CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.1 BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

Agriculture is the life blood of Indian economy. It contributes about 25 percent of GDP and about 70 percent of the population of our country is dependent on agriculture for livelihood. Agricultural development was given high priority in the past 50 years and especially under various Five Year Plans. The share of agriculture in national income is considered as an indicator of economic development. In our country agriculture has a big role in the development of industries specially the agro-based industries such as textiles, sugar, tea, etc. The prosperity of these agro-based industries depends upon the availability of inputs from the agricultural sector. A comparative study with the other countries revealed that most of the underdeveloped countries are heavily dependent upon agriculture as their main source of employment (Varadarajan, 2003). Labour utilisation in rural areas depends on the social and ecological characteristics of a region. The significant factors influencing the pattern of labour utilisation are seasonal variation in the agriculture; nature and type of irrigation facilities; cropping patterns; commercialisation of agriculture; type of agricultural implements; mechanisation and new varieties of seeds; availability and distribution of land holdings and size and location of the village etc. In the rural sector, various forms of labour inputs required are on family farms, hired agricultural workers, non-farm activities and jobs outside the village (Sethi, 1982). The total amount of labour time spent is determined by the availability of work, work done on the family farm or as hired labour, agricultural or non-agricultural work and work within or outside the village (Dasgupta, 1977).
Recent years have witnessed a plethora of literature on role of gender and women’s studies. The studies concerning the educated working women are abundant, while those on illiterate women engaged in various low-prestige occupations such as agricultural labours, construction work, domestic labour and such other similarly situated workers are comparatively fewer. It is this area of research which attracted the particular attention of the members at the National Conference on Women’s Studies in 1981 (Mazumdar, 1981). Various studies have focused the trends in female labour force participation and the factors accounting for it (Gadgil, 1965; Dasgupta, 1977; Sandhu and Dhesi; 1977, Singh, 1980; Mahapatra, 2002; Singh, 2005). Some of the studies emphasised the problematic aspects of female labour force participation. However, a good number of research works undertaken by eminent scholars have focused the view that the participatory roles of women in agricultural operations are underestimated. Majority of women workers in different states of the country are employed in rural areas primarily as “labourers and cultivators” but proper recognition of the women participation in management and decision-making processes still remains excluded. Irrespective of the region of India, the last few decades have seen transformation of the agricultural sector, with increasing number of women joining the agricultural workforce. The incidence of such feminisation can be gathered from both aggregate national level data as well as a series of micro studies, especially during the 1990s (Singh and Meenakshi, 2000). Three different issues are involved in women’s participation in agriculture. These are: i) the changing nature of women’s work ii) the persistence of gender based differential in wages and iii) the relation between increasing participation of women and their empowerment.

In agriculture, women do not generally undertake all types of activities, but only specific ones, which the male workers normally avoid.
This has created a tendency towards a system of job-segregation in agricultural labour force which has several consequences such as – it creates a disparity between wage rates among the males and the females; it results in the reservation of high-prestige and high-salaried jobs for men and the low-salaried and low-prestige occupations for women workers; it brings down the bargaining power of women workers and reduces them to the state of marginal, intermittent or reserve labour which is highly unorganised (Sundar, 1981; Mies, 1981). From various empirical studies it is observed that although, historically, women have engaged themselves in agricultural activities but in the present day subsistence economies they have neither control over land nor they have allowed to play an equal role in the production process. In agriculture, women get pushed into casual low paying wage work mainly as seasonal workers and work under non-congenial environment with no ancillary benefits or job security. These women do not have any option in terms of the type, nature or location of employment. Evidences show that setting up of modern agricultural and industrial sectors based on capital intensive technology has pushed women into low wage sectors, thereby marginalising their contribution in economic activities they perform. In recent years considerable interest and research has been undertaken for women’s unpaid domestic work and women’s home based productive work for income. All these focus our attention towards feminisation and empowerment in agricultural literature.

