreign investment, and bilateral and multilateral arrangements were introduced, such as regional agreements like NAFTA, the formation of the European Union, and relocation of industries and production sites (Roberts and Hite 2007). The situation explains the reason behind exploitation of labour in the global industrial market (Fernandez-Kelly 1983; Ong 1987). However, male labourers are privileged by the gender ideologies (Moghadam 2007: 139) in this flexible system of labour transaction (Ong 1991). Women participating in the labour market have been disadvantaged in terms of wages, household workload, and levels of professional training. According to Moghadam (2007:139), it is this new

global economy and free trade market that “relies heavily on the work of women, both waged and unwaged, in formal sectors and in the home, in manufacturing, and in public and private services”. Transnational companies have invested 80 percent of their capital in Third World countries, spreading 850 export processing zones all over the world where 27 million people are working (International Labour Organization 1998), the majority of whom are women (Gill 2002: 111). In developing countries like those in South and Southeast Asia, Morocco, parts of Latin America and the Caribbean, and even in parts of Canada, women are recruited in labour-intensive and low-cost garment and textile industries; the process continues to the present (Gill 2002; Mossman 2006). Young girls qualified as having “nimble fingers” are considered more suitable for the job (Heyzer 1986; Lim 1985; Wiest and Mohiuddin 2003). This situation is termed “feminization of labour” (Standing 1989). Feminization of labour has its origin in proletarianization of female workers in the capitalist market, which was rooted in commercialization of agriculture and internal migration<sup>34</sup> (Boserup 1970).

Feminization of unemployment has been another issue that should receive attention here. The widespread unemployment problem is one of the disadvantages of a global economy. Women in particular suffer in the process due to the patriarchal class and gender ideology of the global economy.<sup>35</sup> There is no doubt that in the current global economy female labour plays the most significant role, however, it is the women who also experience the highest rate of unemployment (Moghadam 2007: 143). The

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<sup>34</sup> Feminization of labour refers to the increase of women’s presence in the rapidly expanding industrial labour of developing countries. This has occurred due to trade liberalization building upon a labour-intensive market economy. The process has also included commercialization of all kinds of products, including agriculture. Commercialization of agriculture has involved technologies introduced to the agricultural system as well as a unified production distribution controlled by the monopolized trade policy. The whole process has reduced the manual labour in the system. Subsistence products have been replaced by cash crops, and small-scale farmers have been unable to compete with the market demand. Women with a major role in agriculture in developing countries have suffered due to the change of local production systems. Due to the structured social ideology, women already have less access to the limited resources they produce, to credits, and to household decision making. The erosion of rural agro-based markets has reduced the household food supply. Parallel to the erosion of indigenous agriculture, there has been extensive growth of an industry-based economy which has been responsible labour displacement. Many women have taken on non-farm paid jobs to recover their household income deficit which has also caused migration. The development of home-based craft work has been established in the process. The female proletarianization at this time has also been marked in social science as “housewifization” (Mies 1986)

<sup>35</sup> The existing social structure precludes women’s political, social, and economic empowerment with established norms, values and responsibilities in the society. According to Wiest, Mocellin and Motsisi (1996: 6), “the social structure of most societies formally relegates women to inferiority and dependency, increasing their vulnerability through their disempowerment.”

globalization process has produced continuous changes in the local economy. Due to free market competition, frequent loss in the export sectors is a regular event that results in sudden job loss (*ibid*). All over the world women workers have lost their jobs in different times due to the failure of export goods industries (see Gill 2002; Mossman 2006; Moghadam 2007; Polakoff 2007). Another important cause of women's unemployment has been technological innovation and expansion within industries. Human power has been replaced by automated machines. Both male and female workers have been victimized in the process. However, there are cases where women are less recruited and have been replaced by male workers.<sup>36</sup> Feminization of unemployment thus is one of the major traits of the global economy (*ibid*), adding another pattern of oppression to women's lives. Thus, the expansion of the global market economy intensifies the level of discrimination and stretches the past history of inequality for its recipients.

The globalization process facilitating the development of corporization gains profit over women's lives in so many other different ways. One of the major changes that globalization brings out in the world is environmental stress (Shiva 2000). With expansion of free trade markets, the World Trade Organization, International Monetary Fund and World Bank development investment projects in the Third World are generating new ecological risks. As Vandana Shiva (2000: 113) argues, the most "resource-hungry" and "pollution-intensive industries" are situated in third World countries "through the economies of free trade". In 1991, the chief economist of the World Bank wrote in a memo to the Senior World Bank personnel: "Just between you and me, shouldn't the World Bank be encouraging more migration of the dirty industries to the LDC (less developed countries) (*ibid*)?"

Privatization of water is risking lives of infants and children particularly.<sup>37</sup> Women and communities depending on agriculture and forest resources are highly affected by the climate change and pollution caused by the globalization agenda. Tropical deforestation in Latin America, South and Southeast Asia are destroying the ecologically sustainable lifestyles of farmers and minority indigenous communities. Indigenous

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<sup>36</sup> This has been noted in Mexico (see Sklair 1993), in some textile industries in Spain and Italy (Moghadam 2007), and in garment factories in Dhaka (Wiest and Mohiuddin 2003).

<sup>37</sup> "In the Maquiladora zone of Mexico, drinking water is so scarce that babies and children drink Coca-Cola and Pepsi. Water scarcity is clearly a source of corporate profits. Coca-Cola's products sell in 195 countries, generating revenues of \$ 16 billion" (Shiva 2000: 124-125)

women in India and Bangladesh have been losing their forestland and resources due to government-led projects that are funded by global institutions like World Bank, Asian Development Bank (ADB) or the state itself (Shiva 2000). In India, the State initiated a project for commercial timber harvesting on the ancestral forest land of women in Uttarkhand that eventually led to the *Chipko* movement<sup>38</sup> (Shiva and Bandyopadhyay 1986: 133).

ADB is known as the World Bank of Bangladesh (Muhammad 2007). It has created many disastrous environmental consequences through its corporate agenda. The launch of imported shrimp industry in the saline water land in southern Bangladesh (Rahman 2003), and the usurpation of more than 7,000 acres of forest lands of Mandi indigenous communities by starting the commercial monoculture of rubber plantations (Gain 1995) are a few of many other projects. Through many different projects ADB has paved the path for foreign corporations to launch business in the area and gain profit from common property (Muhammad 2007).

The global economy not only targets women as low cost labour, and takes control over their livelihood resources, but it also targets them as primary consumers in the marketplace because women offer the most potential as agents of the global economy (Gill 2002). The expansion of the beauty industry is one example. The beauty industry grew in the United States in the late nineteenth century and then expanded all over the world. Nowadays brand name toiletries, skin and health care products launched by transnational companies can be found even in the smallest towns. Physical attractiveness, beauty, looks, and food habits have become globalized, and all of these factors have a global standard (Black 2006; Berry 2007: 101). To become beautiful and healthy everyone should achieve those standards; thus beauty, looks, health consciousness or skin-care therapy have become a form of capital. It is women who are targeted as primary

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<sup>38</sup> The word *Chipko* means to get attached to something. In 1973 a group of women in Uttarkhand, one of the districts of Himalayan in Utter Pradesh, India raised their voice against Government Forestry Project of making mountain trees to logs. The women were all villagers and claimed that this deforestation would cause less rain and their water scarcity will not only affect their agriculture but also increase other environmental degradation. One of the major characteristic of this movement was, these group of women united to grow a movement in a non-violent way. When the Govt officers came to cut the trees they literally embrace the trees and declared that they would give their lives to stop tree logging. In between 1970 to 1980 the spirit of these village women continued to spread all over India. The organized movement became internationally recognized as *Chipko* Movement.

consumers of most of the products coming from the beauty industry, from hairstyle to health diet, from high-tech exercise machines to cosmetic surgery. Fashion, media, advertising companies and the beauty saloon business have also become part of a global culture and a lucrative part of the profit-making project of large corporations which mainly project women as their model campaigners. There are terms like “women of style”, “women of looks”, “women of size” or “women of status”. It is out of consumer consciousness that a middle class woman has to have a good look, fashionable hair and clothing (Berry 2007: 108-109). The mass commercialization of products to maintain the consumer consciousness thus affects the social lives of men, women and children living in the society. According to Berry (2007: 102), “global and local economies influence not only our worldwide beauty standards but also (a) the things we do to change our appearance as well as (b) patterns of consumption”. The emergence of the beauty parlour business and beauty therapy as a part of multinational industry has become an end result in the process.<sup>39</sup> During the advent of the industrial capital market, middle class female desire towards beauty and health consciousnesses was shaped by the standard determined by the industry itself. However, construction of a beauty myth and female individual desire has not been a linear factor spontaneously pursued by the middle class women. As soon as beauty was made one of the capitals of global industry, the beauty ideology was imposed on consumers, with a “long lasting and devastating effect” (Gimlin 1996: 506), particularly on women.

In the industrial period, white, black and minority lower class women’s labour was used to maintain middle class women’s beauty and leisure culture (Black 2006: 146). In the global beauty industry market, the same class of women are appointed to support middle class women’s struggle to accomplish the standard feminine beauty. Mandi women working in middle class beauty parlours in Bangladesh (Gulrukh 2004), or black women’s work in American beauty salons in the early 1980s (Boyd 1996), are cases in point. These workers are expected “to bring an emotional component to their beauty work, to nurture their clients, and, in this nurturing, to frequently sacrifice their professional expertise and knowledge for the sake of their client’s wishes” (Gimlin 1996: 506). The

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<sup>39</sup> In 1998, in the United Kingdom the beauty industry was valued at 366 million GBP, which was apparently 6 percent more than the previous year’s income (Black and Sharma 2001: 103).

beauty industry supports the cultural construction of femininity (Black and Sharma 2001: 100) and in a complex way goes hand in hand with the female labour exploitation project of globalization. Global restructuring has increased women's subordination to a higher level (Blank 1997; Naples 1998; Pokaloff 2007). However, it has also helped increase women's capacity to contest the biased world against them and they have gained a certain amount of empowerment in the process (Pokaloff 2007). The beauty industry and labour industry have been exploiting women as well as providing employment to the group (Black 2007). Therefore, the process of globalization should be examined in terms of the advantages and disadvantages women gain from it. Understanding globalization from its culture of consumption and the contesting agency of women brings out a clear picture of the struggle, negotiation and responses of the individual towards the global process (Collins 2003: 21). Globalization has intensified the hegemonic experiences for women as well as paved opportunities for challenging global capital through global solidarities (Brecher, Costello and Smith 2000). Women's day-to-day experience has changed at the local level and they can contest or counter the situation by creating "counterhegemony" (Desai 2002: 416) with the help of women's agency. It is important to examine all these factors equally to analyze the social changes caused by global economy.

#### AGENCY THEORY

The notion of "agency" leads to a discussion of the complexities of human subjectivity, particularly of political organizations. From Franz Fanon (1965) to Walter Johnson (1997), theorists have worked with the notion of agency as a tool to understand social discrimination and have paved the way for us to understand agency as a primary way of signifying power relations in the history of women's revolution and labour movement. The centrality of gender as a subject of inquiry grew out of these historical investigations (Scott 1986). Indigenous communities in South Asia already have a history of strong peasant agency that raised its voice against colonial powers (van Schendel and Bal 1998: 9-10). Women contesting, responding or negotiating with colonial or other patriarchal oppressors in the surrounding situation are not a new phenomenon in the context. Indigenous women's agency, from initiating the non-violent *Chipko* movement in India, to Algerian women donning the veil, to carrying weapons during war with French colonizers (Fanon 1965), or to matrilineal Nayar women taking action through



their own agency while negotiating male authority inside the community (Menon 1996), all show the versatility of women's action as a social agent. The women's agency therefore can be seen in relation to subjectivity, individualism, resistance, culturalism, motivation and practice (Barnard and Spencer 1996: 300-301). It is not simply resistance; it is the action that women take according to a complex and contradictory social situation, which helps to understand the complete idea of women's agency (Ahearn 2001: 115-116). According to Macleod, women as agents in the society, "even as subordinate players, always play an active part that goes beyond the dichotomy of victimization/acceptance, a dichotomy that flattens out a complex and ambiguous agency in which women accept, accommodate, ignore, resist or protest – sometimes all at the same time" (MacLeod 1992: 534).

