Chapter - IV

Women Labour in Agriculture - An Overview
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WOMEN LABOUR IN AGRICULTURE -
AN OVERVIEW

Agriculture in India is the vertical backbone of the country and is regarded as the largest sector of the country's economic activity. It is the major sector of the State economy, in which the majority of people earn their livelihood. Though the share of agriculture in the aggregate economy has declined rapidly during the planned development of the country, it assumes a pivotal role in the rural economy.

The contributory share of agriculture in GDP has declined from 55.4 per cent in 1950-51 to 18.5 per cent in 2006-07. Agriculture at present, provides livelihood to 60 per cent of the total population. The sector provides employment to 58.4 per cent of country's workforce and is the single largest private enterprise.
Agriculture also plays a very important role in industrial development of our nation as it is the source of raw materials for many industries. India's foreign trade is deeply associated with agriculture. Agriculture accounts for about 14.7 per cent of the total export earnings.

Agriculture and its related goods contribute 38 per cent in the total exports of the country (Anon., 2007). Expanding agricultural production increases the demand for other sectors notably fertilizers, pesticides, machineries, transportation and communication varying with the level of technology. Indian agriculture continues to be a gamble on the monsoon.
Labour is one of the primary factors of production. It is considered to be important not only because it is productive but also because it activates other factors and makes them useful for production purposes. The size of labour force in a country is determined by the number of people in the age group of 15-59 years as generally children below 15 years and old people above 59 years do not participate in production activity. India's labour force consists of 459.1 million workers (2004-05), growing at the rate of 2 per cent annually. Out of this 268.1 million workers are employed in agriculture as cultivators and labourers.
Agricultural labourers, mostly landless constitute the poorest segment of the Indian agricultural population. They belong to the economically backward and oppressed section of the society. They mainly belong to the scheduled castes and other backward communities. They are basically unskilled and unorganized and work in farms of prosperous big farmers as casual workers on wages for a larger part of the year.

One of the most disquieting features of the rural economy of India during the past several decades has been its constantly increasing trend in the number of landless labourers. Factors like rapid growth of population, law of inheritance, rise in cost of agricultural inputs and decline in small scale industries have been responsible for this increase.
The phenomenon of under employment, under development and surplus population are simultaneously manifested in the daily lives and living of agricultural labourers.

Unlike industrial labour, agricultural labour is difficult to define. The reason is that unless capitalism develops fully in agriculture, a separate class of workers depending wholly on wages does not come up. The First Agricultural Labour Enquiry Committee (ALEC) 1950-55 defined Agricultural Labour as "Those people who are engaged in raising crops on payment of wages" (based on occupation). That is if half or more of a household have wage employment in agriculture then those households can be termed as agricultural labour households.
The Second ALEC 1956-57 enlarged the definition to include- "Those who are engaged in agriculture and other agricultural occupations like dairy farming, horticulture, raising of livestock, bee keeping, poultry etc."(based on income). According to this definition if 50 per cent or more of its income is derived as wages for work rendered in agriculture and allied activities, then it could be classed to agricultural labour household. According to National Commission on Labour "An Agricultural labourer is one who is basically unskilled and unorganised and has little for his livelihood, other than personal labour" (Srivastava, 1993).

The agricultural labourers can be classified into mainly two categories. 
2. Very small cultivators whose main source of earnings due to their small and sub marginal holdings is wage employment. 

Permanent or attached labourers work on annual or seasonal basis and they work on some sort of contract. Their wages are determined by custom or tradition. Temporary or casual labourers are engaged only during peak
period of work. They are paid at the market rate. Under the second group come small farmers who possess very little land and therefore, have to devote most of their time working on the lands of others as labourers.

Agricultural labour in India is being widely scattered over 6.38 lakh villages of which half have population of less than 500 each. And therefore, any question of building an effective organization, like that of industrial workers, poses insurmountable difficulties. Agricultural labourers, especially in smaller villages away from towns and cities, are generally unskilled workers carrying on agricultural operation in the centuries old traditional wages.
Most agricultural workers belong to the depressed classes, which have been neglected for ages. The low caste and depressed classes have been socially handicapped and they never had the courage to assert themselves. In some parts of India, agricultural labourers are migratory, moving in search of jobs at the time of harvesting.