1.2 RATIONALE OF THE STUDY

Gender specific studies related to agriculture have been an important subject matter in the literature of the agricultural economics in recent times. Among the agriculture dependent countries, Bangladesh is the classic example where women constitute 45.6 percent of the farming population. In fact, women have extensive workload with dual
responsibilities of farm and household production. Women’s contribution to agriculture, which is counted as unpaid family labour is grossly underestimated. In Bangladesh, the share of women in the total economically active population is 39 percent, indicating a relatively lower economic participation by women. Besides, women in rural Bangladesh are in general responsible for most of the agricultural work in the homestead. The traditional gender relation with women’s involvement in post-harvest work and men’s in field work has not remained static over time. Presently due to extreme poverty and food-crisis, social norms and traditions are changing and women are appearing in the field as well (Shirin, 1995). About 60 to 70 percent women from landless and near landless households work as agricultural wage labourers, whereas women from larger farms do not participating in field activities (Jahan, 1990). In the Gramin Krishi Foundation working areas in North-West Bangladesh, women equally share all tasks in rice production even presumably male tasks of irrigation (Jordan and Zwarteveen, 1997).

In the Indian context, similar transformation of agricultural sector with increasing women’s participation has occurred during the last few decades. Women constitute a significant part of the workforce in India, though they lag significantly behind males in terms of work participation, employment, etc. In the north-eastern region, women folk constitute a very important source of family labour in farm and non-farm activities. The extent to which these activities are recognised in both tribal and non-tribal societies need to be ascertained. There are still too little field studies that attempted to capture the employment of rural women in both farm and off-farm sectors. Furthermore, it is widely acknowledged that despite substantial involvement of rural women in labouring activities, they have little or no agency in decision-making processes except in some SC/ST communities and certain hill areas (Saikia, 2000). Though most of the rural women in the state are involved in various activities ranging from
crop production to the management of household resources, the participation in most of the cases are determined especially by rules, norms and perceptions. These factors may disadvantage women, both separately and interactively due to gender biasness. Although their earnings contribute significantly to household incomes, many of the activities performed by women remain unacknowledged as work and they remained ‘invisible’ in agricultural operations. However, there is still scanty literature on feminisation in agricultural sector in North East India.

The economy of the Barak Valley region of Assam is predominantly agricultural with 70.73 percent of the workforce being engaged agricultural and other primary activities. It is evident from the data that the female population in the Barak Valley region is high as compared to Assam or the country as a whole. But the Female Work Participation Rate (FWPR) in the region is much lower than the male participation rate indicating a similar trend of Assam and all India. Further, the percentage of female population that is engaged in the primary sector is the highest. The significance of the study lies in the fact that it is the first empirical attempt made to study the pattern of women’s participation in agriculture in the Barak Valley region of Assam which aims to look into the specific characteristics of work performed in the agricultural sector and their distributional pattern among the women to find out actual condition of the female farm labour. Its special contribution is that the study attempts to highlight the differences in the conditions of male and female labour by making a comparison between male-female workforce participation rates in agriculture vis-a-vis other sectors. The study also emphasises on finding the improvement of status of women over the years in relation to their workforce participation and access over resources so that actual economic condition of women in the agrarian society of the Barak Valley region of Assam can be identified.
1.3 CONCEPT OF A REGION

The concept of a region has originally been developed by the geographers which includes both 'sub-national' and 'international' regions. Economic interpretation of a region, however, mostly concerned with 'sub-national' regions characterised by a particular geographical, socio-economic and physical structures. Regional analysis is primarily depend on defining the concept of a region. Broadly, three approaches are found to the definition of a region, namely, homogeneous region, nodal region and planning and programming region. Regional delineation in economics does not depend on geographical contiguity but on economic characteristics and interrelations. Economists, by and large have emphasised the homogeneity criterion in defining a region which is based on the fact of uniform characteristics possessed by a demarcated geographical area. Economically the possible criterion for defining homogeneous region is the similarity in per capita income. However, different interpretations of homogeneity have been given by various economists on different factors. North (1955) considered the existence of an export based as the unifying cohesive force of a region. Isard (1957) gives emphasis on output and production processes in determining a region, while Bogue and Beale (1961) used only agricultural factors for this purpose. A nodal region is a spatial organisation consisting of a node with its hinter-land areas linked together in a wider spatial framework. However, the boundaries of a nodal region are difficult to define. A planning or programming region is an area over which economic decisions apply and this fact unifies the area. It is very difficult to define such a region. Planning regions have necessarily to be political jurisdiction. In the Indian context, Chatterjee (1965) have divided the entire country into physiographically homogeneous regions with regard to administrative boundaries.
The NSS defines a region combining districts on the basis of ecological and agricultural homogeneity and the presence of functional linkages among them. As per the National Sample Survey (NSS) criteria, the three districts, namely, Cachar, Karimganj and Hailakandi forming the southern part of the state of Assam is considered as a region in our present study. Although the three districts by themselves do not form a single administrative unit, they constitute geographically contiguous, physiographically more or less uniform and ecologically and agriculturally fairly homogeneous block (Roy and Bezbaruah, 2002). In the present study a detailed description of the Barak Valley region comprising the geographical, social and economic features is presented in Chapter 3.