The idea of agency is deeply analyzed by the practice theorists. Their understanding comprised a relationship between human action and society and culture. Human action plays the central role to the situation and is perceived as always related to the social structures (Ortner 1984, 1989, 1996; Ahearn 2001). According to Ortner (1984: 158-159) the human actions are powerful enough to "unmake" the socially ascribed situations; it is the actors or the agents who participate in social construction of reality and interact with it, sometimes even by making a new social reality. Agency therefore is centered on human actions that can be responsible for reproducing as well as eliminating social constraints. Practice theorist Giddens understands the agency-structure relationship by emphasizing the "pursuit" of agency. According to Giddens, actions of the social actors are formed in counter situations according to the rules of the social structures. Such actions reinforce and reconfigure the power of social structure (Giddens 1979: 57).

Bourdieu's works have been considered some of the most valuable for understanding the relation between agency and social structure. Bourdieu used the term "habitus" to move his notion of agency away from a traditional structuralist position (Swartz 1997; Ahearn 2001). In his study of Algerian peasants (1965), Bourdieu analyses social order as a system where agency is based on the consciousness of the individual rather than the ascribed social norms. He explains in his study that norms of the society are not "comprehended as an inaccessible ideal or as a restraining imperative, but are rather present in the consciousness of each individual" (1965: 22, quoted in Swartz 1997:

98). Habitus, according to Bourdieu, is the deeply internalized disposition of the agent that generates the action and is conditioned by “structuring the structures” from which they take shape (Bourdieu 1990: 53). Ahearn explains Bourdieu’s idea of habitus as a generative force to create an unlimited number of actions – each of the actions contains culturally ascribed meaning “embodied by the habitus” (Ahearn 2001: 118). According to Swartz, these dispositions make the agents act in such a way so that they can reproduce the prevailing social structures (Swartz 1997: 100-103). The actions of people living in the society therefore are shaped by unconscious preconceived realities, but these people are capable of recreating and challenging the culturally constructed preconceptions.

Bourdieu perceived human action in relation to agency in two different ways. One is that which rationalizes practice, active with the requirements of life and essential strategic life choices, and the other is that which creates differences between actors of agency and the opposed groups. The latter practice is linked more to resistance and subjectivity that grows out of the sense of autonomy (Swartz 1997: 114). Bourdieu’s understanding of agency thus expands the term more directly to the understanding of culture, structure and power.

Reproduction of social structure through action is an idea of Bourdieu’s agency theory that mirrors the position of Giddens, however, Bourdieu distinguishes his perception by relating habitus with symbolic capital. His understanding of the term “capital” is associated with the Marxist tradition. However, his theory goes beyond the traditional definition of capital – “as accumulated labour” (Swartz 1997: 74) – and expands to include three different symbolic categories: cultural capital (different qualifications, for example, educational degrees), social capital (social networks, friendship, family), and economic capital (money and other material resources). Of these, social capital brings out the significance of agency and subjectivity. Social capital for Bourdieu is based on acquaintance and networking that determines human actions and practices that are deliberate actions to gain access to resources. These actions create and maintain social capital to stabilize themselves in different situations. For example, immigrant families deliberately maintain a care network with their natal families or other kin relations by sending remittances (Zontini and Reynolds 2007). This process is reciprocal and helps to maintain cultural values and family ties, but also builds a safety

net for both sides. Bourdieu perceives the use of social capital as strategic. This behavioural practice that social actors undertake, according to Bourdieu, is deliberate action rather than socially ascribed rules. In their everyday life, the actors/agents operate their strategies and decisions to grab or confirm more of the social capital in order to secure themselves (Bourdieu: 1977a: 9; Swartz 1997: 74-75). The use of social capital thus rationalizes the relation between habitus and action. Habitus contains different ideas, beliefs and social values existing in culture and advocates human action towards the practical sense to survive in the social world.

### *Bourdieu's theory of "symbolic violence"*

A very important aspect of practice theory is Bourdieu's invaluable approach to observe the process of reproduction, which means identifying the expansion of inequality in post industrial societies through symbolic exploitation (Bourdieu 1990). By "symbolic manipulation" he means forms of manipulation beyond economic oppression which can arise. His theory of violence and capital rationalizes the transformation of capitalist exploitation from an exposed control to a silent mode of oppression. This perspective of looking at symbolic manipulation thus stresses the importance of looking at religion, cultural practices and languages as direct sources of creating domination over people by manipulating their cognitive behaviour. This system of symbolic manipulation is explained by Bourdieu as the "structuring of the structures" (see Swartz 1997: 83). It is a system that shows the mode of structuring the social system in a manipulative way, the means being cultural materials like religious customs, ancestral practices, and specific myths and beliefs in a community. The symbolic systems thus are the structured structures that make people internalize the dominant cultural ideology and act and communicate according to that (Bourdieu 1977b).

Bourdieu's theory of manipulation over minorities by the ideologies generated from symbolic violence provide the basic understanding of the ethnic, class and gender relationship of the Mandi matrilineal group in Kalachandpur community, a point I have engaged in detail in the last chapter.

In short, the discussion above relates the approach of practice theorists to understand reasons behind the reproduction of different structures of inequality within the social system. They try to theorize the change by looking at the actions of a person

(agency) who is shaped by the social system. Practice theorists thus bring out the importance of understanding the sociocultural structures that produce and constrain agency. In accord with this approach, I try to explain Mandi social organization and political economy, and their interpersonal relations, including husband-wife relationships, urban-rural kin ties, different Mandi ancestral practices in the city such as the evening *chu* gatherings. I try to see components like these as structures that determine the forms of agency. I have used this conceptual framework as an essential tool to understand the personhood, decisions, actions, and intentions of everyday life of Mandi beauty workers, all of which underpins major concepts of this thesis – agency, gender and kinship.

## Chapter Four

# INITIAL EXPERIENCES AFTER MIGRATING TO THE CITY

### INTRODUCTION

The discussion of agency in Mandi beauty worker's community in Dhaka City will remain incomplete if not related to their post-migration story. This chapter explores the initial experiences of Mandi beauty workers after migration to the city. What I mean by "initial experience" is their adaptability to the city culture, the language barrier, feelings for family members at home, difficulties of finding a job or experience as a trainee in a new job, and their responses to other unfamiliar situations they faced. Their statements extracted from the interviews offer insights into their perspectives and interpretations of the social realities they face. These narrations also portray their practiced social values, and obligations to the people they care about in Mandi communities both in Dhaka and in the villages.

### MANDI MEN AND WOMEN MIGRATING TO THE CITY

The broader socio-political and economic reasons for Mandi people's migration to the city have been discussed elaborately in the theory chapter, including how the colonial rule and the state control over Mandi land clearly played a major role in creating the pre-conditions for the migration of the Mandi beauty workers in the Dhaka City.

The city life for Mandi men and Mandi women is different. There are obvious differences between male and female Mandi migrants in terms of job opportunities and the prefigured social roles. Even though from a minority group, Mandi men have certain social security and privilege in the city work life which Mandi women do not have only because they are women. Mandi men come to city in search for jobs as caretakers, security guards, gardeners, shopkeepers, etc. Mandi women come to the city with the hope of two kinds of jobs: either a job in the beauty parlour or a job in a Bengali middle class house as a maidservant or domestic worker. Until the mid 1980s the majority of

Mandi women who migrated to Dhaka ended up working in for middle class families as domestic workers or maidservants until they find a network to get job training in a beauty parlour. By the 1990s, among Bengali middle class families “Mandi women” had become almost synonymous with “innocent and trustworthy maidservant” (Gulrukh 2004: 22).<sup>40</sup> At the advent of the parlour business in Dhaka City these women were presented as “Chinese beauticians”. Another aspect of the gendered nature of the task was revealed when many of these women were entrapped to work in massage parlours as a masseuse (or a prostitute). During my field work I noted more than ten cases referred by the interviewees who knew the victims who were forced to work as a prostitute by the recruiting agent (usually male relatives in the city) to work in a massage parlour instead of a beauty parlour or were forced by the massage parlour owner to work as a prostitute. While doing my fieldwork I found that out of my 29 interviewees ten started their career in the city as a maidservant/domestic worker/cook. None of them were directly forced into prostitution but many of them were sexually harassed or were threatened. These women, between 14 and 45 years of age, with no work experience and with minimum education (50% of them had completed grade five, the rest had completed high school, and one of them completed a Master’s degree) decide to migrate in search for jobs. Their decision to move from their locality to another city is conditioned by their ability to bear the travel cost and the cost of living while they look for a new job, ability to learn from and adapt to a new culture and language, ability to adapt to a new labour market, habituation to maintaining distant relationships with family members, and finally, the hope of making money to reduce their social and economic problems in life. Most of the time Mandi women, migrated to Dhaka or other cities, had endured all the difficulties and survived as city dwellers. However, there are few cases where they returned to home after several months due to homesickness, lack of savings, or a bitter experience at work or in the community. The significance of all these activities lies in the fact that these actions are part of different cultural politics and personal agencies that are complexly assimilated to shape Mandi beauty worker identity in the city. These are the actions that open or

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<sup>40</sup> The situation is not much different from the situation of Filipino women’s migration to Canada to get work as domestic workers or “caregivers”. Commoditized domestic labour culture in Canadian middle class families has accommodated Filipino migrants in such a way that the word Filipina has become identical with the word “nanny” (Barber 2000: 400).

constrain “choices” for Mandi women. Mandi women are the sole earners of the family (in most of the interviewed cases) in the city (and with principal heir to family property in the Mandi localities in the village) or the principal participants to upgrade the economic stability of their families. Their choice of migration brings out a dynamic aspect to the process of migration strategies where women are not merely victims of social structure but actors to accumulate efforts to bring various positive changes in their lives (Barbar 2000). Mandi beauty workers I interviewed typically mentioned two major reasons for their migration: a) to recover economic instability b) to make strong family ties.

### ECONOMIC INSTABILITY

The reason for Mandi peoples’ economic loss is rooted in their history of oppression by the State both in the pre- and post-colonial periods. Mandi people who were deprived of their land rights (along with many other basic rights) started migrating to different cities in the country. Being responsible for taking care of family property, parents and siblings, Mandi women opted to migrate for city jobs earlier than men. Research to date suggests that Mandi women constitute a large proportion of Mandi city migrants, approximately 85% (Gulrukh 2003). All of my interviewees told me that the possibility for better economic status and a fixed, secured monthly income made them decide to come to Dhaka. Obviously, the decision was also shaped by the availability of jobs for women in the city. Mandi women (married and single and ranging in age from 12 to 32) told me that they have come to the city with the hope of saving some money and buying some land back in the village. Most of the interviewees noted their minority status in the city and that city life is not for them, nor can they think of competing with the majority people. These parlour workers speak of a future for their children where they can safely practice their lives in their own traditional way. However, some interviewees noted the benefits of city life. Chameli explained to me several times how different experiences in the city are opening doors for obtaining a better life for their community, including knowledge of better medical opportunities, different kinds of training at work, experience of living alone, and also the benefits of knowing different kinds of people. All these experiences, according to Chameli, have expanded their choices and chances for a better economy, and have strengthened their hopes. Chameli said, “We had to take support from our Mandi neighbours, relatives living in the city at the beginning. In fact,

we learn a lot from each other every day. For example, those who are educated help each other to understand city culture. Manjuli has completed her MA in home economics. She did not get a job and came to work with us. We feel good when she reads to us the daily newspaper every day or helps us with our money orders. She also teaches some of us how to read and write Bengali. I am so grateful to her and to friends and relatives like Manjuli.”

Sixteen years old Ruma came to the city, following her cousin, “to send money to her mother” who lives in Durgapur. Her father died from an unknown disease (as she described) when she was six years of age. He left no property. Her mother is in her late 40s and works as a day labourer under a Bengali landlord. With the help of her aunt, Ruma came to the city when she was ten years old as a maidservant in the Mohammadpur area. Fortunately, people where she worked as a housemaid behaved well with her. Ruma said that even though working in that house was not a bad experience as many others have had, she wanted to go for a parlour job for more money. She knew that there are several risks on that profession. She heard from her aunt that the uncertainty, job loss, poor salary, or ill treatment are also issues in parlour jobs. Ruma agreed that at the beginning it was not easy due to issues like these. She said that, with the help of Mandi co-workers, her aunt and one of her cousin, after some time she got a permanent job. Ruma’s aunt Molina said, “she was working hard and determined to get what she wanted.” Now Ruma has a permanent job in *Shundori* Beauty Parlour in Baridhara and she is saving money. She is determined to buy a small piece of land in the village which she and her mother dream of. She said, “if not me, my children will fulfill our dream and live in the village happily one more time like my parents did.” Ruma knows that the amount of money she gets is not enough, but she dreams for a better life because, like Chameli, she also believes that city life opens up numerous opportunities and it is possible to “make life better if you honestly look for it”.

