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Women in Industrial Jamshedpur: From Domestic Roles to Economic Participation (1907–2000)

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the socio-economic transformation of women in Jamshedpur from 1907 to 2000, analysing their transition from domestic roles to participation in economic activities. Using historical and analytical methods, the study draws on archival records of Tata Steel, district gazetteers, census reports, and secondary literature. The findings show that industrialisation created new opportunities for women, but these were uneven and limited. In the colonial period (1907–1947), adivasi women known as rezas formed over 35% of the unskilled workforce and yet received the lowest wages, no housing, and no welfare protection. The wives of formal employees lived in better conditions but only as dependants welfare was given in the name of the male worker, not the woman herself. In the post-independence phase (1947–1980), Tata's expanding welfare model improved women's access to healthcare, schools, and community life, but always within a framework that treated women as mothers and wives, not as economic citizens. The third phase (1980–2000) saw the first generation of educated women entering formal employment as teachers, nurses, and clerks, while market women, self-help groups, and small enterprises began to change the economic landscape from below. Women's participation increased mainly in informal and service sectors, while their presence in core industrial labour remained low. Corporate welfare policies improved health and education but also reflected a paternalistic approach that controlled women's roles. The study argues that women's empowerment in Jamshedpur was partial and shaped by class, community, and institutional structures. The article concludes that progress for women in Jamshedpur was real but deeply uneven good for those inside the welfare system, much slower for adivasi and peripheral community women. True economic participation only began to emerge in the final two decades of the century, and it was driven as much by women's own agency as by corporate welfare.

***Keywords**: Jamshedpur, Domestic Roles, Economic Participation, Adivasi, Reza, Industrial History, Jharkhand, Economic Participation, Labour History.*

Introduction

When we tell the story of Jamshedpur, we usually begin with iron ore and coal. We talk about the furnaces and the railway lines, the visionary Jamsetji Tata and the British colonial engineers who helped build the plant. What we rarely talk about is the woman who carried bricks on her head in 1909, the wife who queued at the hospital dispensary in 1935, or the vegetable seller who has sat in Sakchi market every morning since 1975. These women are the invisible foundation of the steel city.

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This article takes women as its central subject. It covers the period from 1907, when TISCO began construction at the confluence of the Subarnarekha and Kharkai rivers, to 2000, by which time the Jamshedpur Urban Agglomeration had grown to over one million people (Dubey, 2015).

The Land and Its People Before the Factory

The Singhbhum district in which Jamshedpur was built was, at the turn of the 20th century, a landscape of forests, rivers, and small villages, inhabited mainly by Ho, Munda, and Santhal adivasi communities, as well as settled communities of Bhumihar, Chero, and other groups.

L.S.S. O'Malley, in his Bengal District Gazetteer for Singhbhum (1910), gives us a valuable pre-industrial baseline. He notes that among the Ho people, 'women enjoy considerable freedom, mix freely with men, and take part in the management of village affairs.' Ho and Munda women worked in the fields, participated in the weekly haats (village markets), managed household economies, and held recognised roles in community and spiritual life. They were not secluded as upper-caste Hindu women in the Bengal plains were. Their economic activity farming, gathering, trading was visible, ordinary, and necessary (O'Malley, 1910, p. 74).

The adivasi women who were displaced when Jamshedpur was founded did not come from a tradition of domestic confinement. They came from a tradition of active economic participation. What industrialisation did, in its first decades, was actually to reduce their economic agency replacing productive work on their own land with the lowest-paid wage labour on someone else's construction site.

Objective

- To analyse the position of women in Jamshedpur before and after industrialisation.
- To study women's participation in formal and informal economic activities.