1.4 PROCESS OF AGRICULTURAL DEVELOPMENT IN A REGION

The process of economic development of a region is characterised by certain usual criteria such as the volume and structure of production, income, employment etc. However, the question of regional economic development can be examined from two angles. Firstly, the question of economic progress of the region may be dealt within the context of realisation of its economic potentialities which may be defined by several factors such as: i) physiographic ii) economic, iii) socio-cultural, iv) political and v) neighbourhood. All these factors do not work in isolation rather they are interdependent to each other and prepared the ground for a region to takeoff. Secondly, the problem of regional development is concerned with the ideal of balanced regional development which may refer to the rate of economic progress of a particular region compared to the same in other regions. According to the neo-classical school, in the region where labour is scarce and capital is abundant labour will flow-in and capital will flow-out, thus reducing
wages and raising the rate of profit. While in less developed areas where labor is abundant, labor will flow-out and capital will flow-in, thus raising wages and reducing the rate of profit. However, Munir (1992) points out that balanced regional development does not necessarily mean equal development of all regions. It essentially implies the fullest utilisation and development of the potentialities of an area to its capacity so that the inhabitants of all the regions share the benefits of overall economic growth. In most of the developing countries like India, a vast majority of population is dependent on agriculture and allied activities. Hence, the economic development of regions of such a country is mainly dependent on its agricultural growth. The differences in agricultural productivity may be considered as an important indicator of the extent of regional disparities within a country. Traditionally, the role of agriculture in economic development has been viewed as largely passive and supportive. However, there has been a sharp difference of opinion about the need for transforming agriculture in developing countries as a pre condition for economic development. Hirschmen (1964) following Karl Marx argued that economic development can be achieved through the establishment of industries without necessarily stressing revolution in the field of agriculture at the early stages. Again, some writers like Nurkse (1958), Scitovsky (1955) and Lewis (1961) suggest that a balanced growth approach giving equal priority to both the farm and non-farm sectors for healthy economic progress in the regions. However, the philosophy of balanced growth lies in the fact that both agriculture and industry should be developed with rising intensity with industry supplying the basic needs in the form of inputs to agriculture and agriculture supplying back its surpluses for the expansion of the industrial sectors. The group of writers Schultz (1964), Rostow (1962) and Kuznets (1954) argued that transformation of agriculture is a pre-condition for the development of the industrial sector as well as for the overall
development of the economy. Based on historical experience, the economic development of England and Western Europe between 1750 and 1850 was seen as requiring a rapid structural transformation of the economy from one pre-dominantly focused on agricultural activities to a more complex modern industrial society. In fact, the growth stage theories of Fisher (1945) and Rostow (1962) treat the transition from an agricultural to an industrial society as the major problem of development policy. Both the theories, however, clearly specify a dynamic role for agriculture sector in the transition process. In fact, Rostow also observes that a good part of working capital for modernised industry must come from rapid increasing output achieved by higher productivity in agriculture. Contemporary development economists, however, observe the role of agriculture in development to be more direct and even pivotal. As Meir (1984) comments that the need for agricultural development is not only for its instrumental value in sustaining expansion elsewhere in the non-agricultural sector, but also for its own absorption of labour and its own increase of real income among the rural poverty target groups of this small farmers and the landless labourers.

