

Indian Women in Agriculture

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Abstract

The status of women in India has been subject to many great changes over the past few millennia. With a decline in their status from the ancient to medieval times, to the promotion of equal rights by many reformers, the history of women in India has been eventful. In modern India, women have held high offices including that of the President, Prime Minister, Speaker of the Lok Sabha, Leader of the Opposition, Union Ministers, Chief Ministers and Governors. The major Indian occupation is agriculture. Seventy per cent of the Indian population is involved in agricultural occupation. Many women in developing countries are involved in agriculture. The objectives of present attempt are : to measure the season wise employment of woman labour in agriculture; to examine the distribution of woman workers in India. The women play a significant and crucial role in agricultural development and allied fields including in the main crop production, livestock production, horticulture, post harvest operations, agro/ social forestry, fisheries, etc. The nature and extent of women's involvement in agriculture, no doubt, varies greatly from region to region. Rural Women form the most important productive work force in the Indian economy. Agriculture sector employs 4/5th of all economically active women in the country. 48% of India's self-employed farmers are women. Women's dependence on agricultural wage labour as a source of income has also increased in the regions with the destruction of many household based industries employing mainly women. Women's rights are secured under the Constitution of India — mainly, equality, dignity, and freedom from discrimination; further, India has various statutes governing the rights of women. As of 2011, the President of India, the Speaker of the Lok Sabha and the Leader of the Opposition in the Lok Sabha (Lower House of the parliament) were women. However, women in India continue to face numerous problems, including violent victimisation through rape, acid throwing, dowry killings, and the forced prostitution of young girls. India is ranked as the worst G20 country to be born a woman and one of the worst countries for women in the world. India has a national tradition bound to agriculture fertility. In the North, the Indus valley and Brahmaputra region are critical agricultural areas graced by the Ganges and monsoon season. Based on 2011 World Bank data, only 17.5% of India's gross domestic product (GDP) is accounted for by agricultural production.^[1] Yet for a majority of the country, an estimated 72% of the 1.1 billion people who live in rural India, it is a way of life. Agriculture in India defines familial tradition, social relations and gender roles. Female in the

agricultural sector, whether through traditional means or industrial, for subsistence or as an agricultural laborer, represents a momentous demographic group. Agriculture is directly tied to issues such as economic independence, decision-making abilities, agency and access to education and health services and this manner has created externalities such as poverty and marginalization, and compounded issues of gender inequality.

Keywords: Agriculture, Women, India

Introduction

The Constitution of India guarantees to all Indian women equality (Article 14), no discrimination by the State (Article 15(1)), equality of opportunity (Article 16), and equal pay for equal work (Article 39(d)). In addition, it allows special provisions to be made by the State in favour of women and children (Article 15(3)), renounces practices derogatory to the dignity of women (Article 51(A) (e)), and also allows for provisions to be made by the State for securing just and humane conditions of work and for maternity relief. (Article 42).

Feminist activism in India gained momentum in the late 1970s. One of the first national-level issues that brought women's groups together was the Mathura rape case. The acquittal of policemen accused of raping a young girl Mathura in a police station led to country-wide protests in 1979-1980. The protests, widely covered by the national media, forced the Government to amend the Evidence Act, the Criminal Procedure Code, and the Indian Penal Code; and created a new offence, custodial rape. Female activists also united over issues such as female infanticide, gender bias, women's health, women's safety, and women's literacy.

Since alcoholism is often associated with violence against women in India,^[22] many women groups launched anti-liquor campaigns in Andhra Pradesh, Himachal Pradesh, Haryana, Odisha, Madhya Pradesh and other states. Many Indian Muslim women have questioned the fundamental leaders' interpretation of women's rights under the Shariat law and have criticised the triple talaq system.

In the 1990s, grants from foreign donor agencies enabled the formation of new women-oriented NGOs. Self-help groups and NGOs such as Self Employed Women's Association (SEWA) have played a major role in the advancement of women's rights in India. Many women have emerged as leaders of local movements; for example, Medha Patkar of the Narmada Bachao Andolan.

The Government of India declared 2001 as the Year of Women's Empowerment (*Swashakti*). The National Policy For The Empowerment Of Women came was passed in 2001.