Chameli’s and Ruma’s observations shed light on their positive approach to city life, gratefulness to their supporters and a realistic understanding of their future planning. Undoubtedly, economic instability has been the primary reason for Mandi beauty worker migration to the city. What can also be witnessed here is that the struggle to overcome financial insecurity rests upon Mandi women’s approach to life with multiple possibilities,



which also demonstrates the strength of their agency. The statements of Chameli and Ruma also demonstrate Mandi women's journey towards education and becoming more knowledgeable about urban culture. This cultural capital (Bourdieu 1977a, 1986), education and knowledge, that they get after migrating to the city either by possible chance of going to an academic institution or by their engagement with middle class culture where they work as maidservants, gradually becomes a necessary strategy to fight against economic instability. Layers of sociability that Mandi beauty workers acquire from community members, coworkers, and relatives is a very significant part of their city life, and ensures the proliferation of cultural capital from person to person.

#### DESIRE FOR FAMILY BONDING

The desire to bond with family is another reason behind Mandi women's migration to the city. Mandi people migrating to the city maintain strong ties with families living in the villages. Over time when Mandi communities like Kalachandpur were established, Mandi Welfare Associations, Church maintained hostels, parlour hostels and residences<sup>41</sup> for Mandi city dwellers were founded, and the city dwellers got more chances to stay close to their relatives.

Here is the story of a Mandi man named Prodeep.

Nowadays there are lots of opportunities for both Mandi men and women. Even though you don't have a job, you can try your luck staying in the city with the help of your relatives, Mandi Church personnel, Mandi welfare association (*Nokmandi*). I remember when I came to Dhaka for the first time looking for my sister (who started working in a house in Shanitnagar area). I didn't know anyone in the city and suffered a lot. For three days I looked for my sister, trying to ask people about the location with my not so fluent Bengali. For three days I didn't eat anything. A Bengali guard who worked in a two-storied house as a guard saw me walking on the street. He helped me. Without his master's permission he let me sleep in the house. Three days I slept on top of the window sunshade. I suffered but I found my sister at the end. She works in Gulshan parlour now. She brought my mother here. She sends money for my uncle who lives in Tangail. My sister still cries whenever she thinks of my three days suffering in the city. Now I am happy. I live with my sister's family.

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<sup>41</sup> There are a few cases where the parlour owner rented a whole house to keep beauty worker families together in the city.

There are many stories similar to this one. When I spoke with Prodeep's sister Nomira, she told me that money has always been a priority concern in her life but only because she cared about her family and wanted to stay with them, protect them like many other Mandi women. Studies on migration and immigrant lives have provided evidence that female migrants decide to move or migrate due to their strong desire to unite with family (Cerrutti and Massey 2001: 198; Curran and Sagu 2001, Brettell 2002). In this case 20 out of my 29 interviewees came to Dhaka either inspired by a sister or cousin or other relatives. All of these parlour workers have strong ties and regular communication with their families who are either living in the city or in the villages. Most of them have taken initiatives to bring family members to the city or have plans to bring them to the city. All of them send money to the families and relatives living in the village. Many of them have brought family members to the city to look after their children when they are at work.

#### *Patriarchy and family bonding*

Family bonding stems from a combination of the patriarchal social norm and social insecurity. Mandi women's choices in the city are constrained by the gendered norms of the society. For example, I was told by one interviewee that no matter how bad the financial condition was, if a woman was married to a man in the village, the Mandi community expectation would be that she would bring her husband to the city as soon as possible. A Mandi man married with a local Mandi woman does not have the urgency to bring his wife to the city and can determine whether or when the wife should join him. A Mandi beauty worker's marriage, her stay in the city, and often her decision to seek more education is being decided for her by the male members of the household. Patriarchal norms thus overpower the autonomy of Mandi women in the city. There are a few cases of parental arranged marriage<sup>42</sup> of Mandi women in the city. Then again I must mention that parentally arranged marriage is common in Bengali society. There are many cases of young women going through arranged marriages by parents. Guardians want to choose for their daughters so that the girl is secure and accountable to the new bond and will not be attracted to whomever they want. When a Mandi woman decides to come to the city to

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<sup>42</sup> When parents and/or guardians decide life partners for their children.

work in the parlour, the approval of a Mandi male member in the family is sometimes necessary. The case is strongest in the household where a husband is skilled to take care of the property and decides on both property and the woman's life. The single women are taken care of by the guardians or relatives living around them, and here also the approval of male guardians is an issue. Therefore it is important to note that Mandi beauty workers' kin ties are conditional not only on their ancestral practices and responsibilities of female members, but also upon patriarchal social norms in Bangladeshi society which determine the social image of an individual and the institutions as well. Mandi beauty workers who are living in the city by themselves or married to Bengali men do not have easy relationships with their relatives. Because of the discriminatory ethnic relationship with the Bengalis, Mandi-Bengali marriage is not acceptable to the Mandi community. However, the sense of security and patriarchal norms become secondary when it comes to the question of earning money for food. With or without patriarchal surveillance Mandi women are bound to leave home and go for urban parlour jobs to secure food and shelter for their family.

#### *Concern for safety and family security*

When I asked Ruma about security in the face of patriarchal norms and urban uncertainties, she said,

We Mandis love to take unknown steps. We are peace loving and love our traditions. It is true that our relatives try to keep an eye on single and young girls like us which is something that bothers us. But they have some good reason. From where I see, Mandi young girls are careful these days, unless fooled by a close person, they try not to mix with strangers, be it Bengali or Mandi. We try not to live alone and that's because of the situation of women all over the country, we are not safe. But even though we are inside our hostel, are we secured? What if our owner comes in one day, take some of us and throw us inside someone's bedroom?<sup>43</sup>

Gendered norms operate with more power inside the lower class third world minority groups (Mohanty 1988), which means their required privileges as human beings in the society are prohibited by the fact that they are poor, identified as an ethnic minority, and because they are women. Ruma's statement expresses these facts. Her

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<sup>43</sup> This statement was grounded on what Ruma heard from her Mandi co-workers. She spoke about beauty workers being threatened by Bengali men (at work and outside).

understandings also consist of Mandi women's awareness of their insecurity in city living as well as their loyalty to Mandi ancestral values. Mandi women's awareness of their insecurity can be read as their aspiration to face challenges in city life; but their own interpretation to the loyalty to ancestral Mandi practices explains how autonomy and independence of a Mandi woman is hindered through multiple layers of power structure camouflaged beneath expected responsibility and obligation to the family values.

For example, Beli, a Mandi parlour worker of 32 said to me,

the reason I am always a responsible girl to my family is because I never distracted my life for the so-called "modern" life that many of the young Mandi girls are living now. When it was time I married someone whom my family trusted and I managed to bring my husband with me in the city and we are living happily. My husband doesn't do any work. I know that is not easy but it's hard to get jobs in the city. But he provides me security, takes care of my children. That is enough for me.

In another case, Jhuma, a Mandi parlour worker of 25, said,

I am happy to become a city girl. I love my work and my hostel life. Many people say it's not good to be alone and live like this. Many people in the village say that I am not a good woman anymore because parlour jobs are not prestigious. I do not care what they say. It's true that I don't have enough money to rent my own apartment house, but I brought my mother here for several months and gave her good medication when she was severely ill. I am happy that I am a responsible woman. That is what a good woman should do. I have always dreamt of a free city life and I am grateful to my cousin who brought me here and gave me this job. It is because of her I am here now.

In the narrations above, Mandi women were speaking on behalf of the social "us" that takes care of patriarchal norms. Their thoughts about life are in flux and in constant adjustment with familial obligation, expected femininity, and desire for an independent modern life. They try to play their expected gendered role as a member of the family, for example, taking care of a sick mother, providing shelter for brother and other family members, and sending money to the family. When it comes to the question of their independence and individual decision making, they rationalize it with the concepts of the "traditional" on the one hand and freedom loving social values on the other hand, which show their constant struggle to face their expected role in the family and community. Studies on female migration and transnational families (Phizacklea 1999; Ryan 2004) have suggested that to understand the power structure it is important to underline all

dynamics of family networks maintained by the female migrants. It is true that Mandi women gain a certain amount of empowerment and autonomy in their city life. But their agency operates within a given structure and can only be understood if looked at through the lens of the oppositions formed against Mandi women's individual and collective agency.

#### INITIAL EXPERIENCES AFTER COMING TO THE CITY

##### *Cultural difference, unfamiliar environment*

Upon migrating to the city, the first thing the Mandi women have to face is the difference between Mandi-Bengali life-style. Mandis and Bengalis live their lives completely opposite to each other in terms of language, religion, inheritance system and other everyday life practices. With all these differences, Mandi women and their families coming to the city face different types of challenges to cope with city life.

All of my interviewees have told me that they felt uncomfortable and insecure while going out. "There are too many people, too many cars and everything is new, unknown and expensive here", said Synthia. Being members of a minority community, Mandi beauty workers and their family are treated as aliens by the Bengali majority community most of the time. The problem arises especially for Mandi children in the urban community. Probha, a 34 year old mother, told me that at the beginning her children were not well accepted at the school. Because of the ill-treatment by the teachers as well as the other (Bengali) students of the school they were unable to learn proper Bengali and English, so she had to send them to a different school in Mymensingh where they can at least see a few more Mandi faces. For the beauty workers who come to the city as trainees, it is still a problem. It is because of this alienation they have problem communicating with the Bengali customers and owners in the workplace. Nancy, an eleven year old trainee, told me once that she could not ask for her monthly salary because she felt scared and unwelcome at her workplace. The Bengali parlour workers did not talk to her and she was the only Mandi at the store for the first three months. She

did not get her salary for three months until a new Mandi woman who joined her as a worker helped her out and asked the owner for her salary on her behalf.<sup>44</sup>

### *Alienation of language*

The language barrier has always been a problem for Mandi beauty workers in the city. This happens mainly because it is expected by the owner that they will not be able to communicate with the customers properly and partly because of their lack fluency in Bengali. In earlier period (1970s and 1980s) communicating with customers was a problem for Mandi workers. Nowadays language is less of a problem for Mandi beauty workers, however, the relatives and Mandi men who come with their spouse are still having difficulties dealing with the language issue, and hence they are not comfortable living outside their own community and have less socialization with Bengali people. Beli once told me that she was fired from one of her jobs because of the lack of fluency in Bengali. She also said that her brother lost a job almost at the same time for the same reason. His was a job as “helper” in a grocery shop. Beli said “It was a difficult time and we both needed jobs. If I only had a little more knowledge in Bengali, I would have been saved. We did not have any jobs for three months after that and we suffered a lot. ”

### *Homesickness and family responsibility*

Homesickness and family responsibility is another significant concern that can be related as a part of Mandi beauty workers’ migration experience. Mandi women’s homesickness, which is very intricately entangled with cultural shock and multiple losses, can be understood in the context of migration and kinship networking. The stories of their emotional journey tell about Mandi women’s attachment to the family. Their emotional attachment with the family and kin relations acts as a survival mechanism in the new location, which provides the basis on which they decide their future plans.

All my interviewees have mentioned homesickness as one of the most important parts of their journey towards an urban life. When they spoke about homesickness, they refer to their family, friends, and neighbours as well as the water, air, environment, food and all familiarities of their ancestral locality. Most of the time homesickness was an

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<sup>44</sup> This parlour was owned by a Bengali housewife. She completed a course from England on how to run a beauty parlour. Upon her return she started the business in her apartment.

important discussion topic in the group meetings or gatherings. In these gatherings they mentioned that their life became more stressful because they were struggling in a very unfamiliar place and culture.<sup>45</sup> “You don’t have a garden in front of your house where you can grow vegetables to save money”, said Synthia. “We come to the city to earn money; it’s not our place, not our home. We want to stay connected as much as possible with our family. It is impossible to survive here without the help of family and relatives in Dhaka”, said Beli.

