CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION
India, for ages, has been the sacred land of people who have shown great reverence for spiritual values. Each nation is a power (śakti) of the evolving spirit in humanity and lives by the principle which it embodies. India is the Bhārata-śakti, the living energy of a great spiritual conception and fidelity to it is the very principle of her existence. Swāmi Vivekanānda describes India as 'the blessed punya-bhūmi and as the land from where came the founders of religions from the ancient times deluging the earth again and again with the pure and perennial waters of spiritual truth'.

India is essentially an agricultural country, about eighty percent of the population live in villages. The majority of the Indian workers are the agricultural labourers who constitute the major segment of the rural work-force. Though a large number of women are found among these agricultural labourers contributing significantly to the rural economy, they have attracted the attention of the researchers recently.

Agriculture in India is of crucial importance from different stand points. It accounts for a large part of our national income; it is the most important sector from the point of view of employment.

Further the agricultural sector has an important influence on industrialisation and its role in our foreign trade is also significant.

Estimates made by the Government of India reveal that in 1981-82 the agricultural sector accounted for 41.5 percent of India's national income. Thus, despite the substantial progress of industries in the planning era, contribution of the agricultural sector to the national income is the largest as compared with that made by other sectors.

It must, however, be noted that the percentage contribution of agriculture to India's national income has been declining over the period since 1901. For instance, the share of agriculture in India's national income was 65 percent in the period 1914-18. It declined to 57 percent in 1929-30. In 1960-61, agriculture accounted for 52 percent of our national income. Since then the share is falling and, as mentioned earlier, stood at 41.5 percent in 1981-82. Due to severe drought and the resultant set-back in agriculture thereafter its share had declined to 40.6% in 1979-80.

Percentage contribution of agriculture to a country's national income is an index of economic development. In developed countries, agriculture accounts for a very small part of their national income. In the U.S.A., which is the major food producer of the world, agriculture contributes only 3.2 percent of national income. The figures for Canada, Australia and the U.K. are 5
percent, 7.6 percent and 3 percent respectively. India is not yet as industrialised as the western world and hence, the contribution of the agricultural income is as high as 41.5 percent. Any understanding of the process of production would remain incomplete if the role of women in shaping them is not analysed. In the past, studies dealing with different aspects of the agrarian economy, have exhibited a male-bias by assuming only the labour of men as a constituent of productive work. Such a discrepancy has arisen because of two prevailing conditions, one, women are normally subsumed under the generalized category of "peasants" and second, among the agricultural families, the division of labour occurs within the context of the family economy and it is the male headed family as a group, which forms the unit of analysis in these studies. Thus on the one hand, a misplaced emphasis in considering only men as producers has resulted in the inclusion of women in such generalised categories as "peasants" or cultivators and on the other hand, a substitution of the family bias to the male-bias has occurred while accounting for the unpaid labour of women in the household economy. It has precluded the option of women to remain free from the family. However total social reality can only be understood if gender is considered as an important category of analysis. Only a balanced appraisal of men's and

women's lives and activities provide an understanding of the total social reality.³

In recent years efforts have been made by social scientists to build bridges by focusing attention on women workers and drawing a distinction in the work activities of men and women. An appraisal of the economic activities of men and women shows that there exists an unequal distribution along the occupation and wage structures.⁴

Moreover, studies dealing with women and their development indicate that the economic and social gains of development have been unevenly distributed not only among persons and social classes but also among countries. Studies on rural development in India have time and again pointed out that the rich farmers have grown richer and the poor have become poorer. This means that over a period of time, there has occurred a marginalization and pauperisation of the small peasant. We find that there has occurred a marginalization of the women in the agrarian economy, because they have little scope for mobility and education and also because of task segregation and relegation of women's tasks to the lower levels of the occupational hierarchy.⁵

---

4. Sethi. R.M. 1984, Female Labour in Agriculture, Department of Sociology, Punjab University, Chandigarh.
The experience of the developing countries shows that apart from the economic marginalization of women the efforts at economic development have resulted in an increase in the work activities of rural women on the one hand, and shrinking of their resource base and opportunities for well-being as persons on the other. These developmental experiences have made many social scientists sit up and raise the issue of "development with equity", that is an equitable distribution of social and economic resources. The notion of equity raises the issue of how women should regain control and ownership of land and other resources and how they should be effectively involved in decision making at all levels.

