Women, land and power in Bangladesh: Jhagrapur revisited
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6 Moral values, gender ideology and power

The introduction of the Green Revolution has brought changes to the lives of the villagers not only affecting economic relations, but also social relations and cultural norms and values. This chapter is about moral norms, values and gender ideologies as imposed by Islam, the state and other local and global powerful forces, and how these have been changing in the context of Jhagrapur. Norms and values are important elements of the social structure of class and gender relations; they demarcate the space in which people in the village have to operate and negotiate their interests. But norms and values are not uniform and there have been contradictory developments. On the one hand, this has led to stigmatisation of women while on the other hand it has created more space for women to defy certain norms and values.

Changes in society take place not only at the material level, but also in the minds of the people, in ideologies. This is often a process that is mediated by the state, religion, NGOs or other powerful forces, but also by people's agency. The more the various powers interfere in the daily life of people, the more people's thinking is influenced by the ideology explicitly or implicitly promoted by these powers. Saptari (2000: 12) pointed out that with the development of the state, its policies and ability to manipulate media, education, legislation and social institutions, the way people think is influenced in many ways, particularly with regard to women and the household. Saptari argues that it is our task to:

…map the tensions of hegemonic notions of family and external interventions into family life, household structures and domestic arrangements on the one hand, and the persistence of cultural variations and local subversions, on the other. In other words, we become highly attentive to the tensions between structure and agency, culture and practice.

Translated to the case of economic transformation in Bangladesh induced by the state, foreign ‘aid’, and transnational companies, we need to study which changes in the household can be attributed to external interventions, and what has been the result on women’s/people’s agency. People’s actions can be either in line with external interventions and dominant ideology and hence strengthen these, or they can challenge them. In particular changes in gender relations and ideologies that have taken place with regard to women’s position in the household and society and women’s empowerment that found its expression in moral values, in marital relations (family planning), in education and in the village power structure will be dealt with. These elements provide the background against which my findings on women’s relationship to land and social transformation will be analysed in chapters 7 and 8.

6.1 Islam in Jhagrapur

In chapter 4, I have described how Islam in Bangladesh has been embraced by the state from the second half of the 1970s and how there have been signs of a growing political Islam. In Jhagrapur there have been a few developments that
point in the same direction, but most of these are not more than incidents in which some people have tried to assert their authority rather than an indication of a clear trend towards a growing Islamisation. One such incident happened toward the end of 1999 during one of my fieldwork periods. During Durga Puja, one of the main Hindu festivals, the idols of the goddess were going to be immersed in the canal on the road between Gangni and Alamdanga just outside the village (Plate 32). This event is organised yearly by Hindu businessmen from Gangni; the canal is the nearest waterway where such immersion is possible. Many villagers went to see the immersion, but several of them could not make it to the canal as some villagers had stopped them on the road and forbidden them to go. “This is not for Muslims; you should not go there”, they were told. Although quite a number of villagers did attend the ceremony and many others condemned the fact that these people had prevented others from going, it is a sign of a growing intolerance.

Another sign of a growing influence of Islam, I noticed in the village during the November harvest in 2004. Several shopkeepers who held a halkhata¹¹⁴ (the occasion where customers have to pay their outstanding bills) played a cassette with an enflaming speech. When I asked some villagers about it they explained to me that it was a Maulana (religious leader) who was speaking against Humayun Azad, a popular writer who has written critically against oppression of women by Islam and who has been assassinated by political Islamists in 2004. These villagers agreed with what the Maulana was saying. Usually during halkhata shopkeepers put up a

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¹¹⁴ Literally: account-book changed at the beginning of a new year. Usually a halkhata is held a few times a year, not only for customers to pay their arrears to shopkeepers, but also e.g. to pay for services, such as deep or shallow tube well irrigation and use of power tiller.

¹¹⁵ In Bangladesh women are not allowed to enter the mosque, they are supposed to pray at home.
mike and play loud music to attract the attention of their customers to remind them to pay their bills, but now this occasion is also used to send out other messages.

**Box 6.1 Meena’s husband wants her to wear a *burka***

One day in 1999 Meena told me: “My husband wrote to me that the women there all wear a *burka*. I’m afraid that when he comes back I will also have to wear one; I don’t like that. I have a lot of freedom now. The only problem sometimes is arranging for the cultivation of our land. I have helpers; they arrange day-labourers and inputs and we have given part of the land in sharecrop.”

In 2005 when I met Meena at someone else’s house she told me: “My husband has been here for holidays and he is thinking of coming back but I told him to stay there and earn more money. If he comes back I won’t have my freedom any more. I will have to stay at home and wear a *burka* when I go out.” But when I went to her house a few days later Meena told me: “It’s alright when he comes back after some years, I will take it as it is, I will wear a *burka.*” I mentioned that before she said that she wouldn’t like that. “I don’t mind. It is good now; he brought me a *burka.*” She took the *burka* and put it on to show me. “Once my husband took me to a doctor in Meherpur, then I had to wear it. I like wearing it.” I asked her: “Isn’t it very warm?” “Yes, it is very uncomfortable”, she replied. Meena was clearly in two minds about it. Her changing attitude may have been connected to all the benefits that she was experiencing from her husband’s job. She continued: “When my husband was here he brought lots of things, expensive *saris* and a golden chain. But I won’t wear the chain, it is too dangerous, it may be snatched away. He had a carpenter made beds, one for me and one for my son, and he also had a latrine and bathroom made. He sends money regularly.” She was clearly pleased with the wealth her husband was bringing them and if wearing a *burka* was part of that, well, then she would adjust to that.

As Meena indicated, she has more freedom to move around and to manage her household while her husband is abroad. At the same time she has to be more careful to show that she behaves properly and guards her chastity to protect the honour of her in-laws and her own family. Because she is alone she is more vulnerable to gossip and reputation damage: “I behave very well so that people cannot talk about me. My father sleeps here at night, so I am not afraid”, Meena emphasised.

Other signs can be noticed in day-to-day life as well, albeit some of them only temporary. Only a small minority of the men, although more than in the 1970s, go to the mosque to pray\textsuperscript{116} and apart from the mosque in the centre of the village that was already there in the 1970s, two small bamboo praying-sheds were constructed
just before Ramadan in 1999, one in the western and one in the eastern part of the village. People explained that this made it easier for men to go and pray. However, a few years later these sheds had disappeared again.

Islamic symbols are also used more than before. More men wear a *tupi* (hat) and whereas before no women in the village owned a *burka* or talked about it, now a few women do. I also noticed a change in attitude in some of the women. For instance Meena, whose husband has been working in the Gulf for several years, at first showed fears that her husband might make her wear a *burka* but later told me that she does not mind wearing a *burka* (Box 6.1).

Mass media have penetrated the rural areas and television has become a common commodity, even for quite a few poor households, so people are well informed about major world events and like to share their opinion. After the Twin Tower attacks in New York on 9 September 2001 pro-Islamic and anti-US sentiments were clearly noticeable. Many people praised Osama Bin Laden and commented that America was very bad. Similarly, they expressed their sympathy for Saddam Hossain after the US invasion of Iraq (Plate 33). These expressions may not go as far as to indicate that people are supporters of Osama or Saddam, but it does mean that they identify with the Islamic world. The ‘War on Terror’, declared by the US government and supported by many other western governments, has certainly created more enemies.
While people may talk positively about Osama or Saddam Hussein, I have not seen or heard of militant Islamic activists in the village or the area and there are only few Jamaat-e-Islami supporters in the village. The majority of the people in the area support the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP). The Meherpur 2 constituency, of which the village is part, is one of the few constituencies where the BNP won the December 2008 national elections while the Awami League gained more than two-thirds majority in the country. But there is also a considerable number of people in the village who support the Awami League and the Union Council member from Jhagrapur is member of the Awami League.

The influence of political Islam has not been very strong in the village despite a growing tendency to promote Islamic norms and values. This may very well have to do with the influence of Sufism in the village. People from Jhagrapur originally came from further east in Bengal and settled in the village most probably during the reign of Nawab Shiraj ud Daulah in the first half of the 18th century. Most rural Bengalis are Atraf Muslims, to be distinguished from Ashraf Muslims who arrived in Bengal from the West beyond the Khyber around the 14th century. Ashrafs belong to the same aristocratic classes as the orthodox Mullahs (Dasgupta 2004). They look down on the Atraf Muslims, who are peasants and artisans and do not mix with them. Atraf Muslims are close to Sufism, which in Bengal amalgamated with the mystic pre-Muslim Sahajiya religious tradition to which the Bauls of Bengal also belong (Dasgupta 2004). In the village there are several Fokir families, as the Bauls call themselves; they visit the big yearly Baul gatherings in the neighbouring Kushtia District (Plate 34, 35). There are also followers of various Pirrs (a Pir is a holy person) in the village and several of them attend big religious gatherings devoted to a Pir yearly. One of the villagers has even constructed a mazar (tomb, used as a place of worship) for a Pir in his homestead. These religious affiliations may be an explanation why political Islam has not had much influence in the village. Although Islam is definitely an important factor in peoples’ lives in Jhagrapur, other developments have an influence on the lives of the people as well, as we will see in the next sections.