Methodology

This study is based on a historical and analytical approach to examine the socio-economic transformation of women in Jamshedpur from 1907 to 2000. Both primary and secondary sources have been used in the research. Primary sources include archival records of Tata Steel, district gazetteers by O'Malley and P. C. Roy Chowdhury, census reports, government documents of Jharkhand and East Singhbhum, and local newspapers related to tribal women and social conditions. Secondary sources include books, journal articles, research papers, and published studies on industrialisation, urbanisation, labour, and gender in Jamshedpur.

The study follows a chronological and thematic approach, focusing on labour, family, culture, economy, and the changing role of women during the pre-industrial and industrial phases.

Findings

Phase One: Colonial Jamshedpur (1907–1947)- domestic roles and limited participation

Construction of the steel plant began in 1907 and continued for years. Every road, every building, every foundation required enormous quantities of human physical labour. A large part of that labour was provided by adivasi women from Singhbhum and the surrounding districts. These women were known as rezas — unskilled female construction workers who carried earth, stone, bricks, and building materials in large baskets on their heads.

Dilip Simeon's research in the Bihar State Archives establishes that in 1921, women constituted 35.6% of the unskilled urban workforce in Jamshedpur (*Simeon, 1995, p. 112*). This is a striking figure. More than one in three unskilled workers building and maintaining the city was a woman. And yet these women were entirely outside Tata's welfare system. They lived in informal bastis outside the planned city boundary. They had no company housing, no access to the company hospital, no maternity benefit, and no job security.

'In 1924, the Jamshedpur Labour Association published a pamphlet complaining about low wages to women employees, no housing benefits, and no maternity leave.' — *Tata Steel Labour Day Campaign Records.*

The Maternity Benefit was introduced by TISCO in 1928, a year ahead of the national Maternity Benefit Act (Avenue Mail, 2023). This was a genuine reform. But it applied to women in formal employment and most reza women were casual labourers, not permanent employees. They fell through the gap.

P.C. Roy Chaudhury's Bihar District Gazetteer (1958) confirms that the settlements outside TISCO's notified area particularly Jugsalai were 'densely crowded' localities with inadequate water supply and sanitation, where the informal workforce, including female labourers, lived in conditions far below those inside the planned city.

Women as Dependants: Inside the Welfare System

For women married to formal TISCO employees, life in the company's housing colonies was materially comfortable by the standards of the time. The company provided housing, free medical care at Tata Main Hospital, and schools for children. R.M. Lala's account of Tata's welfare history records the successive innovations: 8-hour working day (1912), free medical aid (1915), workers' provident fund (1920), maternity benefit (1928), profit-sharing bonus (1934), and gratuity scheme (1937) — all introduced before they became statutory requirements in India (Lala, 1981, p. 45).

They were designed for 'the worker and his family.' The house was registered in the worker's name. Medical cards were issued to the worker. The woman was a beneficiary because she was attached to a male worker not because she had any independent entitlement. If her husband died or left, her welfare entitlements could disappear with him.

Tata Steel itself acknowledged this framework in its own heritage records, noting that Jamsetji's welfare innovations at the textile mills included 'a separate medical dispensary for women' and a 'lady doctor to look after women and children' framing women's welfare in terms of maternal and child health, not economic independence (Tata Group, n.d.).

Table 1: Key Welfare Milestones and Their Effect on Women (1907–1947)

Year	Welfare Measure	Who Benefited	Women Excluded
1912	8-hour working day	Formal male workers	Reza / casual women workers
1915	Free medical aid	Workers + families	Women in informal settlements
1920	Provident Fund	Permanent employees only	Almost all women
1924	Labour Association protest	Raised women's wage issue	No action taken by TISCO
1928	Maternity Benefit	Formal women employees	Casual / reza women
1937	Gratuity Scheme	Permanent employees	Women in informal work

Sources: Avenue Mail (2023); Lala (1981); Tata Steel Labour Day Campaign Records; Simeon (1995).

Phase Two: Post-Independence Change (1947–1980)

India's Constitution (1950) promised equality before the law and prohibited discrimination on grounds of sex. The Factories Act (1948) set legal standards for women's employment conditions. The Hindu Succession Act (1956) gave women new inheritance rights. On paper, this was a revolution. In practice, change in Jamshedpur was slow and uneven.