The following research makes an effort to understand these predicaments through a study and analysis of women workers in agriculture in the southern part of India, that is the women working in family farms as peasant women or agricultural labourers. The earlier village studies only make indirect references to the agricultural work participation of women. But later studies on women's work participation have analysed the nature and conditions of work participation of agricultural labour and have largely shown


the impact of development in decreasing/increasing their participation in agriculture. In the present study we have tried to explore those areas where women either continue to engage in agricultural work inspite of the modernisation of agriculture or because the commercialisation of the economy has not occurred in a big way. Under both conditions the contribution of women to agricultural production is far more than that of men, but escapes recognition when chalking out plans for rural development. The new types of employment generated through the different developmental plans within the village or outside gets monopolised by men while women are left to continue with the major share of the agricultural activities on farms. However the contribution of women to agricultural labour often becomes invisible because women are generally regarded as socially unproductive. The decision of labour along gender lines separates women from the production process and helps in the 'privatization' or 'housewifization' of women's work thereby excluding women altogether from the purview of policy making. Through this process women are subsumed under the category of "family workers" (census of India, 1981) who are supposed to work for the family in agriculture, industry, trade or services but are not entitled to a share in the wages or the profit


received by the male head of the household or the relative. It is exactly this group of women that we propose to study here, in order to understand the nature and type of agricultural labour that men and women engage in paddyfields and their relative control over the fruits of such labour over land and other similar resources.

The agrarian social structure is conditioned essentially by the extent and character of the property structure or land which forms the basis of the production relations within the socio-economic frame work. Two types of agrarian conditions are generally prevalent. One, where there occurs large scale leasing in and leasing out of land; and second where self cultivating peasant proprietors form the bulk. The first category is highly differentiated one but the second is not a homogeneous one either. Differentiations based on size of the holding, economic status, and caste composition are widely prevalent among them. Among them, the big land owners are a distinct category while all the others are small and medium land owners. Tenant cultivators comprise a separate category from the owner cultivators. The wide spread prevalence of tenancy and owner cultivation of land is generally associated with subsistence farming or an underdeveloped state of commercial agriculture which keeps the lower strata of agrarian society tied to land and obstructs the development of an independent labour market.  

Agricultural labourers are those persons who undertake physical work on farms for which wages are paid to them. While men plough and do some other agricultural operations, the female agricultural labourers are employed mainly to perform only some particular agricultural operations like sowing, transplanting, weeding, harvesting, winnowing and threshing. This segregation is followed by the discrimination in the matter of payment of wages. Though the Equal Remuneration Act was made, they are still paid less than their male colleagues for equal work.

The female agricultural labourers lie at the lowest rung of the socio-economic ladder. They slog alongside their men in the field the whole day and then look after the house and children too, with no help forthcoming from the male members of the family. They work for wages because of the economic necessity to supplement the family income. Because they desperately need some work to do and earn wages, they do not hesitate to work at lower wages under harsh conditions.

Lack of facilities to acquire other skills, and unavailability of opportunities to enter other fields has turned them desperate and depressed. Apart from the pressure of unemployment, mechanisation of agriculture has further displaced women from their traditional work.

The socio-economic problems from which these people already suffer as a consequence of their subordinate class position, factors
like their unorganised state, the insecure job conditions, lack of skills, low wages, and casual nature of employment further reduced them into a subservient position in the society.

Review of literature.