All of the interviewees said that when they try to communicate with their families in the village, it gives them mental peace, making them feel secure. “Nowadays we can see lots of Mandi faces, but when I came to Dhaka in 1980, I did not have anyone to talk to. It was a difficult time”, said Manju, a 40 year old beauty worker and mother of three.

The need to unite with the family played a significant role in their planning for the future. Most of the interviewees had brought at least one family member or relative to the city or have planned to do so. Those who did not bring any family members from home maintain various kinds of networking and communications with families and relatives outside Dhaka.

The expressions of homesickness interestingly were similar between the newcomers and the long term city dwellers. Certain factors in city life remain static in Mandi women’s life. After some time they do get used to city life, but they do so by facing many deeply troubling issues and uncertainties. The fact that they are ethnic minorities in the city cannot be erased and the lack of privileges in everyday life remains constant. The transformation to being a city dweller is deeply rooted in these alienating conditions. Chameli said,

I have been living here for a long time. I need money and I cannot go back soon. I can be happy here because my children and my husband are living here. But I still face lots of uncertainty in my job. I am scared about my children and husband all the time whenever they are out. Most importantly, whenever I experience ill treatment from coworkers, the owner or customers, I miss my home and my mother. These are the moments when I feel that it was a wrong decision to come to the city. I

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<sup>45</sup> Robert, one of my key informants, used to compare my life in Canada with their life in Dhaka. Obviously, whenever he mentioned this I felt embarrassed. We were in the similar situation only in the context of unfamiliar place, because my privilege and security and comfort level in Winnipeg cannot be compared with what they have been experiencing for the past three decades

feel that I would rather die of hunger in the village than to die in dishonour in this job. ....it is difficult. We have to learn so much and be smart to compete with the Bengalis.

Their intensity of emotions and urgency to unite with family members thus also is a base to overcome the constant realization of their marginal status in the majority society.

Many of the Mandi beauty workers' families in the villages are surviving their economic instability with the help of the urban dwellers. There are families in which urban beauty workers have brought up their siblings with their money, paid for their education and marriage. There are families who bought their lands back with the remittances of urban beauty workers. In most of the cases of the Kalachandpur area the migration with remittance strategy seemed to be successful as a social security mechanism. However, there are a few cases of Mandi families in the village being ignored by their kin who have migrated for work in Dhaka. Rajmoni, a mother of a beauty worker named Urmi, told me that her daughter used to send her money every month. Recently the daughter decided to settle down in the city. She met a man who she decided to marry, and for the last three months, Rajmoni said, she did not get any money from her daughter.

Again there are examples of beauty workers complaining that sometimes their family members back in the village do not understand their hardship. Jonaki, a 19 year old beauty worker, told me that several times her brother and her aunt misbehaved toward her due to her delay in sending money. They did not even ask or bother to find out that the reason behind the delay was the loss of her job. Jonaki was fired from her old job and could not send the money until she got a new permanent job. However, Jonaki claimed that she had always planned to bring her family to Dhaka. The misunderstanding and tension between her and her family was due to distance and communication difficulties.

Communication in between urban and village Mandi families are not as difficult as it was a decade before. Earlier on, people had to depend on hand written letters or word of mouth through friends or families travelling back and forth. Nowadays expansion of the cell phone system has made things easier. For beauty workers, the difficulties arise from several issues. First of all, most of the time families in the village cannot afford the cell phone conversation. They wait until news comes from the other side in other ways. Therefore, when a beauty worker cannot make contact with their



family in the village due to their own struggle and difficulties, both sides suffer. Also, the pace of life in the city is different from the village. The schedule of work every day in and outside the home hardly gives the beauty workers any chance to look anything beyond their routinized life. Even if they desire to communicate with their families, it becomes impossible for them to do so frequently. As a consequence, distance gradually develops between them and their family in the village. The situation is complex and there is no simple explanation. Due to the distance involved in migration to the city, and the difficulty of communication, there is risk of emotional breakdown on both sides that develops out of the extended absence from each other. Both beauty workers in the city and their families in the villages suffer from this tension that intensifies on both sides with mismatch of expectations.

Interviews with Mandi beauty workers suggest that their city life is a constant struggle to become as “smart” as Bengalis, and fluent Bengali speakers. These reactions are part of their effort to forget what they have left behind and what uncertainty they might face ahead. It is a constant compromise with their expected role in the family and society. They try to ease their hardship by maintaining networks with family and friends in the city and the village community. But most importantly, their stories reflect how these emotional journeys have become a major part of their need to compose an urban self that is directed and controlled by layers of social realities that lie outside their own making and control.

### *The idea of (controlled) choice for Mandi beauty workers*

Their narratives demonstrate the importance of “choice” in Mandi beauty workers’ lives. In different situations Mandi beauty workers choose their actions. “Choice”, powerfully governs the life of Mandi beauty workers in Kalachandpur. Mandi beauty workers, subject to their agency, act according to their choice. The system runs in a very ironical way since their actions are controlled by the social realities creating different patterns of subjugation for them. Mandi women in city life show how the “choice”, which seems apparently independent, is actually constrained by the culture. Wiest et al. (2003: 204) relate this idea of controlled choice as a part of “labour market principles”. Developing the notion of “transit society”(ibid: 201-204), they reflect on garment workers in Bangladesh and their choices, For them, “transit society” refers to a

group of (Bengali) female garment workers and their society whose lives are in constant flux in terms of economy, career, security, family life and much more. They argue that the garment workers who consider themselves members of the transit society have developed immense resilience to cope with varied difficulties of life. They fight back, they dream of a better life by earning lots of money, but they experience growing family problems. Their everyday struggle remain exclusively their own and do not affect the upper middle class. This group of female garment workers suffers from the individualistic philosophy of the “transit society”. The situation lends to a highly “commodified” (*ibid*: 204) relationship between workers and the labour market, where the latter controls and the former is trapped in their choices (of dreaming). Female workers, the very insiders of labour market territory, thus go for the life full of controlled choice, where they choose a double work load with household responsibilities (Mossman 2006: 94), or they choose to be quiet within a discriminatory relationship at work, be it with co-workers, clients, supervisors or owners. When choicelessness becomes the only choice, resilience becomes an option of living. Or said in another way, an effort to be resilient is their only true choice left. In order to live, work and be happy, these female workers have little survival option than to become resilient to the circumstances they are in, in order to survive.

#### **MANDI BEAUTY WORKERS AT WORK**

The most important part of the migration story of Mandi beauty workers is their experience at work. Due to the demand for beauty parlours in the city, Mandi women can get work relatively easily; however, their traineeship journey to qualify for a permanent job is full of barriers. All of my interviewees said to me that the most difficult part was the training period, a period during which they were not paid enough. And during this training period they had to go through verbal and sometimes physical abuse, and had to do whatever they were asked to do at work, which ranged from working in the kitchen at the owner’s house to cleaning parlour washrooms. Most of the interviewees reported that, even though they received help from families and other Mandis from the locality, finding a suitable job was never easy. What they meant by “suitable” was getting along with the co-workers, convenience of transportation, and a satisfactory salary.

### *Beauty parlours and beauty worker job patterns*

Now Dhaka City has hundreds of beauty parlours, although there is no statistical record of the exact number of beauty parlours. Because of the demand for beautification within the middle class, among both males and females, it is a business in the city that is always operative. According to a Mandi parlour owner, almost every month approximately 10 to 12 beauty parlours are being launched, most of which are in Dhanmondi, Lalmatia Mohammadpur, Baridhara, Gulshan and Uttara (see Figure 2). These parlours typically offer haircuts, hair removal, manicures, pedicures, facials, hair and face herbal treatment, and bridal and party make up. The parlour workers also often work on a private basis, which means they take clients outside work. Most of the time, the negotiation between clients and workers is made when a customer comes to the parlour. These beauty workers give discounts to the clients and typically do not inform the parlour owner about their work on a private basis. "It is a source of extra income. But if *malik* (the owner) knows about it they cut hours and sometimes fire us from work. It is risky. We need money and that is why we go for the constant threat."

### *A new job or a trap for the trainee*

The first few weeks are scary, full of confused directions. But some of us don't realize the situation until they come to reality. Nowadays when the young Mandis arrive in the city they spend their savings and have fun traveling around the city instead of focusing on finding a good job.

After coming to the city, the first phase is to find a parlour where one can get training. For their training period the new immigrant joins any beauty parlour in the city and then transfers to another parlour if conditions suggest there are advantages. Getting a training job, as well as the transfer, becomes possible mostly with the help of family, friends or the network involved in bringing them to city with the job offer. But sometimes parlour workers do not get permission for a transfer and are trapped in a low-salaried training job for a long time. The situation is difficult because most of the time when workers get their training, they get free accommodation and eventually become obligated until they manage to escape from the place. Of 29 interviewees, 19 of them said that they had to leave their training parlour without informing the owner because the owner did not give permission. A police case was filed against one of the trainees working in the beauty parlour. She was charged of breaking the deal with the parlour owner. According to the

trainee the case was filed because she escaped from the training place and joined another parlour. The case was mutually solved later on. After this incident, raises were given to the rest of the trainees and no one thought of getting a transfer for some time. However, these workers noted that getting a transfer from the training place to another beauty parlour was an issue that troubled the trainees most of the times.

#### **DISCRIMINATION IN THE WORKPLACE**

Mandi beauty workers are exposed to different forms of economic and social violations. Discrimination at work is a part of that victimization. In the narration of the work experience of the Mandi beauty workers, discrimination at work was the most frequently cited issue. Discrimination begins in the owner-worker relationship and extends to clients and visitors coming to the parlour. Also, there are examples of physical and verbal abuse of beauty workers that come from family members of parlour owners (especially when the parlour business operates inside the owner's house).

#### ***Owner-worker relationships***

It is so difficult to live when you have a very uncomfortable work environment. You are always scared of losing your job and always feel like you are nothing but a servant. We Mandis believe so much in self-dignity. Here in the city the job gives us money but takes away so much from us.

Mandi beauty workers have been exploited by Bengali parlour owners in so many different ways. First of all, the beauty parlours in the city do not have any kind of benefits or insurance for the workers. According to the Mandi Welfare Association, if beauty workers are in any kind of trouble they have to manage by themselves. Sometimes they get financial help from the parlour owners, but generally only under certain conditions. For example, there are cases when workers take loans from the owner to send money home or to get good medication in exchange for signing a bond that they will not leave the parlour without giving money. Workers who are ill-paid at the beginning of the job sometimes are trapped by the signed deed.

I took a loan from my owner and after that she became more ferocious to me as if I am her servant. I was only a trainee at that time and one evening when a customer complained to her about my work she came to beat me. I wanted to escape that very night but was captured by the guard. My owner

threatened me that if I leave it would be against the deed and she would start a police case<sup>46</sup> against me.

With the help of a friend the girl managed to escape and got a new job in another parlour. After a year she returned the loan but the parlour was closed by then.

Sometimes the owners try to keep a good beautician by bribing extra allowances. In these cases the workers are under stress because they think they are somehow bound to stay in the parlour even though they can avail themselves of a better opportunity.

A violent and uncomfortable work environment is a constant trouble, especially for the newcomers in parlour jobs. The experienced workers who are in greater demand in the job claim that they are more “used to the situation” and can “handle” the situation since they know that they can easily get another job.

### *Relations between coworkers*

Nowadays when parlour business is very popular in the city it is no wonder that Bengali women also join the profession. Female labourers working in garment factories are especially attracted to parlour jobs to reduce hardship in city life (Wiest et al. 2003: 202). Consequently, Mandi workers have to face Bengali co-workers at work, in addition to Bengali customers and owners. Mandi workers often become victims of bullying, verbal abuse, and making fun of their Bengali accent, which adds unwanted negative conditions that make them feel even more marginalized. “These things happened more ten years ago. Now we have learned to work together with professionalism; we both need money.” However, there are cases where Mandi workers also told me that they would never be able to trust Bengali coworkers except for a few who became good friends.