P.C. Roy Chaudhury's Bihar District Gazetteer (1958) notes that the first decade after independence saw 'a rapid expansion of educational facilities' in Singhbhum district, including new girls' schools in Jamshedpur. He records that Tata Steel had increased its investment in education for worker's children, and that female enrolment in schools was growing though from a very low base. He estimates the literacy rate in the district had improved significantly since 1910 but remained far below national targets (*Roy Chaudhury, 1958, p. 187).*

The 1956 Jamshedpur Agreement between Tata Steel and the Tata Workers' Union described as the 'Magna Carta' of the Indian working class secured permanent job guarantees, housing, healthcare, and education benefits for the formal workforce (Tata Steel, n.d.). This was an important milestone for workers' families. But it was negotiated entirely by men, for men. Women's independent welfare entitlements, women's employment within the plant, and the needs of women in peripheral communities were not part of the discussion.

Healthcare and Education: Real but Conditional Gains

In healthcare, the gains for women in Jamshedpur in this period were genuine. Tata Main Hospital (TMH) grew into the primary referral hospital for all of East Singhbhum. The Tata Steel Family Initiatives Foundation (TSFIF) the first corporation in India to launch a formal family welfare programme, in the 1950s reached both the workers' colonies and the surrounding communities with maternal health

services and reproductive health information (Tata Steel CSR, 2018). As a result, Jamshedpur today has some of the best maternal and infant health indicators in Jharkhand.

In education, the Ramakrishna Mission Vivekananda Society — established in 1920 with TISCO's support — gradually built an extensive network of schools, including girls' schools and a students' home for tribal children from rural communities (Belur Math, 2024). By the 1960s and 1970s, the Mission was educating hundreds of girls from both formal worker families and tribal backgrounds. This was the seed of the change that would become visible in the 1980s and 1990s. Even many missionary schools opened

Phase Three: GROWING ECONOMIC PARTICIPATION (1980–2000)

The long-term investment in girls' education that began in the 1950s now began to show results. The first generation of girls who had attended the Ramakrishna Mission schools and the TISCO-affiliated schools were, by the 1980s, adults. Many had completed secondary education. Some had gone to college. Kolhan University, established in 1981, made degree-level education accessible to women in Jamshedpur and the surrounding Kolhan region without the need to travel to Ranchi or Patna.

Women began to enter the formal economy in roles that were socially acceptable to the city's middle-class culture: as teachers in the expanding school system, as nurses and paramedical staff in Tata Main Hospital and the new private clinics, as bank clerks, as school office staff, and as employees in the ancillary industries Tata Motors (TELCO), Tinplate Company, and TRF that had grown up around the steel plant. These were not factory-floor jobs, which remained largely male, but service sector jobs that gave women a formal wage, social standing, and a degree of economic independence. At the National Institute of Technology (NIT) Jamshedpur, women engineering students began to appear on campus a visible symbol of how much the city had changed since 1907, when women were carrying bricks for the same institution's construction.

Women in the Market Economy

Outside the formal economy, women had always been present in Jamshedpur's markets selling vegetables, fish, cooked food, and agricultural produce from the villages of Potka, Patamda, and Boram. What changed in the 1980s and 1990s was the scale and visibility of this economic activity. The markets of Sakchi, Bistupur, and Burmamines expanded as the city's middle-class consumer economy grew. Women vendors became more established, some moving from daily casual selling to permanent stalls and small shops.

The weekly haats connecting the rural hinterland of East Singhbhum to the city brought women from the villages of Hata, Potka, and Patamda into regular commercial contact with the urban economy. These women many of them adivasi were economic actors in a tradition that O'Malley had documented as far back as 1910, but their role was now larger and more commercially sophisticated.