6.2 Global linkages and moral values
Both economic transformation and other influences such as foreign migration improved communication and the village has opened up much more to the world.

116 The oldest villager told me that he had heard the name Nawab Shiraj Daulat from his grandfather. His grandfather’s grandfather had been among the first settlers in the village. It is likely that this refers to Shiraj-ud-Daulat, the last independent Nawab of Bengal. He lost the battle of Plassey against the British in 1757, which marked the beginning of the British East India Company in India.
117 Villagers told me that there is still a bad relation between people from the East and people from the West. Although two centuries have gone by since their forefathers came from the East, the people in Jhagrapur still have no relationship with people from one of the neighbouring villages who are Ashraf. They speak a different dialect, do not intermarry and do not do business with each other. The story goes that the first settlers of Jhagrapur who came from the East had a big quarrel with Muslims from the West who had settled in the area before. Then a Hindu Bania (businessman) offered them to settle around his big pond, the boro pukur. That is why the village is called Baniapukur.
118 The Sahajiya religion did not recognize the Brahmanic domination in Hinduism (Dasgupta 2004).
This can be noticed in many aspects of daily life, in particular of the middle and rich classes. People’s lifestyles are changing. In 1975 only a few people had a radio and a bicycle, a watch was still very much a luxury item and many people, especially women, had never gone further than a neighbouring village. When I first came to the village in 1974, women asked me where I was from and when I answered “from Holland” one of them asked whether that was near Meherpur (less than 20 km from Jhagrapur). Another woman told me later that when she first saw me she thought I was a ghost; they had never seen a foreigner. Now people know about the world outside the village and are informed about national and international political issues. Quite a few people have travelled outside the district and several men and women have a job outside the village, some of them in Dhaka. Televisions and mobile phones have become common commodities, and are now also within the reach of poor peasant households. Mobile phones have also connected women to the outside world, in particular when a son or husband has migrated abroad. Movies shown on television bring ideas of more freedom and romantic love into the homes and minds of people. Advertisements of national and particularly foreign products portraying women as desirable beauty models have shaped peoples’ desires and set new standards of beauty, modelled after western standards, and playing into the colonial legacy that everything white is more beautiful and superior. Young women in Jhagrapur can sometimes be seen wearing lipstick and some women use ‘Fair and lovely’, a widely advertised cream that makes the skin lighter (Plate 36). These ‘modern trends’ were unthinkable in the 1970s. Women do not act shyly (‘lojja’) anymore as was expected from a ‘good’ woman in the 1970s. Women are less inclined to accept just everything, they have become stronger and

119 Televisions also fulfil a social function for the neighbourhood, especially on Fridays, the weekly holiday, when a movie is shown on television and many of the neighbours who do not have a television come and watch the movie.
they appreciate their greater mobility. In general, people want to be a part of the modern world. Sayeda, a middle peasant woman, expressed the changes in the position of women in 1999 in this way:

Women now dare to open their mouth if they get beaten up. They have had more education, you can’t tell them just anything anymore, they see much more now. On television they see a movie in which a wife beats her mother in law who treats her badly. Laizu [their neighbour] went on hunger strike for one day after her husband had beaten her up.

Women are less inclined to accept just everything. When I asked her what changes had taken place for women, another rich peasant woman told me:

Before we had to go like this [pulling her sari completely over her head, also covering her face], now only like this [covering only her head, not her face], or like this [no sari over her head]. You could go outside the

Plate 35  Baul woman performing at Baul festival in Gulapnagar, Kushtia District April 2001.

Plate 36  ‘Fair & Lovely’ advertisement, produced by Hindustan Unilever above a shop in a small town

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A middle peasant woman described how women had become more assertive in public:

In buses men and women sit next to each other now, before women had separate seats. Now women tell men to get up in the bus ‘Ami bosbo’ [‘I will sit’] and they take them by the hand to make them get up.

These are all examples of how women challenge their subordinate position. Several people also referred to the fact that since 1991 the Prime Minister is a woman which sets an example for other women. But women are not (yet) free to just go when and where they like without their husband’s permission. Many of them can go to places, but they have to tell their husband beforehand where they go, otherwise they are in trouble and risk being beaten up. Only few women take part in public activities, such as attending a village theatre performance or a village meeting. Women are not formally forbidden to attend village meetings, but they have to keep quiet if they do and are excluded from decision making in the community.

On the whole, women appreciate their greater mobility and apparently purdah has not been a constraining factor in the increased mobility and visibility of women in public spaces. Women still subscribe to the purdah norm, but they reinterpret Islamic norms to fit their changed circumstances. As observed by other scholars as well (Rozario 2002; Rudnick 2003, 2009), women have modified and stretched the meaning of purdah or found other ways to maintain purdah. In this way, women have moulded the structure in a way that enables them to cope with the changed circumstances and to adjust to their perception of being part of the ‘modern’ world. On the other hand, men express their dissatisfaction about women’s behaviour and complain that women do not listen to them any more. Mondols complain that they are not respected any more and some men express their fear that their wife may run away if they give them land or if they do not keep them under control by (the threat of) beating her. Men’s complaints and fears indicate their dependency on their wives. An increased emphasis on Islamic norms and values may well be, at least partly, a reaction to these ‘mundane’ influences. Hence, men reinforce an Islamic identity to counter these trends and to emphasise their hegemony.

These worldly influences also find expression in the increase in love relationships between boys and girls now, as several people told me. Although chastity of women is one of the strictest moral norms, these relationships are often of a sexual nature. Films and advertisements display images of romantic love and desire, which catch people’s imagination. People emphasised the influence of movies in this development. One middle peasant woman told me:

120 As a token of gender equality the government has abolished reserved seats for women on buses.
They see movies on TV and then they start a love relationship. Girls elope with boys and then their parents marry them off quickly. Women even leave their husband for another man. This also happens. And some people marry in Meherpur court now.

A serious consequence of the open display of love and suggestions of sexual affairs in a patriarchal society where women are regarded as the possession of men, is that men increasingly harass women when they refuse their advances. Women are stalked or even violently attacked when they refuse to give in to a man’s advances or marriage proposals. The most vicious of such attacks is acid throwing which maims a woman for life. Incidents of this nature are regularly reported in newspapers, but fortunately such vicious behaviour of men has not taken place in the village.

Mobile telephones have become common commodities (Plate 37) and they also facilitate relationships, as a young man from a rich peasant family explained:

There are many love relationships now; with mobiles it has become very easy. A boy and girl can secretly be in contact through their mobile phones and they can fix a secret place to meet. Laila [a daughter of a rich peasant] just got married to a boy from Raipur, they could keep in contact through their mobiles. The boy’s parents still have not accepted the relationship, but her parents did and performed the marriage at night in their house. Before this she had another boyfriend, here in the village. She had many boyfriends. *Bidesher system hoeche.* [It has become here like in foreign countries.] I myself had a relationship with that girl too, but my parents didn’t accept and I married someone else.
Lovers often have a hard time to get their relationship accepted and most of the time they fail with parents refusing to accept the relationship and quickly making arrangements to marry their daughter off to someone else to avoid any further shame. Norms of purity and morality, and with that loss of status, play a role in the rejection of love relations, in particular for girls as parents fear that their daughter might lose her virginity before marriage. Virginity is regarded as a sign of purity and to be guarded carefully. If a girl’s virginity is lost before marriage, the honour and status of the family and lineage is damaged. As one middle class woman put it: “Parents are afraid that people will say: ‘your lineage girls are bad’”.

Love marriages are highly discouraged. For parents arranging a marriage not only means arranging future economic and social security for their children, it may also serve other purposes, such as raising the status of the family and broadening its economic, social, or political networks through connections with the family of the prospective bride or groom. This is why parents wish to remain in control over the choice of the marriage partners of their children. Status and, linked to it, class discrimination are an important reason for disapproval, especially if the boy is from a poor family and the girl from a rich family. One day in 1999 Hassan, whose father is a poor peasant, related his bitter experience to me:

I was in high school in another village, I lived with relatives. I had a relationship with the daughter of a rich family. But her father found out about it and then he promised someone 35,000 Taka if that person would kill me. My girlfriend heard about it and told me. She was worried about me and told me to flee from there, so I fled. I felt very bad. My girlfriend has now been married off to a boy from a rich family, against her own wish. It hurts a lot, my love will always remain.

He also told me about a few similar cases in the village:

Most of the time it happens like this between a poor boy and a rich girl. Boys are also chalak (clever) to fall in love with a girl from a rich family. But in 95 percent of the cases the boys lose and the girl is married off to someone else.