### *Client-worker relationships*

The desire to remain forever beautiful in the modern world means thousands of consumers who come to the parlour and spend hours looking in the mirror. The whole practice stands on the ground/discourse of marginalizing the beauty workers’ labour and

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<sup>46</sup> I must add that the middle class Bengali community has more privilege in communicating with the police force endorsed by the State. The class-ethnic power nexus grounded in the same ideology of the dominant majority “harmonizes” well. That is why it is easy for a Bengali owner to establish a police case against any of her workers and make sure her demand is secured, something practically impossible for Mandi beauty workers or anyone from the working class in the country. In addition, in Bangladesh there are examples of female workers being raped and murdered in police custody (see Zaman 1999; SACW Dispatch 2000). Mandi beauty workers, as female groups of a minority community, suffer from the same threats and do not get protection from police in such cases. Their voice is not heard.

identity. One client, Mrs Suraiya Badal (pseudonym), said, "It's the nature of human beings that they want to be more and more beautiful. I go to the office everyday; I don't have time for myself so I come to the parlour. You need to get help from others. These servant girls help us a lot. I give them all credit for my beautiful looks." Mrs Chowdhury, a social worker, said, "It's a tradition. My mother used to come to the parlour. Now I and my daughter, we both are regular customers of this parlour. It's good to help these poor, helpless girls. I always try to give them good tip money. They are trustworthy too. I have one of them<sup>47</sup> as a maidservant." Deeba, an undergraduate student, told me that it was a good way to pass the time for her since she had nothing to do at that time. She said she comes to the parlour very often to get experience because she is planning to visit her sister in England very soon where she thought she could go for a three-month beautification diploma course.

The beauty workers reported to receive regular verbal abuse from the clients. "We have good customers who behave well. However, most of the time ladies are violent and give complain about us to the owner." Another worker said, "We are not Bengali, its natural that they behave badly with the strangers."

The scholarship in social history has provided abundant evidence of gender discrimination in the work place (see Powell 1999). For decades women have been trapped with their double burden of paid jobs and household responsibilities, while men uphold the symbols of all kinds of progress (Meade and Wiesner-Hanks 2005: 5). The case of Mandi women conveys a rather complex picture of class, gender and ethnic discrimination, all exposed through different oppressors at the work place, whether owner, co-worker or client. Their labour is coerced under a disguised violent economic relation, their cultural capital (education and different kinds of skills at work) is exploited by preconfigured consequences and their choice is defined by Bengali cultural politics operated by the demands of the labour market.

The direct stories of discrimination in terms of class and ethnicity are revealed through the narratives on training and other working experiences. Mandi beauty workers are beaten, threatened, ill paid, and are categorized and victimized through verbal abuse.

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<sup>47</sup> While speaking the phrase, Mrs Chowdhury corrected herself three times, saying, "garo meye (Garo girl)...no..tribe....you know what I mean".

Statements by the clients about Mandi beauty workers show how the dominant majority discourse is powerfully subjugating Mandi women's independent identity as a beauty parlour professional. Middle-class Bengali women who are receiving the services of this minority group very carefully draw a line between the Bengalis and the Mandis involved in the same profession. Mandi beauty workers with ten years of experience in their profession can be described as "village girls" or "servant girls" wanting money. The repeated stress on coercive terms like "tribal girls" or "servant girls" is a constant effort to hide the fact that many of the well-known parlours in the city are run by Bengali women with minimum work experience but who have earned a short term course certificate imported in England, America or India. These certified professionals are known as "beauticians" or "beauty therapists" amongst the middle class.

Mandi women's narratives on their work experience also demonstrate their risk of sexual, physical and verbal harassment. Sexual harassment of women at work is not a new occurrence. Since the advent of industrial capitalism when gender discrimination was intensified, "rigidified" and "crystallized" (Frader 2005: 39), women involved in industrial paid jobs were the victims of sexual harassment as well as wage discrimination. The growth of the beauty industry as a major part of industrial market politics is playing the same discriminatory impact over the lives of Mandi beauty workers who are doubly marginalized with their minority status endorsed by the State. This endorsement has been the basis of all kinds of subjective and symbolic discriminatory acts and ideologies of Bengalis clients, owners and co-workers that are imposed on the Mandis.

My intention to write on Mandi women's work experience was principally to give a closer look at the discriminatory relationship between women in different classes (and from different ethnic background), part of which I had related in the women and globalization section of Chapter Three.

## CONCLUSION

Beauty parlours are places for gathering and socializing among modern day clients in Dhaka. Interestingly, for Mandi workers this place also works as a platform to get strength through agency. Most of the time the Mandi workers discuss their daily experiences during breaks or on their way to work and on their way back home. They exchange experience on how to deal with customers, coworkers, or the owners. The

newcomers take advice from the experienced Mandi workers or make their future plan to solve these day-to-day problems and hence accept the challenge thrown at them by the prevailing power structures.

Mandi beauty workers' experience after migrating to the city is based on separate layers of complexly composed of facts of history and culture. Their narratives of their early experiences after coming to the city, namely, homesickness, language as a barrier, family bonding needs, remittance expectations and needs, and experience at work demonstrate that the independent "choice" of living and collective communications between Mandi beauty workers are conditioned by multiple layers of gendered cultural politics rooted and hidden in both familial and social coercive relationships. The fact is cyclical and its dynamics can be better understood if seen alongside Mandi women's interpretations of these discriminatory facts, negotiation with the modes of conduct of urban culture, and efforts to take up all kinds of challenges. In order to understand the life of Mandi beauty workers in the urban community it is also important to shed light on how other members of their family, friends and relatives are experiencing and/or coping with the locational and economic change, and how that affects Mandi women's private lives and/or their lives at home. In the next chapter I take up the issue of agency in their home life as exemplified by these resilient Mandi beauty workers.



## Chapter Five

### **MANDI BEAUTY WORKERS' AGENCY AT HOME: SOME THOUGHTS ON "DOMESTIC" MEN**

#### **INTRODUCTION**

In this chapter I address the home life of Mandi beauty workers. Home constitutes a number of issues, for example, distribution of resources among household members, the decision-making process in the family, migration and change of profession, and much more. But most importantly, these issues revolve around the gender division of labour, a concept that allows seeing to what extent the individual household members are responsible for, and contribute to running the household. Asymmetrical distribution of labour between male and female members in the house has been marked as one of the fundamental causes of women's subordination and the perpetuation of patriarchy in the society (Wharton 2005: 82). However, in this chapter I consider the gender division of labour central to understanding political economic marginalization of Mandi city dwellers. Mandi people's ethnic marginalization in Bengali society makes them more subservient, and trapped in the system. Their ethnic marginality determines their place in the labour market and their working class status in the urban culture, both of which intensify their everyday struggle. These multi-layered power relations that allocate the social status of Mandi people in the Bengali society influence gender roles in Mandi households.

"Mandi households" come into the discussion as complex units enduring the process of transition that Mandi beauty workers and their families go through in their urban life due to the dominant social system. Household as a social unit has been used as a tool to expose the constant shifts in economic arrangements and cultural responsibility, and also to identify Mandi peoples' interaction and transformation between social relationships, organizations and the society. Mandi households are seen as a process, defined and constructed by social realities and relationships of everyday life (Hammel

1972). Households are comprehended as “multifunctional institutions imbued with a diverse array of cultural principles and meanings” (Yanagisako 1979: 200).

Mandi beauty workers in the city live under varied circumstances. Married women and single women live their lives in different household arrangements and composition, and experience different social relations and realities accordingly. Home for Mandi beauty workers could be hostel or a shared accommodation. Home for Mandi women can be defined as their personal living space outside work. Within patterns of home and experiences with household members, the nature of the lives of Mandi beauty workers is shaped, as are their choices, their autonomy and their expression of agency. With this overview in mind, I discuss the perceptions of Mandi men and women of their gender roles in their urban household as well as the pattern of Mandi beauty workers’ agency back home in the Kalachandpur community.

#### **HOUSEHOLD PATTERN OF MANDI KALACHANDPUR COMMUNITY**

Even though they are matrilineal, Mandi social values are influenced by Bengali patriarchal understanding due to their Bengali surroundings both in the city and in the village (Gulrukh 2003; Halim 2001). According to Bengali patriarchal norms, a woman and the children of the house should be protected by the men of the house, and it is women’s responsibility to take care of the domestic chores and look after their children and the husband (Khanum 2001). Mandi beauty workers who are the sole breadwinners in the city community still have to uphold this ideology. Since Mandi women’s ancestral traditions put less emphasis on the “patriarchal role” of the male member in the household, their urban households are a constant tug-of-war between matrilineal traditions and Bengali patriarchal values, all of which manipulate the Mandi city dwellers’ patriarchal projection on household responsibility. A brief description of the Mandi household pattern will be useful before I proceed with analysis of individual respondent comments.

Standing’s (1991: 3) study of a Bangladeshi community defines household as “economic units in which commodities and/or services are produced, distributed and consumed and in which labour is organized and allocated through a sexual division labour.” Theorists have provided understanding of household concepts based on reproductive, social and political aspect operating within different household patterns

(Yanagisako and Collier 1987; Jansen et al. 1991; Stone 2005). In Kalachandpur, Mandi community women mostly provide the reproductive as well as economic part. Men, mostly unemployed, take care of children and do some specific domestic tasks. In the Kalachandpur Mandi community in Dhaka, the households are mostly of a nuclear structure: the father, mother and children. Several are extended family households (see Hammel and Laslett 1974: 87), including some that have family members residing with them who they brought from the village to take care of the children while the parents are working outside. These members of the family exist as passive characters having no direct contribution to the family finance and who are considered dependants even though they perform major roles in the household, e.g., cooking, taking care of children, housekeeping, and sometimes grocery shopping.

In Mandi village communities outside Dhaka the households are mostly either “extended households”, where a nuclear family is extended by one or more other kin group members, or “multiple family households”, where two or more kin-related nuclear families are brought together under the same economic arrangement (Hammel and Laslett 1974: 87-88), which means more than two or three families live in a single compound, arrange a common budget, and share in a labour system to run the household. In the city the pattern is different. In addition to the nuclear families, there are female residences where several beauty workers live on a common budget. There are single mothers living in hostels, unable to bring their husband to the city. Therefore, the gender division of labour is not a direct factor in these cases. However, these women living in the city by themselves maintain close communication with their male members in the village. The male members in the villages take care of the family and property of the village household while the female members provide financial support from the city. These women run households in the city, and because of their strong ties with the village families, they in effect are part of an extended-family household sharing a common budget. The sense of mutual/shared responsibility between household members brings them together despite the fact that they live in separate locations.

The gender division of labour in different Mandi households in Kalachandpur is not solely patriarchal. But both men and women in the family profess that men are the head of the household. Men make the decisions and women take care of the domestic

work, as the society expects. In the nuclear and female-headed extended household families, the family members try to respond according to the expected gender roles, which means Mandi men should work outside to earn money instead of staying at home, and Mandi women with or without doing paid jobs should take responsibility for children and other family members as well as the kitchen. The beauty workers living in the city are themselves convinced by the socially expected role (or more specifically, the role usually assigned to men and women living in Bengali society based on Bengali patriarchal norms) and express their concern for the importance of men's work outside the home. How Mandi women handle the "role reversal" of Mandi men is the main issue here. I will begin with the *chu* gathering in Kalachandpur community to examine men's role in the community which is according to Bengali patriarchal norm has "reversed".

#### CHU GATHERING: MEN SHOULD DRINK AND WOMEN SHOULD COOK?

Mandi people living in the village basically try to maintain a living produced from their ancestral land, property bearing a culture which has colonial influence. Despite several changes, there are some practices in Mandi communities which still continue as a part of traditional custom. The *Chu* gathering is one of those. *Chu* is the traditional rice beer which the Mandis make, mixing the rice with many other herbal ingredients. Each evening, especially during the harvesting season, Mandi adult men and women in the village get together and enjoy drinking *chu*. In Mandi community villages in most areas this *chu* gathering bears immense importance since it is a gathering for exchange of ideas and experiences as well as playing pranks on each other as jokes. Most of the time in the village, the female heads of households lead the discussion in the gathering. The centrality and participation of female members of the *chu* gathering and every one's acceptance of this has been built upon the importance of matrilineal ideology in Mandi culture.