Till recently the theoretical and empirical literature on rural labour markets had completely ignored studies on agricultural women labourers. They assumed homogeneity in agricultural labour averaging male and female wage rates to create one wage and averaging female and male employment level to create one level of employment. However, realizing the heterogeneity of labour in the rural labour market, a good lot of literature on the question of why female patterns of employment and wage rates in terms of specialised work tasks differ so markedly from male patterns and about the separate labour supply behaviour of women and men have started appearing recently. But these studies have failed to study the justification or otherwise of the socio-economic discrimination of agricultural labourers and the exploitative conditions under which these women are forced to work and the way they are cleverly and systematically discriminated against with the methodological rigour. Most of the studies on women workers in unorganised agricultural sector, are either impressionistic or lack a clearly defined research focus. Bina Agarwal who happened to act as Rapporteur on the Report on "Impact of Rural development in Economic Status of
women[^11] made a highly critical remark that majority of papers lack analytical thrust and they do not present any hypotheses and methodologically most of the papers suffer from one or more defects. One such paper[^12] is worth reviewing.

The author S.N. Balaraman reiterates that sex discrimination in farm wages is a fact of life in most parts of the world, whether developed or under developed and it exists in two ways. The first one is paying less to women for the same type of work which he calls open discrimination and the other in restricting women to low paid unskilled jobs denying them access to better paid jobs and the author confirms that both these types of discrimination exist in India and it is true of Tamil Nadu also.

For the purpose of analysis, the author uses the wage data obtained from Department of Statistics, Madras for the years from 1964-65 to 1975-76. In his analysis an attempt has been made to identify these two types of discrimination namely (a) open wage discrimination and (b) female task specific discrimination. In addition to this he makes a passing reference to sex discrimination in farm employment because in his opinion sex discrimination in


employment is not found as much as discrimination in wages for the reason that the employment opportunities are thrown open to both men and women. But because of their household chores women are not able to participate fully in agricultural production and hence the time at their disposal for farm work, is limited to 50 to 70 percent of the number of days that men are employed. Therefore, women are not discriminated against the employment in the real sense of the term.

Every one knows that the female agricultural workers encounter many difficulties in the field mainly because of the prevailing disparities. But concrete information pertaining to the roots or degree of discrimination of these women is not available. Except a few studies conducted here and there, no serious study has so far been undertaken either by any research organisation or by an individual researcher to explain this social phenomenon. Review of the existing literature pertaining to women’s studies in India reveal that the research so far made into this problem is biased and that it has failed to get at the core of the problem. No particular aspect of the problem is thoroughly probed. Also, wide gaps exist in the existing literature. Theoretical studies of any nature are totally absent. This indicates the dire need of a number of studies to be undertaken in this area.

The present study attempts:
(1) to assess the social background of the women agricultural labourers;
(2) to examine the women's socio-economic status and the extent of their control over the means of production;
(3) to assess the level of participation of women in their respective family affairs and examine the perception of their roles;
(4) to assess the quantity of work and identify the nature of jobs available for women in agriculture;
(5) to assess the impact of the various development programmes launched by the government for the welfare of women;
(6) the special features facing the female headed households in the working fields as well as in the social structure.

Different methods have been employed to collect the required data pertaining to the study. For collecting secondary data the researcher visited a number of libraries like Centre for Development Studies, Trivandrum, Centre for Women's Development Studies, Gandhi Peace Foundation, Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development, Govt. of India, Ministry of Labour, Govt. of India, and the Library of the Planning Commission at New Delhi, Social Welfare Dept. and Rural Development, Kerala Secretariat, Trivandrum, Kerala University Library, Trivandrum. Information was also gathered from the papers presented at the various women's conferences held at different places.

The researcher selected 3 taluks at Palghat district, Kerala
and had fruitful discussions with social, political leaders, public and social scientists.

The data has been collected by both formal and informal techniques of interview, observations and recall while examining the life styles of certain women involved in the agricultural labour. The researcher has personally contacted some of the workers to get the first-hand-information about their problems and their working conditions. Structural questionnaires have been made use of for the purpose of collecting the data. Two hundred and forty female agricultural labourers from Palghat district were chosen at random and interviewed.