Apparently, boys sometimes try a love affair with a girl from a rich family as a strategy to raise their status, but most of the time this strategy fails. Similarly, girls may try this as a strategy, but they are even less likely than boys to be successful due to the dowry demands of a middle or rich peasant family being too high for a poor girl’s family. Several boys and girls have eloped and whereas some of them were able to reconcile their parents later, for others there was not such happy ending. In one case, a girl was married off to a boy in another village because she had a relationship with a boy next door. Even after her marriage the boy and girl stayed in contact and finally they eloped. Then the girl’s father filed a case against the boy who was arrested and put in jail and the women who had helped the couple
escape were beaten black and blue by one of the girl’s relatives. In another case, some men were jailed (Box 6.2).

Illicit relationships are not new in the village, we heard of many cases in 1974/75 (Arens & van Beurden [1977] 1980: 54-61), but now more girls are involved and to a greater extent than before. In 1974/75 girls were usually married off soon after they reached puberty to avoid problems, but now many girls first go to high school, at least for a few years, and are married off later as one of the conditions for a stipend is that they remain unmarried as long as they are in school.

Box 6.2 A group of men jailed for arranging a marriage for a minor girl

Around 1995 a middle peasant daughter had an affair with a boy from the village. Both were involved in the same political party as a few other (married) middle peasant men from the village. One night the group of men took the girl and boy to a Maulana in the neighbouring village and had them married. It is not really clear to me how this evolved, whether this was at the request of the girl or at the initiative of the group of men. According to some sources it was because the girl had told them that she wanted to marry the boy but had no money for dowry. According to some other sources the married men wanted to cover up their own sexual involvement with the girl (some of them are notorious for their illicit relationships). Then, soon after the marriage, the boy rejected the girl and as a result there was a quarrel in the village between the group of men who were involved in the case and a group who supported the girl. When the conflict could not be resolved, the father of the girl decided to file a court case against the men involved, to the surprise of the latter. They had thought that they would get away with the case, as the father would never be able to start a court case against them being far from rich. Finally the men were all convicted for arranging the marriage of a minor girl. They spent 4 months in jail and they each had to pay 50,000 Taka compensation. The girl was married to someone else.  

School also gives boys and girls more opportunities to have contact with each other as most schools are mixed. Many men and several women are said to have illicit affairs. One man who is well informed and also involved in extra-marital affairs told me that 25 percent of the men have extra-marital sex with women. Whereas his estimation may be exaggerated, certainly many men are involved. This man told me in 1999 that he had seen a woman with a man from outside the village in the light of his flashlight not long ago. Later on the woman came to him and told him to keep quiet but when he said that he would not keep quiet, the woman offered

121 In the end the girl was the one who lost. Apparently she died under unclear circumstances. According to some people she was sick and kept on taking medicines from a kobiraj (quack) causing her death.
herself to him in exchange for his silence. Men who have illicit affairs are from all classes but the majority are rich peasants whereas the women are mostly poor peasant women (but I know of a few middle and rich peasant women as well). Poor women are driven by poverty to give in to men’s sexual desires for money and men take advantage of their poverty to use these women for their sexual pleasures.

6.3 Moral values and poverty

“Women from our village do not work outside the house”, villagers assured me repeatedly. When I asked why in one of the conversations on this topic, an old landless woman said: “Then they will lose their chastity.” This is clearly one of the dominant gender norms in the village. In the 1970s, most women did not work outside the homestead either, but villagers did not feel the need to emphasise this; it was a fact, the ‘normal’ practice and not a matter of discussion. During my fieldwork visits for this study, I heard more and more people, both men and women, emphasise that women do not work outside the house. However, this norm seems to apply in particular to poor women. Several middle and rich class women do have jobs, mostly outside the village. Some poor women clearly expressed that other norms apply to them: “The rich forbade our village women to work outside.” But when I told them that some rich women also worked outside the village they said: “They are rich. When a rich woman works outside the village then nobody dares to say anything.” This shows the double standards of the rich and the village leaders. Despite all of this several poor women do work outside; they are mostly widows and divorced women who have no other means to survive.
The greater emphasis on the norm that women do not work outside the house has to do with two contradictory but connected trends. On the one hand, due to poverty and the influence of development NGOs and western donors that focus their programmes on women, there is a growing trend in the country to increase the physical mobility of women. On the other hand, the growing Islamisation of society, in combination with the fact that rural women have been further pushed out of production, has led to a greater emphasis on reproductive values. Yet, the dominant discourse of purdah and the need for women to stay at home is emphasised especially by the rich and powerful. Rich and middle peasant women have to uphold their status, while this does not count for poor women (Plate 38). Although purdah is generally given as the main reason for these social norms, I argue that purdah is not the main reason. Rather, purdah is used to enforce underlying patriarchal norms of male dominance and women’s subordinate position. The fact that women’s mobility has increased considerably since the 1970s indicates that women are willing to defy or reinterpret purdah norms. Thus, why would purdah be the main obstacle for women to work outside their homestead? Another argument that defies the central role of purdah in women’s inability to work on the land and their consequential lack of control over land is the fact that in other Islamic countries, such as Malaysia and Indonesia, women do work on the land. Apparently there are other interests at work here.

Shahnaz’s case illustrates how patriarchal gender ideology can constrain a woman’s agency. In 2001 Shahnaz told me that she was very interested to join the Ansar, the paramilitary force (see chapter 5, Box 5.8). But in 2002 when I asked her again about this she told me:

My son doesn’t want me to join the Ansar because other people will speak badly about me. He says that he will work as day-labourer and take care of me. They speak badly about women who work outside the village. The rich don’t allow our women to work outside the village.

When I mentioned that there was another woman from Jhagrapur who had joined the Ansar force earlier, she said: “Yes, in the beginning they talked bad about her too, but not any more. They are rich.” Shahnaz clearly regretted not being able to join, although she did not express this in words. Nevertheless, joining the Ansar force would have meant being away from her sons most of the time and going against the wishes of her eldest son who had grown up in the mean time and now wanted his family to conform to the dominant gender ideology. Shahnaz, who had previously been prepared to ignore the prevailing norms and gossip of people was now left jobless and with an ambivalent feeling. It proved more difficult to ignore her son’s wishes to conform to religious and social norms. In fact her kinship ties constrained her not to pursue her own wishes. The case of Shahnaz, who is landless, shows that there can be a tension between poverty, moral values, and social norms. Shahnaz herself had wanted to join the Ansar force had it not been for her son who prevented her “because people will talk bad about her”, reproducing the
hegemonic gender ideology. For Shahnaz herself, considerations of being able to have a regular income were stronger than moral considerations and purdah norms. Her kinship ties prevented her from actually joining the Ansar and she accepted her son’s wish for him to take care of her.

Not all landless women have a husband or a son to take care of them. Their poverty forces them to defy gender norms and moral values to be able to survive. Certainly not all people adhere to the dominant ideology and they may look for ways to avoid or even subvert it. Although gender ideology of male domination and unequal gender relations are a serious constraint for women to go against the flow, it is not impossible. There are women in Jhagrapur who explicitly defy social norms and values, not only for their survival driven by poverty, but also because they resist the control of men, often at the cost of being stigmatised.

Box 6.3 Rushina and Shahina do not want to marry again

Rushina is a divorced landless woman and has a young son who is still in school. She left her husband when she found out that he already had a wife. In 2009 she told me: “After I was divorced I made a case against my ex-husband, a lawyer helped me. The case lasted 6 to 7 years, but in the end I won. My ex-husband refused to give me land, then the government sold part of his land and I got Tk 1.4 lakh. I put all that money in the bank for my son for later.” She runs a small shop on the roadside in the village. For some time she lived mostly from husking paddy at the mill and selling the rice, and raising animals, but she could not survive on that, as she had not enough capital to buy paddy to process. She does not care what other people say about her. One day I met her on the road when I was on my way to Gangni by bicycle. Jokingly, I asked her whether I could give her a lift. To my surprise she said ‘yes’ and sat down on the bar of my men’s bike. At one point in our conversation on the bike I asked her whether she would like to marry again. Her reply left no doubt: “Do you think I could ride the bike with you if I had a husband? He would say that I have to come down immediately.” Rushina clearly does not like to be controlled by men.

Shahina is another example. Shahina divorced from her husband when her daughter was not even one year old. She remarried twice, but now she doesn’t want to marry again. In 1999, when I visited her in her house where she lived with her 9-year-old daughter next to her widowed mother, she insisted: “It won’t match and I won’t be free anymore to go my own way. I can run my own affairs.” Shahina inherited 0.5 bigha of land from her father. She hires in day labourers to cultivate it. Since seven years she runs a small shop in her house, which she set up with a loan from an NGO. “I myself buy all the items for the shop in the nearest small town.
I go there by van (goods carrier rickshaw). Since two years I am also official depot holder of an NGO that carries out family planning programmes.” She shows me the contraceptives in her shop - condoms and pills. Shahina tells: “They gave me a training and I did a survey of the whole village for them. …I taught myself reading and writing, I can read books now. I am intelligent. I am the intermediary between villagers and the NGO. They pay me 500 Taka per month. Nowadays everybody practices family planning, even those who strictly follow Islamic rules. Now nobody takes it secretly.”