In 2006, the case of Imrana, a Muslim rape victim, was highlighted by the media. Imrana was raped by her father-in-law. The pronouncement of some Muslim clerics that Imrana should marry her father-in-law led to widespread protests, and finally Imrana's father-in-law was sentenced to 10 years in prison. The verdict was welcomed by many women's groups and the All India Muslim Personal Law Board.

According to a report by Thomson Reuters, India is the "fourth most dangerous country" in the world for women, India was also noted as the worst country for women among the G20 countries, however, this report has faced criticism for its inaccuracy. On 9 March 2010, one day after International Women's day, Rajya Sabha passed the Women's Reservation Bill requiring that 33% of seats in India's Parliament and state legislative bodies be reserved for women.

Indian Agriculture

The history of agriculture in India dates back to Indus Valley Civilization Era and even before that in some parts of Southern India. Today, India ranks second worldwide in farm output. Agriculture and allied sectors like forestry and fisheries accounted for 13.7% of the GDP (gross domestic product) in 2013, about 50% of the workforce. The economic contribution of agriculture to India's GDP is steadily declining with the country's broad-based economic growth. Still, agriculture is demographically the broadest economic sector and plays a significant role in the overall socio-economic fabric of India. India exported \$39 billion worth of agricultural products in 2013, making it the seventh largest agricultural exporter worldwide and the sixth largest net exporter. Most of its agriculture exports serve developing and least developed nations. Indian agricultural/horticultural and processed foods are exported to more than 100 countries, primarily in the Middle East, Southeast Asia, SAARC countries, the EU and the United States.

Based on 2012 data, India is home to the fourth largest agricultural sector in the world. India has an estimated 180 million hectares of farmland with 140 million of which are planted and continuously cultivated. Yet India's agricultural profile is shadowed by the controversial impacts of Green Revolution policies that were adopted in the 1960s and 70s with pressure from the United States Agency for International Development and the World Bank. The Green Revolution brought a modern approach to agriculture by incorporating irrigation systems, genetically modified seed variations, insecticide and pesticide usage, and numerous land reforms. It had an explosive impact, providing unprecedented agricultural productivity in India and turned the country from a food importer to an exporter. Yet the Green Revolution also caused agricultural prices to drop, which damaged India's small farmers.

India's agricultural sector today still faces issues of efficiency due lack of mechanization with poorer conditions of farmers, as well as small farm sizes. In India traditional agriculture is still dominant as many farmers depend on livestock in crop production, for manure as fertilizers, and the use animal powered ploughs. According to 2011 statistics, the average farm in India is about 1.5 acres, minuscule when compared the average of 50 hectares in France and or 178 hectares in United States and 273 hectares in Canada.

The small farmer tradition of India can be drawn back to the first farm reforms of independent India. Known as the Laws of Divided Inheritance, the reforms were meant to limit the conglomeration of land, by mandating redistribution as land was divided among male inheritors from the prior generation. The perpetuation of these laws not only limits farm size but also bars women from ownership or inheritance. Furthermore, as small farmers face the increasing competition with larger farm operations an increasing number of men migrate to city centers for higher wages and employment. Women are in turn left to support the family structure and support small farm lifestyle. In 2011, the agricultural sector workforce in the subcontinent was 75% women.

In rural India, the percentage of women who depend on agriculture for their livelihood is as high as 84%. Women make up about 33% of cultivators and about 47% percent of agricultural laborers. These statistics do not account for work in livestock, fisheries and various other ancillary forms of food production in the country. In 2009, 94% of the female agricultural labor force in crop cultivation were in cereal production, while 1.4% worked in vegetable production, and 3.72% were engaged in fruits, nuts, beverages, and spice crops. Women's participation rate in the agricultural sectors is about 47% in tea plantations, 46.84% in cotton cultivation, 45.43% growing oil seeds and 39.13% in vegetable production. While these crops require labor-intensive work, the work is considered quite unskilled. Women also heavily participate in ancillary agricultural activities. According to the Food and Agriculture Organization, Indian women represented a share of 21% and 24% of all fishers and fish farmers, respectively.

Despite their dominance of the labor force women in India still face extreme disadvantage in terms of pay, land rights, and representation in local farmers organizations. Furthermore, their lack of empowerment often results in negative externalities such as lower educational attainment for their children and poor familial health.