The *Chu* gathering in the village community is considered an essential part of Mandi people's agency in the village. They welcome their newcomers in the community, guests from Bengali communities and these people are accepted as a part of their household after joining the gathering.

However, because of the expansion of Christian patriarchy in village-based Mandi communities, the importance of women's role in decision making is being undermined.

The exclusive male *chu* gatherings are more frequent in the villages nowadays, and women are not invited because of the Bengali patriarchal idea that it is not good for women to have alcohol, and an expression of the clash between a patriarchal male ego and the Mandi matrilineal head. Alcohol consumption is also seen by researchers as a symbol of projecting and practicing masculinity (Driessen 1992). Driessen quotes McClelland (1972: 334): "Men primarily drink to feel stronger.... Those for whom personalized power is a particular factor, drink more heavily".

In the Mandi case the web of patriarchal power over matrilineal practice expands through a variety of changes in Mandi cultural expressions. The diminution of Mandi women's importance in *chu* gatherings, and the considerable increase of Mandi male "exclusivity" in *chu* gatherings, strongly indicate a shift in ideological paradigm.

Kalachandpur Mandi community in Dhaka also has the *chu* gathering practice. Despite living in the city, the community members have maintained this practice very well. While doing my field work I attended several *chu* gatherings and, interestingly, all of them had both male and female members. However, I noticed several times that there were male *chu* gatherings arranged in the living room while female members were cooking in the kitchen or serving food to the family. The tendency of male *chu* gatherings can be interpreted as the growth of patriarchal agency against Mandi matriliney. The reason behind this patriarchal expansion lies in the difficulties Mandi males face in their role reversals inside their urban households, which can be considered one of the reasons behind the growing male centeredness of this Mandi cultural practice.

#### DEALING WITH THE SOCIAL REALITY OF DOMESTICITY

Whether in interviews, gatherings or focus group discussions, the expression that came recurrently both from Mandi men and women in the community is the "feminine" role of men in Mandi society. Bengali patriarchal norms constantly impinge upon Mandi men, creating hardships for them as members of the working class, as well as dejection as a consequence of living an unemployed domestic life. The complexity of their space inside the household or community has been intensified by their matrilineal identity which traditionally marks them as "household resource managers". In this section I explore Mandi men's perception of their reversed role in the domestic arena.

In the Mandi village communities outside Dhaka, domestic responsibility is not traditionally defined by stereotypic gender roles. In a Mandi family, it is not essential that women always take care of domestic work and men do all the outside work. Mandi peasant families in the village have mostly female farmers who work in the field while the male members or any other members in the household take care of the infants. Indeed, there are households where females are participating in the household responsibilities and the male members are away in pursuit of different professions as farming, fishing or working as daily labour in the nearby markets; a grandfather carrying the youngest child on his back and working in the garden is a more familiar scenario than a Mandi mother carrying her child and working in the kitchen. Mandis consider themselves as non-violent and non-dominant people. I have heard many times from interview sources that in the Mandi language there is no word for “rape”. Violence against women in Mandi society has never been an issue. Several times while interviewing, Mandi women in the household claimed that Mandi men are more down to earth, soft hearted and cooperative than Bengali men. With all these factors in Mandi culture the role reversal of men in Mandi villages is a traditionally acceptable custom.

In Kalachandpur Mandi community men also provide support to domestic responsibilities, yet the principle reason behind their home-centered life is the lack of job opportunities for Mandi men in the city. In postcolonial industry-based economies all over the world there has been a significant growth in the percentage of female workers involved in the labour market in different sectors. Bangladesh is not devoid of the grasp of labour market politics over female workers (Zaman 2001). The huge and relatively rapid expansion of the garment and beauty industries, and the recruitment of female labours in the factories and parlours, shows evidence of the feminization of labour in Bangladesh. Mandi men, along with other Bengali working class men, both Muslim and Christian, are trapped in the situation. Unemployment issue causes mental stress for Mandi men. Firstly, living in a patriarchal Bengali society, their surroundings and people constantly mark them as odd members in the family who are not man enough since they are not doing the stereotypical “men’s job”. Secondly, their ancestral role in the matrilineal community compels them to feel relaxed as domestic men who enjoy taking care of children and having *chu* with friends and family. For Mandi men stress arises due

to the existence of two opposed gender role structures in the urban Mandi community: one accepts their role reversal while the other denigrates it.

Below I present excerpts from interviews with Mandi men relating to their role in the household in the Kalachandpur community.

Men should behave like men and women like women. I don't have a job; that's why I am staying at home and taking care of the children; it does not mean that I have to cook and clean dishes. (a beauty worker's husband)

We are matrilineal men. Everyone thinks that we do what women do at home, but its not true; we take care of the fruits, crops, gardens, all domestic animals and land. Do you think taking care of all these are women's jobs? Now that in the city we don't have a garden or any lands to take care, it doesn't mean that we have to work in the kitchen. (a beauty worker's husband)

Lots of things in this house are my contribution. I am jobless and I don't feel bad about that. But other people do. They think it's abnormal for men to stay at home and take care of children. But that's not the only thing I do; I do take care of the whole house which includes any problems to fix the house, managing the social life and communication with family in the village, and security of my wife and children. (a beauty worker's husband)

It is natural that all women cook and all men work. In our case the situation is opposite. Well, not exactly opposite; we help women by taking care of children. (the brother of a beauty worker)

### *The politics of the labour market*

The statements of the Mandi male interviewees show the difficulties they are dealing with due to their designated status in the household. The fact that they are jobless and not the sole breadwinner of the house is the most stressful part. In each statement given above it shows how they have tried to assure their role as the man of the house. For Mandi beauty workers the struggles in the city life are their job insecurity, physical or verbal abuse and much more, whereas for Mandi men in the city the stress is a blend of the discomfort of being a man while performing roles associated with women, as well as the embarrassment of being rejected by the labour market. Mandi men's adamant response or interpretation of their domestic role therefore can be seen as a way of countering the rejection of labour market, a strategy to hide their unbearable helplessness due to poverty, and a method to cope with the unwanted role reversal.

### *The insecurity of double marginalization*

Unemployment for men in a patriarchal society can be perilous since the consequence means dealing with both social and economic burdens; it is a situation that brings out “the sense of double exclusion” (Ashwin and Lytkina 2004: 190). Unemployment of Mandi men within the Kalachandpur beauty workers’ community brings out two kinds of marginalization for men living in the urban domestic periphery, as mentioned in the previous section: rejection by the labour market, and confinement within domestic roles generally seen as women’s roles. The double marginalization of Mandi men in the house reduces their social acceptability in Bengali patriarchal society. Pressure from the dominant majority means that, Mandi men prefer to prove their manly tasks in front of any newcomers. While doing my fieldwork, one of my key informants (male) repeatedly attempted to tell me stories of his role as a brave man in the family. He used to tell me how much money he had contributed to the house. He would say,

This huge TV my wife and children are enjoying now is one of my contributions. It’s a good quality product. Many from other families come here just to watch programs in my TV.

Insecurity of Mandi working class men in Kalachandpur community is derived from several sources: their identity as associated with the jobless working class and their connection with a women-centered tradition which is a joke among Bengali men. Mandi men’s everyday living in the urban community is a dilemma of defining for themselves what it means to be a Mandi man. It is imperative for Mandi men to become “proper men” in order to exist in the Bengali patriarchal community. To regain their “manly” position is not easy. Mandi women, including Mandi beauty workers, are also experiencing the consequences of having unemployed men in the family and household. Women’s perception of the situation brings out another complex aspect of the scenario.

### **WOMEN SHOULD COOK: ROLE REVERSAL OF MANDI BEAUTY WORKERS**

Mandi men’s discomfort in domestic marginality brings out similar kinds of pressure for Mandi beauty workers living in or involved with the same household. It is difficult for Mandi women in the urban community to deal with the sarcastic comments by the Bengali majority about the domestic Mandi men. The relationship between Mandis and Bengalis is not violent in Kalachandpur community. However, there is a very fine



line between Mandi Christian families and Bengali Christian families which can easily be understood by the silent distant between neighbours. As a consequence of this situation, when Mandi men refuse to accept their domestic identity, Mandi women also refuse to introduce their men as unemployed domestic husbands.

Below I present some statements of Mandi beauty workers regarding this issue:

My husband needs to get a good job. It's good for him, good for us, and most importantly, it's not good for men to stay at home. All our neighbours are always joking about us.....and after all, cooking is women's job. Women should cook. (Mandi beauty worker wife)

They are a little different (giggling). Men are cooking and women are working! Their men are like women! (a Bengali neighbour)

I don't know why my husband seems to be very easy with household work. He cooks well too. It's not that difficult for me to manage both work and home. I can always cook for the next day after coming from work. (a beauty worker wife)

I don't feel good when anyone else touches my kitchen. I won't let my husband come inside the kitchen. (A single women going to marry very soon)

It's expected in the city, like the Bengali families men will work and women will take care of children and do whatever they are good at. It's not our Mandi village that we could do anything we want. There are rules in city life. (a Mandi female relative living with a beauty worker's family)

These statements bring out multilayered issues which occupy/form Mandi beauty workers' perceptions of household responsibility.

### *Stereotypic gender roles: a historical consequence*

First and foremost, one element is Mandi beauty workers' preoccupation with the stereotype idea of the natural sexual difference between men and women and their socially assigned tasks which allocate women to the domestic periphery and appoints men as sole breadwinners of the household. The gender-segregated Bengali Muslim ideology also assures the preclusion of social and economic autonomy of the female members of the household (Kabeer 1988). The informants' statements above clearly show that the insights of Mandi beauty workers are getting to be tied up with the same ideology. Similar to the male members of the community, Mandi women workers are trapped in labour market politics, but for being employed. Feminization of labour has confirmed a more firm version of gender segregation over working class segregation than

that of the middle class society all over the world (Wharton 2005: 85). Working class females, who also have served the middle class women, have had to merge their paid labour with household work. This historical process, which began with the expansion of an industry-based economy, has affected the Mandi community. Mandi women's acceptance of imposed gender stereotyping is rooted in their historical marginalization.

### *Ethnic marginalization*

Ethnic marginalization is a source of continuous fear-assigned gender roles. The informants' statements also are examples of Mandi beauty workers' responses to the fear of ethnic marginalization. The Bengali Muslim patriarchal norms are dictating Mandi urban working class community ideology. The pressure is doubled because they are cornered both economically and ideologically.

### *The double burden of Mandi beauty workers: Who is responsible?*

The implication of the ideological marginalization is strong enough to impinge on Mandi women's work load at home. In one of the statements by an informant, the beauty worker woman is willing to play the domestic responsibility after completing her paid job in the parlour only because it is not good for men to do women's jobs, and also, this is not how Bengali families are structured in the city. Mandi women's change of choice doubles their work load. According to my data, eight out of every ten families in the Kalachandpur community are facing this situation. Beauty workers come home and cook for the family while the male members spend the evening in *chu* gatherings. The response of women being trapped and convinced by the Bengali stereotypic ideal of gender roles is expressed through different statements. Mandi women willingly decide to cook at home. Mandi women's agency is controlled by the preordained gender role assignment. However, another issue which arose recurrently in my notebook was the issue of women's autonomy in the domestic periphery.

### *Concern for female autonomy in domestic space*

...[W]ithin their separate sphere women create a space from which they can resist male authority in subtle and silent ways. (Menon 1996: 142)

While discussing men's work in the kitchen or men's role inside the house, almost every Mandi beauty worker expressed somehow that women's place is in the kitchen.

because they like their job. Most of the time in families where a man is unemployed, I was informed that the disagreement between the couple arises due to the husband's lack of effort to find a job, thus disturbing women's place at home. Despite various subservient roles in the society, women's autonomy has flourished in the periphery of household life. There are examples of women's agency being formed and expressing resistance to the patriarchal agency (Menon 1996). Existence of patriarchal agency through the male household members is not yet excessive in the Mandi case. Nevertheless, where women are the sole breadwinners of the family, the existence of female autonomy in the urban families is clearly visible. Mandi beauty workers' reluctance to free their domestic space to men therefore is not only the influence of conventional patriarchal gender ideology, but also an expression to protect their practice of autonomy at home.