Some of these women are divorced and do not want to marry again; they do not adhere to the norm that to be single is not an option for women, except for widows. They have been able to overcome the constraints and dare to step out of oppressive marriage relations; they make a conscious choice not to remarry. Whereas before, staying single was by force of circumstances, now some women make an explicit choice to stay single after a divorce (Box 6.3). These are often women who have no one else to take care of them and they have nothing to lose.

With more women defying gender norms it seems that men feel the need to explicitly reassert certain norms for women such as the norm that “our women do not work outside the house”, which I never heard in 1974/75. This could indicate that men have the feeling that their power is waning. The case of women working for traders in the rice mills is another example of women defying gender norms. In the next section I will analyse their case as it shows several processes that are at work in the subordination of women.

6.4 Stigmatisation of women

All the women who worked at the rice mills were landless. They live on the premises of the rice mills. When I asked some of them whether they were married, they all said: “No, do you think we could do this work if we had a husband? They would not allow us”. They were all divorced or widows and had no one to take care of them and ‘protect’ them. Widows and divorced women generally have more freedom of movement, as there is no husband to control them directly and restrict their movements and, as they are landless, this work is one of their very few options to survive (Plate 39, 40). Only after some time in the village did I realise that all the women who work at the rice mills in the village are from outside Jhagrapur.122

So, no women from the village itself were employed there. This is in line with what villagers repeatedly assured me: “Women from our village do not work there”. I asked women at the rice mill, as well as some villagers, why women from Jhagrapur are not employed there. The first explained: “They will go home in

122 The women’s home villages are situated in the same sub-district, but at quite some distance from Jhagrapur. I have the impression that there are no marriage connections between Jhagrapur and their villages. This may be of relevance here. Possibly traders recruit women from villages that are outside their own social network, as they may fear implications for their own status. It would be interesting to study this further.
between all the time, that’s why the bosses don’t want to take them”. But several women from Jhagrapur painted a different picture: “It is not good for women to work there, only bad women work there.” At my question why, a landless woman explained: “If a woman sleeps with her boss, that is not bad?” Another time, an old poor woman first gave the rather standard answer “the women there are bad”, but a bit later she clarified: “The rich have forbidden to work there. …The women will lose their chastity. Islam has increased and therefore women are not allowed to work outside.” So the gossip is that women who work at the rice mills are ‘bad’ women, because they have sex with their bosses. It is true that a few relationships have developed between traders and women working for them (Box 6.4).

**Box 6.4 Conversation at the rice mill**

One day in 2007 I sat with some women and their traders working at one of the rice mills and asked them about the allegations that the women sleep with their *malik* [boss]. After insisting they tell the truth, the following conversation developed:

A young man explains: “He [pointing at Hassan, a poor peasant who trades rice] is her [pointing at one of the women] husband”.

J.A.: “But he has a wife in the village.”

Hassan admits.

J.A.: “So you don’t live with your wife in the village?”

Hassan: “Yes I do, in the daytime I’m here, at night there.”

Another man: “He is lying. He is 2 nights there and 5 nights here.”

J.A.: “Why are only women from other villages working here, why not from here, there are so many poor women here without an income?”

First young man: “Women from the village don’t do this work.”

Hassan: “I will tell the truth. If a woman and man sleep under same blanket, then people talk bad about them, that is why there are only
women from far away here, then people in their village don’t know.”
J.A.: “So women from here work in rice mills in other villages? Who are they?”
Hassan wants to tell, but the young man prevents him and denies that any women from the village work elsewhere in rice mills. I don’t insist further, not wanting to compromise anyone.

I heard of one trader who had married one of the women working for him, repudiating his first wife and children and during my fieldwork another one eloped with a woman working for him, leaving behind his wife and children in the village. Even so, it certainly does not mean that all the women actually sleep with their bosses. Besides being economically exploited, these women working in the mills are branded as prostitutes for their (supposed) sexual relationship with the traders they work for, no matter whether they actually have such a relationship or not. They are outcasts; which is the price they have to pay for their work at the mill.

Why are the traders themselves not talked badly about? Why are only the women stigmatised and is all the blame put on them? How to explain this? The stigmatisation of women at the mills cannot be seen in isolation, but should also be seen against the background of the social transformation that is taking place in the area and in rural Bangladesh over the last few decades that I have described previously.

Plate 40  Woman boiling paddy at a rice mill in Jhagrapur.
In particular poor women bear the brunt of the resulting cracks in the power structure by being stigmatised. There are some specific mechanisms at work. First of all, the stigmatisation is used by the rich to assert their power and their control over women and to strengthen the gender ideology that ‘good’ women do not work outside the house. This stigmatisation also emphasises class hierarchies and reinforces the image of their own women as ‘good’ women. Besides, if women from Jhagrapur were to work at the rice mills, it would not be so easy for the rich men to use the women there for their own sexual pleasures. Their wives might start hearing more rumours which could lead to a further defiance of their authority. By labelling the women at the rice mills as ‘bad’, men give a signal to the women from the village not to mix with these women and not to work outside the house for else they will also be branded as ‘bad’. Although the stigma is labelled in terms of violation of women’s chastity (an age-old strategy of men), the main function is for the men to assert their authority over women and to keep the existing class and gender hierarchies in place. Joke Schrijvers (1999) has pointed to similar processes in Tamil refugee camps in Sri Lanka, where women and girls who have taken up jobs outside the camps and enter into love relationships, are labelled as prostitutes. She argues that this serves to maintain the gender and age hierarchies, and to keep women, in particular young women, under control. The ‘good’ woman identity and the ‘bad’ woman identity are in fact two sides of the same coin. Both are social constructs intrinsically linked to the prevailing patriarchal ideology in which chastity of women is a crucial element. Hence, the stigma put on women by men who want to keep them in their place, is generally of a sexual nature. It touches on the core value of women, invented by men to control women. In a male-dominated society, norms and values are set by men and serve to reassert their superiority and masculinity and to subordinate women. Men who ‘conquer’ women are ‘real’ men, while women who (are forced to) give in to men are ‘whores’. No matter whether such allegations against women are true or not, it puts them in ‘their’ place. In this way, men can use their power position to take advantage of women by exploiting them both economically and sexually without any consequences for their own status. At the same time women, are made into the identity bearers of the group and are therefore expected to keep up the honour of the community. For this reason they need to be ‘protected’ and kept under control. The image that is being created of the women at the mills is used as a weapon to control them and to reassert men’s authority, allowing them to get away with their double standards. But also women have internalised these norms and use them to put other women in their place. This is not very different from the way in which women in the western world are often portrayed as whores or, the other side of the coin, as saint-like mothers. In both worlds the dichotomy serves the same purpose.

A similar mechanism at work here is the labelling of people who are perceived as a threat, as ‘the other’. Castles and Miller (1998: 30) first pointed out this mechanism in the context of migration. By labelling or stigmatising female labourers from outside the village as the ‘other’ they are made into outcasts. Castles and Miller argue that dominant groups who perceive others as a threat ascribe undesirable
characteristics and an inferior status to the latter. They label ‘others’ and give them a certain stigma, which is then repeated over and over again thereby institutionalising prejudices. The prejudices work to exclude people who do not fit in, and who, in the eyes of the dominant group, have crossed the boundaries of prevailing norms and values. Although Castles and Miller make their argument in a different context, similar mechanisms are at work here in a gender context. Not only have women at the rice mills crossed the physical boundaries of their villages, they have also overstepped the moral boundaries of the prevailing gender norms that women do not work outside their homes and do not interact with men from outside their family. Therefore, these women are seen as a threat, in particular by men from the dominant class who fear to lose their control over women. In order to deal with this perceived threat, women working at the rice mills are projected as ‘bad’ women and as ‘the other’ from outside the village, even by other poor women, and are excluded from the village community in this way. Women internalise the norms set by men or use them to their own advantage thus reproducing the dominant male discourse. Rudnick (2003) has argued in the case of Bangladesh migrant women in Malaysia who were labelled as ‘bad’ that the dominant gender discourse is too powerful to counteract and so, if one cannot fight the leading discourse (stigmatisation), one had better join it. By labelling others as ‘bad’, women aim to convey that they themselves do not behave in an immoral way and, by doing so, assert that they are ‘good’. Mostly middle and rich peasant women tend to emphasise that the women working at the rice mills are ‘bad’, but several poor women did the same to indicate that they are not like those women. At the same time, some of them affirmed that if there were to be work for them outside the house, they would certainly take it, but not at a rice mill!