The regional character of agriculture in the Assam plains are more influenced by physical factors of land rather than technology because of stagnant conditions of agricultural land use with low level of its intensity. Regional disparities in agricultural developments have been analysed by considering its two main attributes – the agricultural productivity (i.e. the indicator of crop-yield in response to the physical factor of land) and the production growth (i.e. the attribute related to change over time in the performance of agricultural production). Agricultural productivity is closely related to the production factors of land. The agricultural land used in Assam plains is paddy crop-dominated and consequently, the agricultural productivity measurement must be based on aggregated picture of crop yield. Moreover, the agricultural growth basically refers to
the relative changes in agricultural output over time. Singh (2005) founds that the regional patterns of agricultural productivity and growth appears to be negative in the areas of lower Brahmaputra Valley which weakens the productivity-growth relationship. However, the areas of upper Brahmaputra and Barak Valley follow the norms of balanced agricultural development. The impact of urbanisation and bigger urban centres on the regional pattern of agricultural development may also be visualised. It shows that there is a need of studies towards locational analysis of agricultural structure for the Assam plains which may be more helpful in testing the validity of regional patterns of agricultural development.

1.5 OBJECTIVES

The main objectives of the study are the following:

1. To assess the extent to which status of women have improved over the years in relation to workforce participation rate of women and the pattern of access over resources.

2. To examine the specific characteristics of work in agricultural sector and their distributional pattern among the women.

3. To make a comparison between male-female workforce participation rate in agriculture vis-a-vis other sectors and to assess the difference between male and female labour productivity.

4. To assess the implication of the technological change on women in agricultural sector.

5. To identify the prevailing constraints to women’s empowerment in agriculture.

6. To suggest a policy package for better participation and women empowerment in the agricultural sector.
HYPOTHESES

Keeping the objectives in view the hypotheses for testing in course of the study are as follows:

1. Women contribute equal efforts towards generation of surplus value in the familial domain despite having wage disparity with their male counterparts.
2. Technological change have resulted in remarkable shift in the pattern of women’s participation in the agricultural sector and marginalised the role of women.
3. Women are denied their right to participate in the decision-making process of the farm household due to their weak resistance capacity. Moreover, women are unorganised than their male counterparts.
4. There is lack of institutional efforts in addressing the issue of women’s gender specific deprivation or the issue of women empowerment in the agricultural sector.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

A number of concepts have been used in the present study which might carry a different meaning from what is written in dictionary. Therefore it is necessary to define those special concepts in order to avoid discrepancy.

Feminisation: Historical evidences show that women’s participation has gradually been increasing in most of the countries of the world for the last few decades. The concept ‘feminisation’ is used here to represent increased participation of women in the agricultural labour force. But this increased participation of women as against men in agriculture may not be treated as a positive factor as most of the them have got the less
advantageous status in the subsistence non-market economy and they are not counted as economic earners.

**Informalisation**: A large section of the rural women are found to perform agriculture related activities in addition to their household tasks and contribute significantly to household income but many of these activities that women perform remain un-acknowledged as work and, hence, they remained ‘invisible’ in formal agricultural operations. This has crated the problem of informalisation of women labour force participation in agriculture.

**Gender Disparity**: Unequal gender relations prevailing within the family as well as in the society leads to the continuance of ‘gender discrimination’. It is observed that the sexual division of labour plays a significant role in agriculture leading to gender disparity which re-inforces caste and class hierarchy in agrarian sector.

**Work**: The estimates of worker participation rates of women based on Census and the NSSO date are subject to the changing concepts and definitions of ‘work’. The concept of work used by Census does not include ‘domestic work’ and considers only productive activity outside the home as ‘economic participation’ in the labour force. The sudden phenomenal drop in the female labour population during 1961-71 has attracted the attention of social scientists for the accurate measurement of work in the subsistence agriculture.

**Work Segregation**: it is observed that in agriculture women do not generally undertake all types of jobs but perform only specific ones, which the male workers normally do not perform. This has crated a tendency toward a system of work segregation in agricultural labour force.

**Women Empowerment**: ‘Women empowerment’ is a social process that challenges the fundamental imbalances of power between individuals which can be treated as control over resources and ideology. The process
of women’s empowerment aims at integrated development, economic empowerment and increasing consciousness in organising farm women in agricultural literature.

**Marginal worker:** Marginal workers are those who have no land holdings of their own and who are engaged only during peak seasons of work in agriculture. Their employments are purely temporary and are paid nominal wages at the market rate. They generally belong to the category of economically and specially backward sections of the society.