The present study is restricted in its scope and the following are its limitations:

(1) Though the research aims at studying the position of the female agricultural labourers in the present socio-economic situations, it confines itself to the rural scene only. The female agricultural labourers working in and around the urban areas and semi-urban areas are not covered in the present study.

(2) Covering all the female agricultural labourers working in the selected villages is also an unwieldy task and hence the present research is restricted for studying the cases of only a limited number of the female agricultural labourers.
Since the research is based on the field survey made in some specific areas overall generalizations cannot be drawn from it.

While examining the welfare schemes launched by the government the present study has shown insight into the background situation of the female agricultural labourers.

About the chapterisation, in Chapter I an attempt has been made to catch a glimpse of the position of the female agricultural labourers. While pointing out the issues involved in the problem, the importance of the present study has been brought out. The research methodology, objectives and the limitations of the area of research have also been specified.

In Chapter II an attempt is made to examine the characteristics of the agricultural labourers. The nature of Indian agriculture and general land holding pattern is also discussed and the status of women in the overall context of the mode of production is determined.

In Chapter III an attempt has been made to analyse the agricultural situation in Kerala. A characteristic feature of the agrarian population in most parts of India is that large numbers of agricultural labourers belong to castes which constituted traditionally the lowest rung in the caste hierarchy. The Malabar coast is no exception. The point has already been made by Dharamkumar that in the Madras Presidency as well as in other
parts of India, "ever before the British rule, there was a sizeable group of landless labourers at the lowest rung, both socially and economically of the village hierarchy".

The agricultural labour caste in Kerala were the Pulayas, Parayas, Kuravas and Paniyars. At the end of the 19th century these castes together accounted for about 12% of the total population in the state. The Pulayas alone (also known as the Cherumen in the Malabar region) formed more than three-fourth of the population.

In Chapter IV various aspects of the social status of the female agricultural labourers and their economic conditions and their working conditions and also some special features faced by the female headed households are also dealt with.

The agricultural labourers generally come into their career, at an early age and this is true in the case of all the taluks selected for study in three parts of Palghat district namely Mannarghat, Chittoor and Palghat taluks. In all the three taluks the female agricultural labourers come into their career at an early age and majority of female agricultural labourers are in the age group of 26-45 years.

The socio-economic conditions under which the female agricultural labourers live have continued to be traditional, exploitative and anti-women in character. These condition impede their development and go on lowering their socio-economic status day by day. Simply by improving their job opportunities or by increasing
their wages, their problems cannot be solved.

In certain parts of Palghat district especially in Mannarghat the situation is different. In several places, paddy fields have been replaced by banana cultivation. This will still reduce the employment rates of female agricultural labourers in the region. This will affect the employment potential and consequently effect the economic position of the agricultural labourers, especially the female agricultural labourers who will be first denied work. Obviously old workers also become the worst sufferers in this situation. Their conditions become even more distressing when even the younger ones in the family will have to remain without work for several weeks and their slender savings get eroded without any chance of replenishment until the next harvest.

In Chapter V an attempt is made to analyse the policy and plan of development in India pertaining particularly to the various rural development programmes launched by the government from time to time.

Rural development has become the major concern of the public policies all over the world; the public policy has become synonymous to improving the living conditions of the poor. Therefore, most of the policies in their objectives reflect a concern for the poor. This can be witnessed in the plan documents and public pronouncements. Rural development is essential for the economic development of a country like India where 80% of the
people live in villages.

The purpose of Chapter VI is to analyse social securities for weaker sections in India and other countries. Social security is the production furnished by the society to its members through agencies of public measures against the economic and social distress caused due to unemployment, invalidity, destitution, social disability and backwardness, oldage and death etc.

Thus social security in broad would embrace social insurance, social assistance, family benefit, health care, and other social services. The social security and welfare schemes in the state are implemented through institutional care measures and non-institutional measures.