Thus, the stigmatisation serves to maintain both gender and class hierarchies. As we have seen before, the norm that women do not work outside their houses does not apply to rich peasant women and to some extent to middle peasant women. Apparently, this norm applies to poor women only and there are double standards. Several middle and rich class women have a job outside the village, mostly as teachers, and this is not questioned by anyone; they have ‘respectable’ jobs that do not make them ‘bad’ women. Zarina Rahman Khan (1992: 183) examined the value attached to the various kinds of work that women do, both unpaid work in the household and paid work outside. She found that there is a clear status ranking of women’s work “based on the degree of (a) deviation from the norms of mobility and (b) the connotations of the need for the woman to supplement male income of the household’, which reflects the inability of the men to fulfil the family needs. According to Rahman Khan, non-income-generating work within the domestic sphere has higher status than income generating work while women’s domestic work in other households implies less status loss than traditionally non-

123 Marty Chen (1986) has also studied the effect of women’s paid work on their status and found that earthwork, construction work, rice mill labour and agricultural labour significantly decreased the status of women.
female work in the public sphere, such as earth cutting and brickfield employment. Her study concerned only work done by poor women as she did not examine jobs done by middle class women, but contrary to the poor women’s work, obviously, these jobs are status-raising, while the work of the women at the rice mills is clearly regarded as status lowering.

I found further indications of status loss for women in relation to the agricultural transformation where the introduction of the rice mills has also had a negative consequence for middle and rich peasant women. As men operate the rice mills and have taken over work that was a woman’s job before, women’s work is now valued even less by men. In the previous chapter we saw that middle and rich peasant women had more leisure time thanks to the introduction of the rice mills. The other side of the coin is that men now claim even more than in the 1970s that women have a lot of leisure time and that their work is very easy. The only hard work they did had been taken over by the rice mill. And so, men claim that men’s work is much harder than women’s work. “Women have a very easy life now”, one man said during a group conversation that I had one day in 1999 with a group of men and women while they were winnowing paddy. A small peasant woman set him right: “Men have no work for 2 months a year, but our work is everyday.” Such remarks by men usually come with an undertone suggesting that men’s work is much more important and that women’s work nowadays has even less value. That men have a clear interest in downgrading women’s work was revealed by the joking remark of a middle peasant: “If we say that women have more work than men, we may have to start cooking.” This remark implicitly indicates the dependency of men on women, but also the hidden resistance of women.

6.5 Education
Another development that goes against the gender ideology of women’s confinement and gender inequality is the increased participation of girls both in primary and
in high school. In 1999, I collected data on enrolment of girls and boys in the primary school in the village and in two high schools in neighbouring villages, and compared these with the figures of 1974/5 (Arens & van Beurden [1977] 1980: 70). In 1974/75 a total of 114 children was registered in primary school, whereas in 1999 the number of pupils had increased to 248 (Plate 41).124 The number of girls and boys was more or less equal in both cases. As to the number of students in high school, in 1974/75 only two out of seventeen high school students were girls; they were both from rich peasant families. In 1999, a total of 61 girls and 51 boys were enrolled in high school, almost one-third of them from the poor peasant class.125 In the meantime the numbers have gone up even further, but I did not collect figures on enrolment in education after 1999. Nowadays, many poor peasant girls go to high school for at least a few years, while their brothers often have to earn additional income for the family as day labourer. This indicates a tremendous change. An important reason for the significantly higher number of girls in high school is the stipends programme for girls who go to high school.126 Although the stipends are rather small, these do work as an incentive for parents to send their daughters to high school, especially for the poor classes. But maybe more importantly, with the expectation that dowry demands will be lower for educated girls and that education raises the chances of finding a better match for their daughter, parents allow their daughters to go to high school. This argument is often used by teenage girls as well. Several girls told me that they prefer to go to school rather than getting married at this age. They were able to use the stipend programme and the prospect of a lower dowry as an argument to convince their parents to allow them to go to high school and not be married off yet in an example of how women use the structure to their own advantage. To some extent, studying has become an accepted reason for postponing a woman’s marriage. Although the majority of the girls are still married before they are 16 years old, it is not uncommon nowadays to find girls of 16 or sometimes even older who are still unmarried, whereas in 1975 there were hardly any unmarried girls of 14 or 15.127 Girls use education as an argument to support their request to their parents not to marry them off yet. Yet at the same time the educational effect of the stipend program is limited as the majority of the girls drop out after two or three years of high school in order to get married. In 1999 there were only 5 girls in class 10, the final year of high school. The fear of not being able to find a bridegroom once the girl becomes older and the perceived danger of girls entering into a love relationship and losing their chastity are important factors for parents to have their daughter married before they complete high school. For girls, finding a good match is obviously more important than the limited prospects of getting a job.

124 This includes the enrolment in primary schools in Jhagrapur run by NGOs.
125 These figures should be taken with some caution as these are the official enrolment figures and do not necessarily match with the actual attendance figures. Several evaluation studies of the stipend programme have shown this.
126 According to the principal of the high school in one of the neighbouring villages, the stipend programme for girls who are enrolled in high school was operational in the Jhagrapur area since 1996.
127 Contrary to my own findings, in other areas the number of early marriages has reportedly been increasing due to dowry (Daily Star August 17, 2002 reports about an alarming rise in early marriages in Narail).
Education for girls is also seen as a way to reduce the dowry demand as dowry demands usually decrease when a girl has had some years of high school education. This is an indication that the value of a girl goes up with education. Most likely this is not because of increased chances to find a job, as everybody knows that there are hardly any employment opportunities for women in the area. Moreover, Ahmed and Naher (1987: 196) have pointed out that most husbands do not like their wife to work after marriage.

They also pointed out that it is difficult to find a bridegroom if a girl is over-educated or over-qualified, as their bridegroom would have to be at least as qualified. Some (mostly rich) villagers voiced the same opinion and warned against the supposed advantages of an educated daughter from a poor class, especially if she had gone to college. They argued that it might be difficult for these poor women to find a suitable bridegroom as there are fewer boys from poor families who have studied in college and a boy does not like to marry a girl with more education than he. However, the actual practice points in a different direction: several rich and poor peasant girls with a few years of high school education have been married to uneducated boys. As a rich peasant woman clarified: “For an educated boy they would have asked too much dowry.” So, apparently education is not a key issue in the choice of a marriage partners, and it is not a breakpoint in marriage negotiations. Apparently the villagers I spoke with expressed their patriarchal concerns that had in the meantime been overturned by the present practice. Villagers also argued that men from middle and rich classes would not marry poor women, even if they were highly qualified. Obviously, these were rich peasants expressing their class concern about poor girls marrying a boy from a rich family. My findings confirm that class is a factor in marriage practice; marriages between educated girls and less educated boys are mostly within their own socio-economic class. Thus, class is a breakpoint in the choice of marriage partners, but not education.

The key question is whether increased participation in education contributes to a structural change in society towards greater gender and class equality. In previous sections, we have seen that women’s (exclusion from) ownership of means of production and their participation in the production process/labour market are important elements in the value attributed to them in society and to a large extent determine their dependency on men. As of yet, a higher level of education does not guarantee a place in the production process or labour market, let alone a change in norms and values leading to equal participation of women and of the poor in society, all the more given the generally low quality of education. Nevertheless, villagers often mention education as an important factor in the empowerment of women and of young people. Several girls who studied in high school expressed that they had become less ignorant and felt more confident, more informed and more aware of the possibilities. Others expressed their satisfaction about having been able to postpone their marriage or having increased their mobility. A rich peasant told me:
Nobody respects the village leaders any more because everybody has more money now and more education. Sons know more than their fathers and they don’t accept everything their fathers say just like that any more.

Both men and women have started to exercise their agency in challenging traditional power structures and education has played a role in this. In this way, education has made some difference.

There have been several attempts at adult education by NGOs (Plate 42) but these have mostly failed; the programmes disappeared again after one or a few years because of lack of interest and people’s complaints that they have no time for it.

6.6 Family Planning

Another change that has transformed gender relations is the fact that many couples have started using contraceptives. In 1975 there were 173 households with a total population of 1017 persons and in 1999 there were 419 households with a total population of 1678 meaning that the average household size had decreased from six to four persons. Apart from the splitting up of joint families, the smaller size of households is largely the result of the now generally adopted use of contraceptives. Nowadays, almost all couples have adopted family planning. They have fewer children and also have longer time gaps in between their children. In 1974/75 only a few couples used contraceptives. Some poor women had an IUD (Internal Uterine Device), mostly because they had been promised money as a reward, and a few women used the pill, but they were not always aware of how to use it properly. One woman told me that she thought that she had to take the pills all at once and would then be protected for one month. Men were mostly not in favour of family planning, let alone of having a vasectomy operation themselves as they feared that it would make them impotent. But, although only a few women used...
contraceptives, it was obvious that they were interested. Often women came to me asking why I did not have any children. I always answered that I used contraceptive pills, opening up the possibility of a discussion on the topic which they were usually keen to take. Some of the women then asked me to get the pill for them as they were too shy to talk to the male family planning worker who visited the village from time to time. A few women told me that they used contraceptive pills secretly, without their husband’s knowledge, clearly demonstrating their agency.

People’s knowledge about and attitude to contraceptives has changed gradually. In 1985, when I first revisited Jhagrapur, people talked more openly about it and I was told that more people had started practising family planning, mostly through using the pill. At the same time many people were still reluctant and said that they were afraid to fall ill as a punishment from Allah. So on the one hand the state promoted family planning but on the other hand many people believed that it was against Islam and this prevented them from using contraceptives. Nowadays, the use of contraceptives is widely accepted. During my recent fieldwork everyone, including the religious leader, supported family planning and no one said that it was against Islam. Even children have become aware of the need to reduce the number of children, as a 10-year-old boy told me:

“If everybody still had so many children as before, there would not be enough place in the world. Where is the place for so many children?”