**Gendered Division of Resource use:** Access to resources is the precondition for improving the agricultural productivity of both men and women farmers. It is evident that women have a reduced access to private property resources and are more dependent on communal resources for their subsistence needs. At the social level this leads to gendered division of resource use.

**1.8 METHODOLOGY**

The study attempts to explore women’s involvement in the agricultural sector in the Barak Valley at both macro and micro level. Hence, the study is based on both secondary and primary data. The main sources of secondary data are the publications of government agencies like the Directorate of Agriculture and Economics and Statistics, Government of Assam and Government of India and other publications.

The micro level analysis is mainly based on primary data selected through a process of multi-stage sampling. To retain the representativeness of entire region it has been decided to select the sites for sample survey from all the three districts of the region. There are six agricultural sub-divisions in the three districts of the region. District wise sub-divisions are: Karimganj district – i) Karimganj Sub-Division ii) R.K. Nagar Sub-Division; Cachar district – i) Silchar Sub-Division ii) Sonai Sub-Division iii) Lakhipur Sub-Division; Hailakandi district – i)
Hailakandi Sub-Division. From each of these six sub-divisions one Agricultural Development Officer (ADO) Circle has been selected for the field study. The selection of ADO circles has been done in consultation with the official of the agriculture department subject to consideration of higher female workforce participation rate in the circle. From each of these six ADO circles, three villages have been selected at random primarily on the consideration that at least there are some proportions of female workforce participation in the selected villages. In the final stage, about ten percent of the farm houses have been selected again subject to the consideration that in the selected sample there should be representation of female workforce in the agriculture. The agricultural labourers have been classified into male and female to find out the labour productivity in each category. As per the statistics available rice constitutes the major crop in the region occupying 93 percent area in the total cropped area of the region. As such the study concentrates mainly on rice crop. The details of the sample study locations have been discussed in Chapter 4. The method employed for testing hypotheses has been based on comparison of mean value of input and output and yield gap between the compared cases. Suitable test statistics have been used to test the significance.

The Cob-Douglas Production Function was estimated to assess the difference between male and female labour productivity in each crop. The details of the models estimated in the present study have been analysed in Chapter 5.

1.9 ORGANIZATION OF THE STUDY

This study is organized into six chapters. After this introductory chapter, chapter-2 deals with review of literature on the issues of role, pattern and feminisation of in agriculture. An attempt has also been made in this chapter to discuss the issues relating to modernisation of
agriculture and the status of female workforce in agriculture. Chapter-3 deals with the General Background of Barak Valley Region. The historical, geographic and other related aspects have been analysed in this chapter. The backgrounds of field study have been detailed in chapter-4. Chapter-5 presents a detailed analysis of empirical results in the form of the Level of Agricultural Operations in Sample Farms. The Issues related to Empowerment of Women has been discussed in Chapter-6. The summary of findings, conclusion and policy suggestions have been presented in chapter-7.

NOTES:

1. In agriculture, women are generally kept away from the labour market, and sometimes when they are drawn into it, then the process of task-segregation reduces them to the level of marginal, unorganised and reserve labour.

2. Technology, while it has increased the household income of a small section of households who have access to and control over technology, has marginalised a large section of rural population, making them subject to the dictates of technological power of the former. In both the processes women have been marginalised and subjugated to male dominance in the family and community. The composite composition of class and caste has enduring bearings on the processes of such marginalisation.

3. World Bank, World Development Report, 2008 gives a detail analysis regarding 'Agriculture for Development'. This report contains a lot of information on various issues related to agriculture and development. The report addresses three main enquiries: i) what can agriculture do for development? ii) what are effective instruments in using agriculture for development and iii) how can various agenda on

4. It is argued that globalisation particularly as expressed through the WTO, is threatening the very foundations of Third World Agrarian economies and hence could condemn millions of small and marginal farmers to perpetual poverty while seriously damaging the environment and bio-diversity. For details about important facets concerning interlinked issues on globalisation, the environment, livelihood and food security in developing world, see, Vandana Shiva and Gitanjali Bedi (ed.), Sustainable Agriculture and Food Security: The Impact of Globalisation (2002).

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