## CONCLUSION

[I]t is not individuals who have experience, but subjects who are constituted through experience. (Scott 1991: 779)

The impact of labour market politics in providing separate quotas for Mandi men and women has significant influence over gender roles in urban Mandi households. Men's discomfort in domestic roles turns their attention to becoming expert *chu* makers, and in the practice of male *chu* gathering they try to stabilize their insecurity in the urban patriarchal Mandi community. Women, on the other hand, are conscious about their autonomy in the domestic periphery and unconsciously surrender themselves to patriarchal-defined gender roles which double their amount of work in their everyday routine. However, as I mentioned above, along with the increased subserviency both for Mandi men and women, the participation of Mandi women in some of the *chu* gatherings opens up the reinforcement of Mandi cultural practices. In these *chu* gatherings, both Mandi men and women, whether single, married, or dependant, express their anxiety and try to defend each other from their confused emotions. For men, the *chu* gathering is a place where they try to figure out their identity, their choices and their role inside the house, both as expected and as currently played. The jokes they make in the gathering are a way of dealing with the discomfort of both men and women facing their role reversal. For women, it is a place to identify their discomfort with the unemployed male

population of the community and may be to deal with their excessive tiredness due to the double workload. Single women in the community dream of an employed husband, while the dependent household members who are brought to provide extra labour support to the family remain silent observers and, due to their limited access to resources, cannot play any significant role to resolve this problematic.

Mandi women's domestic periphery is a continuous struggle between constructed socially opposite concepts and values: *Mandiness* and *Bengaliness*, patriarchy and matriliney, feminine men and feminine women, breadwinner men and breadwinner women, egoistic males rejecting kitchen work and possessive women protecting their kitchen. It's not only a scenario of scattered and confused gender identity within a minority community, puzzled by the politics of structured socialization of the dominant majority, but also a consequence of intertwined and increased webs of power expanded from the labour market which constructs the choice of the working class, both men and women.

The individual and collective agency of Mandi beauty workers' community is thus precluded from any independent choice. Agency is socially constructed, its consequence is preordained. The anxiety composed in Mandi urban household is deeply rooted in the globally-woven power structure.

If the operation of agency is merely an illusion, how can it be seen as an aspect of Mandi women's positive attitude towards life or as a symbol of their everyday struggle through all kinds of preclusions in their lives? My concluding chapter is an attempt to look into these questions.

## Chapter Six

# CONCLUSION

This thesis has been an attempt to understand agency among Mandi beauty workers in Kalachandpur community in Dhaka, Bangladesh. It is an attempt to understand how Mandi women make choices in regards to their own lives and the lives of their community members. In this thesis, the concept of agency has been situated as a way to understand power, in particular, its relation to individuals and communities. The journey has involved a process of looking at the intensification of individual consciousness, or the capacity to constitute or reconstruct their reality in order to live a more satisfying life.

Life for Mandi beauty workers is surrounded by different preordained social realities and their agency operates within these constraints. This fact has been a scenario revealed through their experiences—initial experiences which involve language barriers, home sickness, and discomfort in a city environment; work experience involving relationships with clients, owners and coworkers; their unsecured public life as women; and domestic experience which includes relationships with family members, neighbours and other relatives. The experiences told through the narrations of the beauty workers has brought out the kinds of impediments they were facing and the kinds of strategies they are choosing to deal with the circumstances of everyday life in the city. Several noteworthy features underlie the subjects of discussion of each chapter—the globally-determined demands for female labour that shapes the lives of Mandi beauty; conditions behind the formation of a “modern” self; and Mandi beauty workers’ experiences inside and outside home. My concluding remarks are a summarized discussion of these features, along with some indication of future research.

## TRANSNATIONAL CONCEPTION OF THE BEAUTY INDUSTRY AND FEMINIZATION OF LABOUR IN BANGLADESH

First and most importantly, the research is evidence of the impact of globalization and its market policy towards the making of different “categories” of labour; beauty parlour workers form one of those categories. In Bangladesh, with the introduction of an open market policy thousands of homeless and landless citizens fell prey to the global market and its demand for labour from those who have no choice but to work for minimum salary. In order to maintain a continuous demand for different products, the global capital market provides a different concept of living that introduces new “needs” For example, people need to beautify themselves regularly; they need different kinds of clothes for summer, winter, home and office and for socializing; they need different models of cars; and they need specific foods for a fit figure. The excessive demands of these different styles and patterns of clothes, shoes or beautifying process, or computer products, or beautiful fancy living places are generated by the global capital market. The labour power to fulfill these demands is supplied by numerous low paid labours from developing countries. By entering into this process these people themselves become a kind of product of the market, the kind which is transnational, can suit in almost any category, and can provide service by workers who must endure all kinds of discriminatory practices. In Bangladesh, there are thousands of constructions workers. Some immigrate to countries in the Middle East or to European countries where they provide service until death with virtually no privileges. There are garments workers, particularly women, who usually work ten hours a day, often with minimum payment and without any special allowance for health or transportation or any privileges for their children and family. There are countless incidents in Bangladesh where construction workers (Reuters December 2007) or garment workers (ICFI April 2005) are dying due to accidents, sudden collapse of the factory building, disastrous fires, or other calamities. Mandi beauty workers fall into this same labour category. These women work in the parlours, most of the time ten to twelve hours a day. So far none of the parlours have given them any specific allowance for medication or transportation, nor are they taking any responsibility for the children of a working mother. There is no specific rule for pension or any policy to address harassment or discrimination against Mandi beauty workers or Bengali workers in any of the parlours.

Feminization of labour has been a much discussed issue as it sheds light on the sudden increase of women in paid work, particularly in Third World developing countries. But most importantly, it also indicates how common people from rural areas, as well as the informal sectors in urban areas, are affected and are getting involved in the process. It has been noted that this process of feminization of labour not only provides ill payment and poor working conditions for women, but also approves women of a certain age to be inserted into the system. In addition, the whole process is an extra amount of work for women. A statement by one of my interviewees who is a husband of a beauty worker, says it well: "No matter what happens, one cannot deny that giving birth to a child is a women's job." Obviously, my intention is not to emphasize or rationalize the fact that men instead of women should give birth to children, but to show how the capitalist market economy goes hand in hand with the patriarchal ideology. As victims of the process, women experience subordination at different levels: the market provides them the title of "labourer", the husband provides them the title of "mother of the child", and the social structure provides them the title of the "selfless giver". And all these are particularly showered upon the minority and lower class citizens of the State. The middle class beauty workers who come to the profession as owner or "just for pleasure" definitely do not go through the process. Mandi women's migration to the city, their destined career as beauty workers, and their gradual adjustment to becoming city dwellers thus are connected to politics of gender, ethnicity, class and globalization.

#### **CHOICELESSNESS AND MANDI BEAUTY WORKERS IN THE CITY**

What makes Mandi women choiceless? There is another layer of the society-made barrier that justifies Mandi women's status as city migrants who uphold all kinds of responsibilities: as women, as community members and as responsible for taking care of all the economic exchanges to survive.

Mandi beauty workers understand their situation but they have the strong sense to do the "socially obliged" right thing: whatever it takes to be a good mother, a good wife, a good Mandi woman of the community, and a good employee. Ironically, all these goods are in contradiction to their real status in the city. Mandi women are choiceless because of obligations to their employer, their family obligations, and the obligation to uphold the honour of family and become loyal to everyone they are obligated to in the family and

community. These are the very subtle and supple forms of bonds that rationalize and confirm the economic communications. Mandi women sell their skills in order to uphold all these good qualities. The obligation to all kinds of emotional bonding and responsibility as women cannot be marked as something coercive; however, they are considered sinister obligations because they are not visible. Bourdieu's concept of symbolic violence discussed in Chapter Three is apropos here. According to Bourdieu symbolic violence is:

...the invisible form of violence, which is never recognized as such, and is not so much undergone as chosen, the violence of credit, confidence and obligation, personal loyalty, hospitality, gifts, gratitude, piety – in short, all the virtues honoured by the code of honour – cannot fail to be seen as the most economical mode of domination. (Bourdieu 1977a: 192)

This symbolic process of securing the “good quality” of a Mandi woman thus is something socially accepted (Bourdieu 1977a: 191) and puts Mandi women inside the process by invisibilizing their oppression.

Mandi women's structural barriers to being members of an urban labour group are strengthened by the symbolic violence which annihilate their identity as victims and make them “the heroes” of the community to themselves and to others. Their acceptance of household responsibility as well as responsibilities of a community member can be seen as the result of symbolic violence toward them.

The social values founded upon the dominant patriarchal ideology not only initiate the action of symbolic violence but also overshadow Mandi domestic life and make women and men living in the house think more similar to their surroundings. The thesis has given several examples of these kinds of situations which make Mandi women choiceless in their living situation.

The choice is preordained as well as constrained by social reality; therefore, the profound operation of agency as strength of Mandi beauty workers in the city remains ineffective. In fact, Mandi gender relations in the urban household are defined and shaped by a confusing patriarchal ideology. I express it as “confusing” particularly because Mandi beauty workers and others living in the urban community clearly face problems dealing with both patriarchy and matrilineal practice at the same time. While interviewing, I noted different opinions from the same male interviewee, which was



understandable under the circumstances. For example, the same person told me on different occasions that:

- he sometimes hated himself for not working like Bengali men in the neighbourhood;
- he loves to stay at home, play with children and take care of them, and most importantly, he loves the company of *chu* gathering with other Mandi males in the community;
- Mandi men's duty is to control the home, but because it is "modern" (*adhunik*) city life, they should also try to change their life by going for jobs outside home;
- women should cook, and men can stay at home but they cannot cook on a daily basis; it is not their job.

Like millions of other labourers in the global market, Mandi beauty workers occupy a choiceless situation. The discussion throughout this thesis suggests that the operation of Mandi beauty worker agency inside Kalachandpur community is not in force, or not exercised. However, the research also shows that their individual and collective agency has operated as a stimulus to arouse their autonomy to some extent.

#### **AUTONOMY AND AGENCY IN MANDI BEAUTY WORKERS' LIVES**

A group of workers surrounded by a choiceless situation are believed to be more than helpless; they can do very little with the amount of "autonomy" they can achieve. Mandi women have achieved their allocated amount of autonomy and are doing whatever they can do to survive in the contrary situations that encompass them.

The first step of their autonomy, however, stems from their matrilineal practice of women living as a community member entitled to power and priority of resources. The second step of autonomy comes as a part of their survival strategy. Similar to many other female workers working in the garment factories, the shrimp industry (See Rahman 2003), or any other globalized capitalist sector, Mandi beauty workers take the challenge of facing the world outside the boundary of the household to earn money. Their journey from home to the city to find a job brings out a certain amount of independence and courage to experience the city life along with other Mandis. Mandi beauty workers with similar experiences share their knowledge and understandings with each other. These communications, and the sense of sisterhood, motivate them for self-esteeming actions

and decisions that help them to make wise choices for their future plans. This independence, autonomy, and the control and ownership over whatever resources they gain in the city is something intact and has separate identity. It means Mandi beauty workers' subordination by different kinds of social barriers and their autonomous self against these barriers functions side by side as two parallel lines. Obviously, there is no organized resistance against the socially operating power. But the actions of individual decisions and the thoughts of independence are shared. However, their autonomy is much more clear and revealing when they are in women's group. By helping each other facing different kinds of problems at home and at work, Mandi beauty workers try to negotiate autonomy for themselves.

The thesis is an effort to analyze Mandi beauty workers' agency in the context of being victims of social barriers, and how they work within these limiting contexts. The discussion above is intended to underscore the contradiction in which Mandi beauty workers as well as the community members are living. My intent is not to undermine Mandi women's capacity to fight back, but to mention their spirit of upholding sisterhood, their ability to spur strength from matrilineal ancestral practice, and their courage to declare a practical insightful plan for a future with the dream of living in dignity and in accordance with tradition, but, not with modernity and subversion. Women have been victims of their social systems for centuries, yet being the strongest force on earth to continue all kinds of actions related to life and living. The issue of Mandi beauty workers in Bangladesh is a part of the picture.