The NGO that has a depot in a shop run by Shahina (Box 6.3) comes monthly to give injections and distribute pills and condoms (Plate 43). In 1999 women had to pay 5 Taka for an injection that works for three months. Contraceptives are subsidised by foreign aid and are mostly distributed by the government through NGOs. Some women go to an NGO in Gangni for an injection usually together in a group. The family planning policy that is promoted by the government and NGOs has been taken on by people mostly for economic reasons. As Shahina told me:
Nowadays everybody practices family planning, because to have many children is a problem as there is only little land. Even those who strictly follow Islamic rules use contraceptives. First some government people came and they gave pills free of cost. A few people started taking them. Then others saw it and gradually more and more women started using them. Now nobody takes it secretly. Most of the women take injections, about 100 women. Many also use the pill, but condoms are hardly used, I sell condoms to 10-12 people.

Women are most keen on taking contraceptives because they are the ones who get pregnant and are responsible for feeding and taking care of the children. Most men put the responsibility on their wife’s shoulders and so the burden is largely on the women.

Many couples now have only two or three children. Young couples use contraceptives not only for reducing the number of offspring, but also for child spacing. Several young couples told me that they decided to have only one child and they do not want more children, even some of them who had only one daughter. This is a real change compared to the 1970s when many couples continued having children until they had at least one son. The prospect of having to pay a high dowry sum for daughters plays a role and this prevents people from taking the risk to have another daughter. At the same time, the increased access to education has also played a role. Parents expect their daughters to have more opportunities in the labour market if they perform well in school and therefore also invest in their daughter’s education. The change in people’s thinking about having only one child, also if it is a daughter, is connected to these contradictory developments.

6.7 The village power structure
In this section I provide observations on the local power structure and the changing power relations. It provides the background against which women’s land ownership and the changes in class and gender relations will be analysed.

The power structure in the village is twofold and made up from the traditional village samaj (literally community) with its mondols, as the village leaders are called in the area, and the Union Council (UC), the lowest level of the elected state administrative structure. A Union Council has 10 elected members and 3 reserved seats for women. The most important functions of the Union Council are to implement...
government programmes, such as road construction and other infrastructure, collection of taxes, maintenance of law and order, and distribution of relief goods and other government provisions. The Union Council members decide which villagers are eligible for relief goods and special government welfare programmes such as food rations and old age pensions. The Sholotaka Union Council, of which Jhagrapur is part, covers 17 villages. One of the middle peasants from Jhagrapur is a UC Member and one poor peasant woman from Jhagrapur has once contested a seat in the Union Council, but she lost. In many Union Councils the female members have no real power; they are mostly as token figures. On the whole, people do not have much faith in the Union Council and they do not expect much good from its members. People complain that the Union Council members mainly work for their own interest rather than for the common interest of the people and I witnessed a clear example of this in relation to the implementation of one of the government welfare programmes. The Union Council Member from Jhagrapur and the *mondols* together select the persons who receive food rations under the so-called ‘Vulnerable Group Feeding’ (VGF), and ‘Vulnerable Group Development’ (VGD), programmes for the ‘ultra poor’. Under the VGF programme, landless families are supposed to receive 10 kilos of rice per month for three months and under the VGD programme women are supposed to receive 30 kilos of wheat per month for two years. According to the village Union Council Member, 500 people in the Union receive the 10 kilos of ‘ration’ rice under the VGF programme and since 1999 in total 150 women, mostly widows, receive 30 kilos of wheat per month for three months under the VGD programme. Of the 150 women, only eight are from Jhagrapur. According to the Member, the women receive the wheat only for three months and then other beneficiaries are selected so that a maximum number of women can benefit from the programmes. In fact, this is against the objective of the programme, which is to give the women food assistance for two years and simultaneous training to enhance their income-earning capacity and to overcome their food insecurity. Several people who received VGF or VGD rations complained to me that they always get less than what they are entitled to. They felt helpless; they cannot do anything about it. They also alleged that the UC members pocket a lot of the rice themselves. One day in 1999, one of the poor peasants told me that the *chowkidar* had informed them that the next day they would have to go the Union Council office in the neighbouring village to collect their ration and he told me: “You come and see for yourself.” (Box 6.5; Plate 44, 45) These corrupt practices are nothing new. In 1974/75 stories about incidents of corruption

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130 The Vulnerable Group Feeding programme is functioning since 1975; the Vulnerable Group Development programme since 1998. The UN World Food Programme (WFP) provides the government with food grains for both programmes. Officially, the VGF programme is for distressed people during periods of natural disasters. The VGD programme is only for women and is given for 2 years to help them stand on their own feet. Apart from these programmes, the government has also set up an old age pension programme in 1998, the so-called “Boisko bhata”. Low-income citizens of 60 years and above receive Tk250 per month quarterly through the bank.


132 In 1974/75 Kati, the head of the only Hindu family in the village, was *chowkidar*. When he retired one of his five sons became the *chowkidar*. 
Plate 44  Distribution of ‘ration’ food grains. Notice the stone on the weighing tray.

Plate 45  The stone is being taken away from the weighing tray after one of the UC members told the weighing man to do so.
of officials in the village were manifold. For example, a large part of the relief goods during the famine of 1974 were never distributed but were sold in the market and the money ended up in the pockets of the UC members. When I talked to one of the middle peasant women about these corrupt practices after my experience with the VGF rice distribution she explained to me: “All the UC members do that. Somehow they have to get back the money that they have spent on election campaigning.”

**Box 6.5 Distribution of rice under the Vulnerable Group Feeding programme**

Rice was being distributed in the Union Council office in the neighbouring village under the VGF programme. The people had to wait outside the office and per village they were allowed in to collect their 10 kilos of rice. The distributors used a manual scale that is commonly used in the area. A weight of 5 kilos was put on one side of the scale but on the tray on the other side, a big stone was put in between the rice every time. After observing this for a while, I took some photographs. Then I heard the Chairman say to the man who was weighing “pathor tule nao” (take the stone away). The man took the stone off, but after some time it was put back again (Plate 44, 45). Before I left the office, I asked the UC members who were present whether the weight on the one side of the scale was indeed 5 kilos; they confirmed this. I enquired: “Then why do you put the rock on the other side of the scale with the rice?” They explained: “We did not get the exact amount of rice from the government, but a bit less, 500x10=5000 kilo, but we got less than that.” When I asked them then how many bags they received from the government and what was the weight of each bag, they replied that they had received 60 bags. “But the weight in each bag is not exact. Sometimes it is 80, 82, 83, sometimes 90. [83x60=4980 kg] That is why we give everybody a bit less, otherwise there is not enough for everybody”, they clarified. But some time later they came with a different story. They brought a man with rheumatic crooked fingers to me. “You see, he has no VGF card, but still we give him rice.” When an old woman from another village came to me and complained that she had no VGF card, I immediately asked the officials in charge to give her rice too and she was then given rice. They told me to take a photo of her to confirm that she also received rice. Obviously, they were eager to cover up their cheating by showing how compassionate they were, even giving rice to people without a ration card, going beyond official instructions.

Undoubtedly the same mechanism is at work with regard to the other tasks of the UC that involve government money and goods. Many of the roads and other public works are not constructed properly and often break down after some time because officials and contractors pocket part of the money meant for the construction.
Apparently this is how ‘democracy’ works: making sure that you recover the price that you had to pay to get elected and get into power, even over the backs of the poor and powerless. How can people be expected to have faith in this so-called democracy and its leaders?

In the past corruption has not always gone unchallenged, as a grandson of one of the former Union Council chairmen told me in 1999 after Kati, the old chowkidar, (Plate 46) had died:

My dada [grandfather from father’s side] was chairman for 10 years; this was before the liberation war. Once the CO [Chief Officer] Gangni came to the Union Council meeting when the road was muddy. He complained why is there no good road here. Then Kati said: “Because the CO and SP [Superintendent of Police] eat up all the money for the road themselves.” The CO got very angry and tied up Kati in the Union Council office. When my dada came and saw him there tied up he asked why. The CO said that it was because he had said that. Then the chairman said: “It is true, untie him”, and Kati was released. At that time nobody dared to go against the UC chairman and UC member. My dada died in 1971, after liberation.

Another observation during one of my fieldwork periods relates to the Union Council task of enforcement of the laws. In September 2005, I noticed a board in the middle of the village near the primary school and the mosque that read in Bengali: “To give and to take dowry, both are punishable crimes.” Underneath was written “Announcement Sholotaka Union Council” (Plate 47). I was surprised to see this board. Were they finally organising a drive against dowry, one of the big sources of
exploitation of women? I enquired from the villagers whether at any time anyone had been punished for giving or taking dowry and whether dowry had decreased. But everyone denied that this was the case. Rather, people kept complaining about the ever-increasing dowry demands. The only change I noticed, especially among middle and rich peasant families that had married off one of their daughters in the recent past was that they emphasised that they had not paid any dowry for their daughters' marriage, but that they had given money at their own initiative because they were happy with the bridegroom; it was definitely not dowry. So the law enforcement drive of the Union Council by means of the board put up in the village as a token of their authority had not changed the dowry practice but only the language.