Self-Help Groups: Women Organising Themselves

Perhaps the most important development of this period was the rise of self-help groups (SHGs). Beginning in the late 1980s and accelerating through the 1990s, women in both the workers' colonies and the peripheral communities of Jamshedpur formed SHGs — small groups of 10 to 20 women who saved together, lent to each other at low interest, and used their pooled resources to start small businesses: making papad and pickles, sewing garments, running informal catering services, and lending to buy agricultural inputs.

Tata Steel Foundation's community development programmes supported SHGs in the surrounding rural blocks, including Potka and Patamda. Recent documentation shows that farmers in these blocks including women farmers supported through integrated farming programmes have seen annual incomes rise from below Rs. 50,000 to over Rs. 2,00,000 through pond-based fishery, crop diversification, and livestock (Avenue Mail, 2025). While these specific cases date from after 2000, they represent the continuation of a movement whose roots go back to the SHG formation of the 1990s.

The SHG movement was significant not only economically but socially. It gave women a space to meet, to talk about their problems, to make collective decisions, and to build confidence. This was something that Tata's welfare system — for all its generosity — had never provided: a space for women to act as economic citizens rather than as dependants.

Analysis

Looking across the full 93-year period, three things stand out clearly.

First, Tata's welfare model genuinely improved the lives of women inside the formal welfare system — but it was not designed for women as independent economic actors. It was designed for male workers, and women benefited only because they were attached to those workers. The 1956 Magna Carta agreement, the housing colonies, the hospital, the schools all of these were structured around the male breadwinner and his dependants. A woman without a Tata employee husband received none of these benefits, however much she might have contributed to the city's economy as a market vendor or a domestic worker.

As Simeon (1995) argues in his detailed study of TISCO's labour politics, the 'harmony' of Jamshedpur was partly manufactured through a welfare apparatus that kept workers and their families grateful and compliant. This management of consent was even more powerful for women than for men, because women had fewer alternatives and no independent union representation.

Second, adivasi women were the most disadvantaged group throughout this period, and the gap between them and formal-sector women actually widened in some decades before it began to narrow again. In 1910, O'Malley recorded that adivasi women had significant economic freedom on their own land. By 1921, they had lost much of that land and were performing the hardest and worst-paid labour in the city. By 2001, the female literacy rate among tribal communities in Jharkhand was 38.1%, compared to the state average of 54.1% — a gap of 16 percentage points that represents nearly a century of structural disadvantage (Census of India, 2001).

Third, the most important driver of change for women in the 1980s and 1990s was not corporate welfare but women's own agency: their decision to send daughters to school, to form self-help groups, to establish market stalls, to seek professional qualifications. Tata's welfare system created some of the conditions that made this agency possible — schools, hospitals, a physically safe urban environment — but it could not substitute for women acting on their own behalf.

Conclusion

Between 1907 and 2000, the women of Jamshedpur moved — slowly, unevenly, and against significant structural obstacles — from the edges of the city's economic life toward a more visible and active economic participation. The reza women who built the city with their bodies received almost nothing in return. The wives of formal workers received material comfort but not economic independence. The educated daughters of the 1980s and 1990s began to build careers and businesses that their grandmothers could not have imagined.

This is a real and important story of historical change. But it is also a story of persistent inequality. By the end of the century, the three-tier structure of women's economic lives in Jamshedpur — formal-sector women, informal-economy women, and adivasi/peripheral community women was still deeply unequal. The welfare model that Tata built was genuinely impressive by the standards of Indian industry, but it was structurally incomplete: it provided for women as dependants and never fully recognised them as economic citizens in their own right.

Jamshedpur's history tells us something important about industrial cities and women everywhere: welfare is not the same as empowerment. Giving a woman access to a hospital is not the same as giving her control over her own economic life. The difference between those two things is exactly what the self-help groups of the 1990s and the women engineers at NIT Jamshedpur — were beginning to demonstrate.

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