The number of agricultural labourers being very large and skills they possess being meager, there is generally more than abundant supply of agricultural labourers in relation to demand for them. It is only during the sowing and harvesting seasons that there appears to be near full employment in the case of agricultural labourers. But, once the harvesting season is over, majority of agricultural workers will be jobless especially in areas, where there is single cropping pattern. Due to all the above mentioned factors, the bargaining power and position of agricultural labourers in India is very weak. In fact, quite a large number of them are in the grip of village money lenders, landlords and commission agents, often the same person functioning in all the three capacities.
The agricultural labour market in India is highly segmented. The labour absorption and wage rate depends on 1) adoption of new technology, 2) population and migration, 3) marketing & other institutional support like credit etc. 4) the terms of trade and the extent of the market, 5) the profitability. Demand-supply and the quality of life of the labour in the various markets also differ widely. The hilly region with shifting cultivation and forestry provide job opportunities to the agricultural labour at a lower level compared to the region which have adopted new agricultural strategies.

These regions vary with regard to wage levels also. Also the inter-zonal movement of agricultural labour is rigid. The demand for agricultural labour and wage levels in Punjab, Haryana and other areas of green revolution are
higher than those in the remote areas of Orissa or Assam where no agrarian
to adopt.

Some studies have reported the increasing casualisation of labour,
increasing feminization of labour due to male migration, decline in the
customary and dependency relationship, increasing integration of labour
market due to increased mobility of labour because of development in the
means of communication and road infrastructure (Sharma and Kumar, 2003).

When we talk about agricultural labour, woman labour has a special
significance. Women are a vital agent in Indian economy, even as studies
points towards 'statistical purdah' (World Bank, 1991) or 'economic invisibility'
(Radhadevi, 1981) manifest in selective under-documentation of their
endeavours, in a society with strong traits of patriarchal norms. In Indian population 48.27 per cent are women and the number is 495.7 million, 72.72 per cent of the women live in rural areas, 45.84 per cent of the female population is illiterate. In rural areas the corresponding figure is 53.3 per cent.

The labour force participation rate of women is 31.56 per cent, less than half of the mens’ rate of 68.44 per cent. A recent report by the government has revealed that women outnumber men as agricultural labourers. The Union Minister of State for Agriculture Kanti Lal Bhuria said as per the 2001 census, there were 42.95 per cent women labourers as compared to 27.51 per cent men.
In India the labour force is largely masculine, with only one out of every four workers being a female. Women today play a pivotal role in agriculture - as female agricultural labour, as farmers, co-farmers, female family labour and (with male out-migration, widowhood, etc.) as managers of farms and farm entrepreneurs. Three-fourths of women workers are in agriculture. Among rural woman workers, 87 per cent are employed in agriculture as labourers and cultivators.

Woman is the molder and builder of any nation's destiny. They are regarded as the backbone of the rural scene. Women workforce outside the four walls is larger in rural areas than in urban India. Revealed that women are responsible for 50 per cent of food production in the developing world. Most of the women perform various types of work for their livelihood and agriculture is considered as the biggest unorganised sector where large number of rural women take part actively. While women have always played a key role in agricultural production, their importance both as workers and as managers of farms has been growing, as an increasing number of men move to non-farm
jobs. Women constitute 40 per cent of the agricultural work force and this percentage is rising. An estimated 20 per cent of rural households are *de facto* female headed, due to widowhood, desertion, or male outmigration. According to the census reports, there is an increased participation of rural women in economic activities besides doing household duties, though participation of women in agriculture contribute a lot for the economic growth and progress of the country, their problems are shown least concern.

Woman's role has biologically and socially combined to create four distinct functions that of mother, wife, homemaker and worker. The role of worker is equally important as that of the other three roles. But her role as an active worker-producer is rarely acknowledged though it is significant for the family's survival. These unknown and unacknowledged beings are responsible to keep the economy at a steady pace and helped the nation to occupy a significant place in the world.
Womens' involvement varies widely among different regions, ecological sub zones, farming system, caste, class and stages in the family cycle. Generally, the poorer the family, the greater the involvement of women in agricultural activities. Women have extensive workloads with dual responsibility for many of the farm operations and household management (fetching water, cooking and taking care of children).

Despite womens' significant and crucial role in agricultural development and allied fields, they have virtually no access to agricultural information, services or production assets and have very limited control over their earnings. Though Green Revolution technologies enhanced agricultural productivity, they also widened economic disparities and deepened gender discrimination in community life. The introduction of capital intensive technologies in the agricultural sector has had differential impact on men and women and women have been adversely affected due to lack of access to technology.