Division of labour in In Indian Agriculture

In India, the typical work of the female agricultural laborer or cultivator is limited to less skilled jobs, such as sowing, transplanting, weeding and harvesting, that often fit well within the framework of domestic life and child-rearing. Many women also participate in agricultural work as unpaid subsistence labor. According to United Nations Human Development Report only 32.8% of Indian women formally participate in the labor force, a rate that has remained steady since 2009 statistics. By comparison men constitute 81.1%.

An estimated 52-75% of Indian women engaged in agriculture are illiterate, an education barrier that prevents women from participating in more skilled labor sectors. In all activities there is an average gender wage disparity, with women earning only 70 percent of men's wage. Additionally, many women participate in agricultural work as unpaid subsistence labor. The lack of employment mobility and education render the majority of women in India vulnerable, as dependents on the growth and stability of the agricultural market.

In addition to rigorous agricultural work that is undervalued and underpaid, women are also responsible for the well-being of the household. They care for their children, provide nutrition or usually take part in subsistence agriculture, and do chores around the house.^[9] Based on time allocation studies, which pinpoint exactly how a woman's hours are spent throughout the week, Indian women spend about 25 hours in a week doing household chores and five hours in caring and community work.

Besides the 30 hours of unpaid work, women spend the same amount of time as men carrying out agricultural work. Daughters typically supplement or substitute for mother's unpaid work around the household. Considered female tasks, the opportunity cost of girls' time for school is higher than that of sons. Girls do significantly more housework than boys, which compromises their schooling.

Critical resources such as land are also unevenly distributed by gender. Women seldom enjoy property ownership rights directly in their names. They have little control over decisions made in reference to land. Even with land in their names, they may not have actual decision-making power in terms of cropping patterns, sale, mortgage and the purchase of land. In India only 14.9% of households are female headed. Access to credit is difficult, since women lack many of the prerequisites for lending such as assets or ownership of property. Without access to capital or household decision making abilities women lack the resources that are necessary for their labor stability and stability of their households.

Furthermore, without access to support from the National Bank for Agriculture and Rural Development, banks, and cooperative societies, women are excluded from information that would make their production more competitive in the agricultural markets. The traditional systematic denial of women as key producers in India's agriculture causes them to often be overlooked in the research and study, thus further entrenching the exclusion of women in roles of agency. According to Amartya Sen, and Martha Nussbaum's Capability Approach, equality in access is critical step to economic empowerment to create gender equality. In conjunction, the early access to education and health services is critical to the capabilities and self-actualization of girls. The attainment of these necessary life structures is determined by cultural norms as well as the economic standing of the family.

Land ownership opportunities also have a critical impact on human development with freedom from violence. According to a 2005 study of marital violence and property ownership, 49% of propertyless women experience physical violence and 84% experienced psychological abuse. Ownership rights saw a drastic decrease in violence. Among women who owned both land and house there was only 7% physical violence and 16% psychological abuse.

Women As Farmers

Extreme climatic changes are among the factors that have begun to jeopardize agricultural production globally. India's agricultural sector which depends greatly on the variations in climate and weather is defined mainly by the monsoon season. The appropriate levels of precipitation that last from June to September, predicate a bountiful agricultural yield later on in the year. Monsoon seasons with insufficient or excessive precipitation, hurts the agricultural sector. Increasing temperatures and erratic precipitation has begun to exhaust agricultural land and create high variations of land. In the past couple of years these trends have made a noticeable impact in India, causing droughts and unpredictable rainfall. Just one season of such weather patterns can be devastating to the livelihood of farmers, who can find no resilience in small farms.

The loss of biodiversity in India and specifically food crops is a serious concern of food security and sustainability of the agricultural sector in India. The connection between women farmers and environmental health is not simply for subsistence and survival. It also stems from a long existing cultural valuation of India's agricultural fertility in ritual and practice. Women's connection to land is reflected in their almanac-like knowledge of plant varieties. Rituals and ceremonies in various parts of the country show this close relationship. There is Lohri, the harvest festival of Punjab or *navadhanya puja*, which translate to the worship of nine cereals, celebrations that take place in southern India. Both ceremonies celebrate the role of women in agriculture and fertility and importance of environment and biodiversity.