**Village Mondols losing their power**

Now let us turn to the functioning of the traditional village power structure, the samaj and its leaders, the *mondols*. The function of the samaj is twofold. First, the *mondols*, who are mostly rich peasants, have the power to arbitrate in the village court (*shalish*) and to settle conflicts among villagers. Secondly, the samaj functions as an assembly where the *mondols* decide about village affairs in public meetings. Women have no official place in this village power structure. There are no female *mondols* and women have no voice in the public meetings. In 1974/75, the *shalish* dealt with issues such as deciding about who gets relief goods, the construction of the village mosque, paddy theft from a rich peasant, the house of a badly-off middle peasant that had been set on fire by a rich peasant’s son, and illicit sexual affairs. It happened regularly that a *bichar* (arbitration by the *shalish*) ended...
without any clear decision taken or, if a decision was taken, without enforcement. We concluded at that time: “The court functions only if a rich peasant accuses a middle peasant or a poor peasant, and is an instrument of oppression of the latter.”

We also concluded:

The most striking feature of the village court is that it completely fails to deal with most land quarrels, while it is these quarrels which most disturb law and order. (Arens & van Beurden [1977] 1980: 172, 173).

Thus, the *shalish* was mainly an instrument of control for rich peasant men and most *mondols* were the biggest land grabbers. In the 1970s, and even before that, there were two rival factions consisting of rich peasants in the village that grabbed land from a lot of people. Most people still don’t have their land back till date. A small peasant whose father died more than 25 years ago when he was still young told me in 2006 how two members of the notorious gang operated and how they had grabbed 8 *bigha* of land from his father:

My father had bought land in 1970, but after his death they said that their father had bought that same land already 33 years before that. They had paid bribes to get the land registered on their name. We made a case against them, but it is going on since years. This gang has stolen land from a lot of people. This is how they worked. They observed who died and whose widow still had young children and then they took their land. They were educated, their victims were not. But now they cannot do that any more, because everybody is educated now, they cannot cheat people any more. All the cases are from long back.

So widows, especially with young children, were particularly vulnerable to land grabbing and many cases are still running since years. As the *mondols* used the *shalish* and samaj meetings mainly for their self-interest, most villagers did not have much confidence in them. The power of the *mondols* was already declining in 1975 and nowadays rich influential villagers cannot get away so easily with land grabbing any more.

Within the wider frame of society’s norms and values, the *mondols* set the local moral and social standards and they take care of the enforcement of social control. Thus the samaj has a direct influence on gender ideology and gender relations and therefore also on the private life of households. The following two cases that we heard and witnessed in 1974/75 illustrate how the *mondols* arbitrated and set the moral standards of behaviour. The first case had occurred a few years before we lived in the village.

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133 While we lived in the village a notorious land grabber of one of the factions was killed by a member of the rival faction (see Arens & van Beurden [1977] 1980: Chapter 16).
A middle peasant was forced by the village court to marry a poor peasant widow, as it was said that he had made her pregnant. During the first two days of his new marriage the peasant kept denying that he was guilty and beat the woman severely. (He must have been certain about it himself, since he had had a sterilisation operation long before that time.) Finally the woman confessed that someone else had made her pregnant. As a result the marriage was dissolved again. However, no steps were taken to punish the real guilty person and force him to marry the woman. After all, he was a rich peasant and one of the village leaders. (Arens & van Beurden [1977] 1980: 59)

This case shows the hypocrisy of the mondols. Several of them were known to have illicit relations with women themselves, one of them even with the woman in question, but they were never punished for it. Thus the moral standards set by them counted mainly for women and for middle and poor peasants. A similar case occurred while we lived in the village, but the shalish never came to a conclusion. Bilkis, a young divorced poor peasant woman, found out that she was in the fourth month of her pregnancy, obviously too late for an abortion. When villagers came to know about it, some of them started talking about outlawing the woman and her family. In the village court that was called for her case, it turned out that she was not sure who had made her pregnant and she mentioned the names of several men. The talk in the village after that was that the man had been one of the poor peasants and that he would be forced to marry her. But then one of the rich peasants, who had been notorious for land grabbing, was murdered. This diverted all attention and the bichar never took place. Bilkis gave birth to a son and they lived with her parents.

When I started my fieldwork for this study in 1998, I heard of a similar case that had happened the year before. A young divorced woman from a landless family had become pregnant. She named an unmarried son of a rich peasant as the father of the unborn child, but he denied. Some women told me that they suspected that she had hoped that he would be forced to marry her if she exposed him, but in the meantime he had married someone else. There had never been a bichar about this case; after all, the culprit belonged to one of the mondol families.

The shalish hardly functions nowadays. In case of conflict, especially in land cases, middle and rich peasants mostly go to the judicial court now instead of getting a settlement from the village shalish. However, to some extent mondols can still set the norms. For example, in 1998 mondols prevented the performance of a play about an exploiting landlord, written by one of the villagers. They had done this indirectly by talking bad about the play and discouraging the performers. But a year later the writer told me that the play had been performed after all and it had been a great success. In the meantime he had written another play dealing with the practice of hilla, the (now mostly defunct) practice of a sort of interim marriage, which is required before a man can take back a wife whom he has divorced earlier. The practice of hilla is that a man is not allowed to take his wife back after divorce unless the wife
first marries another man and lives with him for three months and three days. Only after that period can she divorce the new husband and can her first husband remarry her. According to the play writer, “this natok [theatre play] cannot be performed. The mondols will object, they don’t want the people to know that hilla is not written in the Hadith [as was explained in the play]; then they will lose their power.” They would also lose the opportunity to use a divorced woman for three months in the case her husband would want to take her back. Villagers told me that hilla is not practised any more in the village, but that it had occurred several times in the past. One woman told me:

My neighbour’s mother hanged herself when she had been forced into hilla with one of her relatives. But now they go to court if they want a divorce, then they get a letter that they got divorced.

Another instance shows that village leaders do not always agree with each other. Some mondols and other prominent villagers set up a private college in the village in 2001. They named the college ‘Jhagrapur College’ and had the name engraved in an inaugural plaque. However, another mondol rejected the name and called a village meeting; the majority of the people mobilised to attend the meeting then opted to change the name and so the college was renamed (Plate 48).

Although the mondols still have some power, people regularly told me that they do not listen to them any more. A middle peasant explained in 1998: “There are no more meetings with the whole village like before. We do not go anymore to meetings but we send our sons because they do not listen to us anyway. But they cannot exploit us any more.”

Some Mullahs claim that hilla is a Muslim practice that has been written in the Hadith. However, no one has been able to point out where exactly it has been written. The only reference I could find to hilla was on the Internet, see http://www.banglapedia.org/HTM/0159.HTM). On the Banglapedia page it is claimed that hilla is according to Muslim law, but no further details are given. Some NGOs have been actively propagating that hilla is not written in the Hadith and should be banned. When I enquired further about hilla, some villagers started giggling and told that hilla has been performed in the village once or twice over the last ten years. They also hastened to say that it is not practised any more, but many people still know about the existence of hilla.
Moreover, the *mondols* had split up per para^{135}, partly because the village had become much bigger, but also because they lost the authority over the whole village and were divided among themselves. A middle peasant woman said: “Now nobody respects the *mondols*. Everybody says: ‘I am *mondol*.’” One of the *mondols*, who was present, complained:

> “People listen less to *mondols*, therefore there are no more meetings. There is only party politics now - BNP, AL. During military rule it was not like that, then people listened to the *mondols.*”

On another occasion a middle peasant woman told me that men say that women are now *mondol*. When I asked why, she explained:

> Now the Prime Minister is a woman. Women see that and say “I am also the boss”. *mondols* cannot exploit any more.

Several other people pointed to the fact that the Prime Minister is a woman as a reason why women defy male authority. However, women are still not allowed to say anything in village meetings “because then there will be quarrels; our women are not good, they fight”, another woman remarked. Women speak up more nowadays and that may well be the reason why they are not allowed to speak in village meetings. Since I started fieldwork for this study, I never witnessed any

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^{135}The village is divided in paras (neighbourhoods). In 1975 Jhagrapur had 5 paras, now the village has 8 paras. The village has expanded and a considerable amount of agricultural land has been converted into homesteads.
village meeting. People confirmed that there had been only very few meetings, among others about the repair of the mosque and the lease of the *boro pukur*, the communal pond in the middle of the village.

What happened to the *boro pukur* (big pond, the communal pond in the village) is an example of how the *mondols* used and still use their power to appropriate resources (Box 6.6).