#### REVIEW OF RESEARCH FINDINGS

In this work I have tried to underscore the politics of power in Kalachandpur Mandi community in the context of household, kinship, women's agency, and relationships between rural and urban community. The multiplicity of the "structured power" that comes through gender, ethnic and class relations integrated with the contexts mentioned above brings out answers to the question of what generates power in Mandi beauty workers' lives. I would like to go back to Practice Theory once again, Bourdieu in particular. Bourdieu's perspective on development of social inequalities under structures structured by different social relations and manipulation of the behaviour of the social actors by the symbolic forces of cultures shows how the nexus of power exists in the

community of Mandi beauty workers, and is assimilated as actual social relations of actors of the society. It is with the help of these insights that I saw the disintegrated culture of the Mandi community in the city as a product of restless development of both internal (family, community) and external (capitalism and colonialism) power relations.

This leads to my second argument, that the principal complexity of behaviour both Mandi men and women express comes out of their lives preoccupied with encapsulated ideologies from both Bengali patriarchal society and Mandi matriliney. The intensity of the situation grows also out of acquaintance both Muslim and Christian Bengali neighbours who throw constant challenges to Mandi ancestral practices that coincide with Mandi belief in Christianity. Mandi beauty workers who I believe are aware of their situation cannot help reproducing the internalized structured beliefs through their dubious actions (Mandi culture with Bengali activities).

Gender relations in Kalachandpur Mandi community in the present day can be associated with the disintegration of Mandi matrilineal kin ties under the pressure of urban patriarchal culture which is strengthened by the unequal quota of jobs for men and women. Over time, the change in the agricultural system (from *jhum* cultivation to wet rice cultivation) brought about the shift in gender roles in Mandi matrilineal community by escalating men's control in the family and household, which grew from the quiet impact of virilocality and neolocality on Mandi uxorilocal practices. Mandi men in the city, not being connected to any kind of agricultural activities to back their authority in the village, look for alternative power sources which bring out the answer to their response to domestic work and their fondness for alcohol consumption.

I would also like to argue that this behaviour of both Mandi men and women in Kalachandpur community is principally the product of the influence of discriminatory ethnic relationships with the dominant majority. For Mandi beauty workers it is a situation they face everyday. I have explained in the theory section (on the exploitation of women via globalized institutions) that by providing services for the middle class community, Mandi beauty workers are exploited both by middle class men (could be anyone from the parlour owner's side) and women (female owner, customer or co-worker) (see Boyd 1996; Gulrukh 2004), all of which lend to the trapped and choiceless character of Mandi women's lives.

Therefore, I would like to argue that Mandi women's choice of the "choiceless" life as a conscious preference. Their consciousness of the situation is expressed principally while discussing their future plans. Most of the Mandi beauty workers are aware of their life struggle in the urban context, and when asked, they told me that if they could save some money to buy a piece of land they would go back to their rural origins since the city life is not for them. While interviewing, I found several cases where Mandi parents are sending their children outside Dhaka City to a relative to complete their schooling. This is because neither admission of Mandi children in Bengali schools nor the adjustment with Bengali culture is easy. This is another reason why Mandi families in the city want to go back to their ancestral land or live outside Dhaka City in the hope for an easier life and to stay close to their children. However, the question remains just how far it is possible for Mandi beauty workers to save money for their future.

Their choice of future plans also underscores the issue of internal migration for Mandi people in Bangladesh. Migration to the city is another one of their "choiceless" choices. The growing problem of land scarcity for the Mandi community outside the city does not leave any option for them other than to move to the city for jobs or send their daughters, sisters and wives to get work in the parlours. However, Mandi beauty workers' agency in Kalachandpur community has strengthened the materialization of their plan by providing job information and accommodation for the newcomers. The interaction between Mandi beauty workers in the city and Mandi women in the villages thus results in a strong tie which I believe makes women's agency in both contexts stronger.

The role of the Christian church must be mentioned here once again. Church people in the village who played a major role in Mandi women's migration in the late 1970s also serves to strengthen the bond between city and village Mandi families. Even though the missionization in the early colonial period was considered to be one of the principle reason for the erosion of Mandi ancestral practices and Mandi ancestral religion (*shangsharek*) over time, particularly after the 1971 war, the role of the church in helping Mandi community members in the village in terms of bringing up Mandi children, providing them with free food, accommodation and education through church school hostels, cannot be denied. Mandi communities from both sides have immense faith in

Church personnel who play a major role to maintain the bond between beauty workers and their families by being a principle source of communication.

This leads to the argument that the authority that prevailed for women in the pre-colonial matrilineal system has been converted to a productive relationship through which they take care of each other. Mandi women as “sisters and wives” (see Sacks 1979) are agents and actors in their own lives. They are very much aware of the contemporary discourses and they reconstitute a sense of self and maintain a family practice in line with matrilineal principles in the best possible way.

#### **FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS**

It is important to acknowledge women’s contribution to the society. It also is important to expose women’s subordination in the social system. The first step in this direction would be to analyze the behaviour of the dominant majority towards women. While Mandi women’s, access to Bengali society has increased over time, it is necessary to conduct a study Bengali middle class thinking on the growing Mandi communities in the city. Such a study can also include the thoughts and future plans of Mandi men in the city.

A large number of Mandi activists are working against state authority over Mandi forest property. Research needs to be done on how Mandi beauty workers take on the issue against the state, and on the impact of activism on the urban Mandi community. How far has State surveillance gone in watching Mandi workers in the city?

Research can be done on the state authorized legitimacy of middle class parlour owners over basic living rights of Mandi beauty workers – food, home, education facilities, and health care facilities. A comparative study of Mandi workers with garment workers would bring out a clearer picture of class, gender and ethnic discrimination in the urban labour market. Last but not least, an important study could be founded on the basis of the transformation and redefinition of matriliney in the urban Mandi community.

These are some of the major research issues that can be linked with global market policies and their impact on local minority groups. Still more ideas for observation of Mandi peoples’ lives in the city might be explored, however, the most important thing is to notice them, to recognize their pain, and to take action in accordance with the research findings.

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## Appendix A: Informed Consent Form

Research Project Title: Ethnographing Women's Agency: A Case Study Of Gender, Kinship and Political Economy in Kalanchandpur Mandi Community, Dhaka, Bangladesh

Researcher: Asfia Gulrukh Kamal, Department of Anthropology, 435 Fletcher Argue Building, University of Manitoba.

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This consent form, a copy of which will be left with you for your records and reference, is a part of the process of informed consent. It should give you the basic idea of what the research is about and what your participation will involve. If you would like more detail about something mentioned here, or information not included here, you should feel free to ask. Please take your time to read this carefully and to understand any accompanying information.

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I am an M.A. student at the University of Manitoba. I am conducting research for my master's thesis on the changes in the lives of Mandi migrant women who become beauty workers in Dhaka. In particular, I am interested in how matrilineal descent, kinship, and gender work in the urban setting. To learn about this, I will speak with Mandi beauty workers and their family members who have migrated to Dhaka city. A few interviews may also be conducted with the beauty parlour clients and the owners. The life experience of my subjects will be the basis to write my thesis. The thesis will be submitted to the department in July 2006 and presented in the oral examination on August 2006.

If you decide to participate in this research, you will not experience any associated risks. Although I will not destroy this data, I am taking many precautions to keep it confidential for perpetuity: I will keep your information confidential by using pseudonyms in my notes and thesis. I will also protect all notes and recordings by storing them in a safe, locked location. I will not circulate information. For my future research program I am willing to contact you for the next two or three years and keep these information with me, of course not without your consent. If you do not want me to go for the process, I will destroy all information within 6 months after my thesis defense. Your participation in this research is entirely voluntary and you should feel free to refrain from answering any question you prefer to omit. There will be no payment to you for participating in this research.

The study will involve an interview with you about Mandi beauty workers' urban life. This interview will last one hour at a maximum. It will take place in a location you are comfortable with, and at a time convenient for you. The study may also involve discussions among a number of participants in this research project who are willing and interested to enter into a group discussion. I will not tape-record or take notes during this interview without your consent.

--Continued on Next Page--

Please initial all those that apply:

- I agree to participate in an interview
- I agree to participate in a group discussion
- I agree to the use of an audio tape-recording device to record my interview
- I allow use of my name in connection with the information I provide.

This form contains my contact information as well as that of my advisor. If you would like to read my thesis after it has been submitted to the Graduate Studies, please contact me at the address provided on this form. I will be able to send you an electronic copy, or a print copy if you do not have access to e-mail. If you do not read English, I can provide you with a copy translated into Bengali.

Your signature on this form indicates that you have understood to your satisfaction the information regarding participation in the research project and agree to participate as a subject. In no way does this waive your legal rights nor release the researchers, sponsors, or involved institutions from their legal and professional responsibilities. You are free to withdraw from the study at any time, and/or refrain from answering any questions you prefer to omit, without prejudice or consequence. Your continued participation should be as informed as your initial consent, so you should feel free to ask for clarification or new information throughout your participation.

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This research has been approved by the University of Manitoba Research Ethics Board. If you have any concerns or complaints about this project you may contact any of the above-named persons or the Human Ethics Secretariat at 011-880-2-204-474-7122, or e-mail [margaret\\_bowman@umanitoba.ca](mailto:margaret_bowman@umanitoba.ca). A copy of this consent form has been given to you to keep for your records and reference.

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Participant's Signature

Date

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Researcher and/or Delegate's Signature

Date

## **Appendix B: Interview Schedule**

**[Note: The interviews were mainly conducted in Bengali and Mandi languages. This is a translated version of the interview questions]**

### **SECTION A: Interview with Mandi beauty workers**

#### **Part I: Introduction**

- Tell me about your work
- How did you know about work in beauty parlour?
- Where (what neighborhood, what residential arrangement) do you live?
- Where are you working now?
- How long have you been working in that beauty parlor?
- When did you come to Dhaka? How long will you stay?
- How did you find out about this job?
- Who brought you here?
- Where did you live when you first came?

#### **Part II: Family and Social Relationships**

- How many hours do work each day?
- Do you have to work over-time? Are you paid for that?
- Tell me about your family and children.
- Who is taking care of the children while you are working?
- Is your husband living with you in Dhaka?
- When did he come here?
- Does he like your work?
- If your husband is not taking care of your children, who is helping you?
- Is he/she a family member? When and how did you bring him/her in Dhaka?
- Where are your parents living?
- Are you taking care of your parents and other family members back in the village?
- What is their impression of you working in the parlour?

#### **Part III: Mandi history**

- Tell me about Mandi culture
- Do you see any changes in Mandi culture in the city?

- Please tell me about the Church facilities in the village and here in the city
- What other forms of Mandi social customs do you follow?
- Tell me about the difficulties you face practicing Mandi customs in Kalachandpur.

#### **Part IV: Initial experience after coming to the city and experience at work**

- How did you communicate with your family in the village after coming to the city?
- Tell me about your experience after migration.
- What did you think of city life after coming here?
- When are you planning to see your family?
- Do you have any plan to bring any members of your family?
- What is your future plan? Are you planning to go back in future?
- What is your thought on the change of Mandi matrilineal community in the city?
- Tell me about your neighbours.

#### **Work experience:**

- Tell me about your experience at work.
- How do you go to work (what kind of transportation you use)
- What was your starting salary?
- Tell me about your training sessions.
- Tell me about Bengali co-workers at work.
- Tell me about your customer
- Tell me about your experience with your owner.
- What do you think of the Bengalis in the city? How do they treat you and the others in your community members?
- What do you do after coming from work?

#### **Part V: Household Responsibilities**

- Tell me about your work at home.
- Who manages your work at home?
- Tell me about your relationships at home.
- What is your opinion on Mandi men in the city?

### **SECTION B: Interview with the male members in urban Mandi households**

#### **Part I: Introduction**

- What is your relationship with her (the beauty worker in the family)?
- When did you come in Dhaka?
- Do you like working in the office? Are you working somewhere?
- What are you doing now?
- Tell me about your work.
- Do you have any budget difficulties?

**Part II: Family and social relationship**

- Who is taking care of the children while you are at work?
- What is your relationship with her/him?
- How and when did you bring her/him in the city?
- Where are your parents living?
- Are you taking care of your parents and other family members back in the village?
- What do you like to do while you are at home?

**Part III: Talking about Mandi customs**

- Do you see any changes in Mandi customs in the city?
- What is your opinion on that?

**Conclusion: Reflection on Interview**

- Please tell me anything else you think I should know about what it is like being a Mandi person living in Dhaka.
- Please tell me anything about how you felt about this interview.