Furthermore, traditional agricultural methods heavily utilized by women subsistence farmers boast environmentally friendly features, such as seed preservation, natural fertilizers and crop rotation techniques that do not exhaust delicate soil. In the wake of Green Revolution's reforms, it is clear that many of the high yield recommendations had severe environmental impacts. The negative environmental impacts of the Green Revolution are barely beginning to show their full affect. The widespread chemical pollution in communities that utilize pesticides and herbicides is creating a public health problem, which has disproportionately impacted women.

In the state of Punjab, which was touted as a success of Green Revolution, cancer rates have skyrocketed. A 2008 study by Punjabi University a high rate of genetic damage among farmers, which was attributed to pesticide use. Ignorance on the appropriate use of pesticides, resulting in the heavy use, improper disposal, the use of pesticides as kitchen containers, and contamination of drinking water with heavy metals are contributing factors. In reaction to the health and monetary costs of inorganic farming many women are turning to organic farming practices. On a micro level women are organizing into collectives to exchange knowledge, organize organic seed sharing, to pursue organic and sustainable agricultural practices.

Cooperatives have been long seen as a social institution providing partnership, solidarity and resources to women farmers as well as tackle gender inequality. In India they have had quite a success. In many instances in which women are barred from participation, women only cooperatives are critical in empowering and educating. Yet female participation in cooperatives is still relatively low and some argue because men are still seen as primarily in charge of agriculture and income generation. Only 7.5% of

women participate in cooperatives as compared to 92.5% of men. Of India's 450,000 cooperatives with a membership of 204.5 million, there are only 8,171 women cooperatives with a total membership of 693,000 women.

Despite that, women-only cooperatives, which include cooperative banks, stores, food vendors, have done quite well and provided a whole range of services to their members. In India, with a view to involve women in the process of decision-making in local self-governing bodies including cooperatives, a 33% representation has been instituted and in a number of states all boards of directors have women serving on them. International organizations such as the Self-Employed Women's Association (SEWA) have been working quite successfully in India with partners to form a membership of 1.24 million women in India. Fifty four percent of members are agricultural workers.

Since 2007, India and the European Union have been in negotiation over a free trade agreement between the two bodies. It is an extension of the neoliberal policies posed by the International Monetary Fund and World Bank as developmentally advantageous to India. However, in the long run it is predicted that the EU-India FTA will not bring gains to the agricultural sector of India. Rather it is predicted by a study conducted by the Centre for Trade and Development in 2009, that the EU will benefit at the expense of the small Indian agricultural laborers and farmers. It is predicted there will be a small increase in agricultural exports that will be dwarfed by larger increase in agricultural imports. In addition agricultural employment will decline in India. Furthermore, there is concern about the social impacts of opening up of the Indian market to European Unions agricultural goods such as general and specialty food crops.

The Free Trade Agreement may lead to increased imports of the products that women are typically involved in, such as cereal production, tea or coffee, confections, and oil seeds. With the EU's competitive advantage this will hurt a number of women farmers and laborers that are employed in these sectors. For example, EU dairy products, a heavily-protected industry in the EU, will most likely enter Indian markets competing with smaller animal husbandry production methods specifically attached to women. Competition may threaten women's and their families' livelihoods and create problems of food security and deepen gender inequality by stifling the expansion of capabilities for girls and women. Agro processing, the creation of cereals and grains mixtures, in India is a large employer of women workers and strong competition can adversely affect them. In addition, since the EU has considerably lower tariffs than those in India, the FTA will induce a loss of tariff revenue in India, which will have to reduce tariffs. This will bring about a loss of revenue source generally used by the government on social spending.

The FTA, as insisted by the EU, will also remove export restrictions and increase the liberalization of investment in agriculture in India. This does not bode well for smaller Indian agricultural production industries that have thus far been insulated from such rough competition for resources. As foreign investors begin to vie for power over agricultural or natural resources in India, women's access to resources and decision-making abilities will be further threatened. Women who do agricultural work for subsistence will be at risk of losing the basic resources such as water, seeds and other natural resources used to feed their families.

The Free Trade Agreement is still under negotiations. Since initial discussion of the free trade agreement there has been a major public outcry due to problems, besides those agricultural cited above, that are predicted to arise. In April 2013, Germany supported the free trade agreement. Progress on the FTA has been delayed due to EU demands that India open its markets further. Europe currently waits on India to raise its cap on "FDI by foreign insurance companies from 26 to 49 per cent" and also decrease import duties for luxury items such as cars, wine and spirits.

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