**Box 6.6 Appropriation of the *boro pukur*, the big communal pond, by the rich**

Some 300 years ago, a rich Hindu who owned a big pond allowed migrants from the East to settle around it. The oldest people still remember that they lived around the *boro pukur* in the middle of the village. One of them told me: “I was born there, but when I was little we moved to this *para*. When I was 10 or 12 there was a big flood [this must have been the big flood in 1937, 1943 or 1945]; then we moved back to the *boro pukur* for 7, 8 years.” After Partition in 1947, most of the Hindu *Zamindars* left for India. At one point, some villagers found out that one calak (cunning) *mondol* had secretly registered the *boro pukur* land in his name. Then there was a big quarrel which split the village into several factions. Some villagers filed a case in the court against the *mondol* and the final verdict was that the land was the property of the entire village; it had to be registered in the names of 104 families, all descendents of the original settlers. Thus the *boro pukur* became the communal village pond. In 1974/75 each of the five paras had a part of the *boro pukur* and it was used for communally cultivating paddy. Part of the crop was used for the school and the mosque and the rest was consumed. Some people at that time told us that the rest was given to poor families but in fact it was mostly taken by the *mondols*. After the paddy harvest, when the *pukur* had almost fallen dry, poor people would catch small fish in it, supplementing their meagre meals (Plate 49).

Around 1990, the mosque committee needed money for restoration work on the mosque and one of the members proposed to lease the *boro pukur* out for fish breeding. In a village meeting it was agreed to lease the pond to the four highest bidders for 5 years (Plate 50). The lease money was to be used for repair and extension of the mosque (Plate 51). Initially some of the *mondals* conspired together; acting as two different groups in the bidding process they managed to lease the pond for Tk 85,000 for altogether 8 years. But other influential villagers found out about the cheating and they were prevented from continuing another period. In the latest bidding the lease sum shot up to Tk 350,000; the leasers were members of the richest families in the village and even one person from a neighbouring village. Fish cultivation has become very profitable now with a new popular breed of fish called pangas. The fish is sold to big traders who transport it...
to Dhaka and sell it there. The investments are high but the profits are manifold. The poor villagers are left with nothing and they lost the few benefits they used to have from the boro pukur. Part of the lease has been spent on renovating the mosque and beautifying the Eid-gah, but many villagers expressed their doubts whether all the lease money had been spent for that purpose and wondered where the rest of the money had gone.

Plate 50  The boro pukur, now leased out to breed fish and divided in four parts.

Plate 51  The village mosque has been extended and beautified with the boro pukur lease money.
So the *mondols* still have some power, but their power has certainly reduced. An important reason for this is that the poor are less dependent on the rich for their survival because there is a shortage of agricultural labourer and poor men also have other options to earn an income. Another reason is that people now also turn to the judicial court for resolution of conflicts. Yet another reason will be found in the next section.

**Underground parties**

A last force that needs to be mentioned in the context of the village power structure is the presence of underground armed groups that operate in the area since the late 1960s and have members in the village. They are part of the unofficial power structure and form a challenge to the power of the rich. These groups belong to a faction of the Purbo Banglar Communist Party (East Bengal Communist Party, PBCP), which is active in Meherpur District as well as in neighbouring districts. The PBCP is an offshoot of the EPCP (East Pakistan Communist Party) which was active in the area in 1974/75. The EPCP was a Maoist party that was formed in the 1960s to fight against exploitation by landlords inspired by the Naxalites in West Bengal. In those years, EPCP cadres held secret meetings in the village at night and went around shouting slogans and putting up posters from time to time. Then Prime Minister Sheikh Mujibur Rahman tried to eradicate these underground parties and set up a special paramilitary force for that purpose, the so-called ‘Rakkhi Bahini’. This force was very much hated and feared by the people as they were very repressive. We would often see a column of trucks with Rakkhi Bahini moving along the main road in the distance and people would feel relieved when they had passed without turning towards the village. “During the daytime the Rakkhi Bahini forms our government, but at night it is the Rat Bahini (Night Forces)”, people used to describe the balance of power in the area. There were still a lot of weapons around from the 1971 Liberation War and weapons were also obtained by raiding police stations. In 1975, the Treasury Building in Meherpur town was raided and burnt down and the Rat Bahini captured 350 rifles (Arens & van Beurden 1977: 192-200). After Mujibur Rahman was killed in 1975 in a military coup, the Rakkhi Bahini was dissolved. During the following military regimes of General Ziaur Rahman and General Ershad many underground party cadres were arrested and jailed for many years. An ex-PBCP cadre from a nearby village whom I met in 1999 told me that he was in jail from 1984 - 1991. After that he had joined the Workers Party, a left-wing parliamentary party. I also heard of several others who were in jail during the 1980s. In 2004 the Khaleda Zia government set up the Rapid Action Battalion (RAB), an anti-terrorist elite force consisting of members of various parts of the security forces. The RAB operates in a ruthless manner and many people have been killed by RAB in so-called ‘crossfire’.

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136 Members of underground left parties are nowadays mostly referred to as *sontrasi* (criminals, terrorists), this in contrast to when I first lived in the village; then they were called the rat bahini (night army) (Arens & van Beurden, 1977: chapter 21).

137 Amnesty International has regularly reported about RAB’s use of excessive and lethal force and Human Rights Watch describes RAB as a government death squad. Wikileaks revealed that RAB has been receiving training from the UK government.
The PBCP’s stated aim is to organise the poor peasants for armed class struggle against the exploitative rich class. In pamphlets they call on people to join the armed struggle against their class enemies, such as landlords and the corrupt police, and to establish an exploitation-free society. But now one of their main activities seems to be extortion of the rich. As one villager said:

At night they go around killing, dacoiting [robbing] and collecting ‘tax’. This is not rajniti [politics], this is petniti [stomach policy - a word he made up himself. He meant that their activities are only to fill their stomachs].

Several times during my fieldwork people told me that at night a group of ‘sontrasi’ had passed through the village, carrying weapons and wearing masks. They ran into them and were asked: “Who are you?” When they told them who they were, the ‘sontrasi’ replied: “You don’t need to be afraid, we won’t do anything to you, we don’t do anything against common people.” A few villagers assured me that the PBCP is not bad, they don’t do anything against good people, poor people, only against the rich. Only very few women have joined such groups. During my fieldwork periods I regularly heard that people in the area had been killed by the PBCP, usually rich peasants, local government leaders, alleged informants or members of rival factions. In August 2010 I happened to read in an online Bangladesh daily that on 16 August in the early morning Atiar, one of the PBDP cadres in Jhagrapur, had been killed by a ‘gang’ (a strange experience to read such news about the village from my desk at home in an online newspaper). Apparently Atiar had been a PBCP Meherpur District leader. He had been one of the main suspects in the country bomb attack on the house of my host family early 2006. It is not clear to me who killed Atiar. It may have been members of a rival faction, law enforcers, or some rich people who had been extorted and threatened by him and his group. One member of Atiar’s group had been killed a few years earlier and another person had disappeared. Both have possibly been killed by RAB forces. Since 2006 a RAB unit is stationed in Gangni and in November 2006, RAB forces had come to their houses to arrest them. When they did not find anyone of the PBCP RAB broke the doors and windows of the house of one of them and beat up his brother.

Operations by successive governments to wipe out underground groups have failed time and again. In many places underground party members are patronised by local political leaders and other influential people. Also in Jhagrapur, some of the rich with links to Khaleda Zia’s Bangladesh Nationalist Party are said to have given the outlaws shelter in their houses in the daytime, in exchange for protection from extortion and killing at night. This patronage is an important reason why many of them do not get arrested. But other rich families are threatened and some of them have moved to Gangni out of fear for these ‘sontras’, indicating the power of the gun of these underground groups. In chapter 8, I will give an example of how a woman has taken the help of some members of underground groups in pursuing her own interest.
6.8 Summary and Conclusion

I have argued that the influence of political Islam is not very big in Jhagrapur although there have been some attempts by villagers to reinforce Islamic values. I have also argued that moral values have been influenced by a new form of globalisation and the opening up of the village through improved communication and easier access to the market and to education, NGO activities, and not in the last place by poverty that forces women to work outside the house for their survival. Local dynamics have been modified by penetration by global forces. These developments have given women space to negotiate for their participation in education, postponement of marriage and their involvement in NGO activities. Through an example of women working at the rice mills, I have analysed how poor women whose circumstances force them to ignore moral norms and values, are stigmatised as ‘bad’ women and projected as ‘the other’ by village leaders in order to maintain class and gender hierarchies. This should be seen against the background of the waning influence of village leaders and the traditional power structure, which is partly due to the fact that people are less economically dependent on them. Finally, I have described the presence of underground parties in the area and their challenges to the power of the rich.

In the following two chapters, I will come to the main questions of this study regarding women’s land ownership, empowerment and structural transformation. In the next chapter, I will present and analyse my fieldwork data regarding women’s ownership of land (inherited and purchased) in Jhagrapur and analyse structural factors that enable or constrain women’s acquisition of land and their control over it.