Kerala has one of the best system of social security and social welfare in India. The state has not only adapted all the statutes of the Government of India in this regard, but, has also implemented them vigorously. Additionally it has enacted a series of legislation which protect the interest of the people in the organised as well as the unorganized sector. The best examples are (1) The Kerala Agrarian Relation Act of 1961 and (2) Kerala Agricultural Workers Act of 1974. In addition to this, it has also introduced a series of non-statutory measures for the protection of workers.

In the concluding Chapter a review of the various aspects of the subjects, raised, discussed and analysed in the previous
chapters as well as the suggestions have been included. The economy of India is predominantly agriculture-oriented. The majority of Indian workers are the agricultural labourers who constitute a major segment of the rural work force. Though a significant number of women are found among the agricultural labourers their contribution to the rural economy has not yet been assessed correctly.

Palghat was the principal rice producing region in the Malabar district of the old Madras Presidency. Among the five taluks which constitute the present Palghat district namely Alathoor, Chittoor, Palghat, Mannarghat and Ottapalam; rice cultivation was traditionally concentrated in the first three.

With regard to the structure of the traditional agrarian labour relations in Palghat there were some features specific to the region. The attached labour system as it evolved in Palghat was known as the permanent labour system. Agricultural labourers who mostly belong to the Cheruman caste were retained as regular workers, and were attached to the farm and given permanent employment rights. Such permanent workers among whom women outnumbered men, were employed for a whole range of operations beginning with the preparation of the field to harvesting, threshing and storing of grains. The system of wage payments in kind for all the agricultural labourers even continued during the transitional phase. However, only the permanent workers would take part in harvesting operations for which they would earn a share of the
produce locally known as "Pathambu" which usually turned out to be the largest component of their wage bill. This mode of labour relations prevailed in Palghat at the beginning of the 1960's.

There were no dearth of labourers in Palghat to meet the additional demand. The rural poor consisting of the non-permanent landless labourers and their small holding peasantry to whom wage employment became a supplementary source of income, could readily fill the gap. Apart from them, there was also the migrant workers from the adjoining Tamilnadu districts who constituted a major source of cheap labour to the Palghat farmers. This was the situation which led to the recruitment of more casual labourers to conduct farm operations along with permanent labourers.

Agricultural labourers constitute the largest single group among the total main workers of Kerala and women constitute a sizeable proportion among agricultural labourers. According to 1981 census, 30.53% of the population of Kerala were retained as workers, 26.68% as main workers and 3.85% as marginal workers. 28.19% of the main workers were employed as agricultural labourers, 62.62% male, 37.38% female in absolute numbers out of a total of 6,742,697. The main workers amounting to 1,900,904 were agricultural labourers, out of which 1,190,318 were males and 710,586 were females. 23% of total men workers and 43% of the women workers were engaged in agriculture.

It is well-known that eighty percent of India's teeming and over-flowing population lives in its thousands and lakhs of villages
which are scattered and dotted through out the length and width of the country. Development of the rural areas has been one of the paramount concerns of the successive five year plans. A number of programmes like the Community Development Programme, the Small Farmers and Marginal Farmers Development Agencies (SFDA), the Drought Prone Areas Programme (DPAP) and the Command Area Development Authority (CADA) have been operating in the country aiming at improving the economic conditions of the rural poor. With the objective of bringing the poorest families in the rural areas above the poverty line by giving them income generating assets and access to credit and other inputs a new programme known as the Integrated Rural Development Programme (IRDP) was launched in 1978-79. In each plan, adequate emphasis has been laid on the village problems and their solutions and it would not be in any way exaggeration to say that the present plan policies and programmes have devoted their attention largely to the problems of rural development. However, we have not planned to develop the villages as a whole. The piece meal efforts in the shape of various measures of land reforms, isolated measures of agricultural improvement - better seeds, fertilizers, provisions of irrigation facilities etc., and even rural electrification and new technology have left the weaker sections in the country largely untouched.

The Gandhian element of rural development seems to have been included in the planning process as a matter of appeasement rather than as a matter of conviction in the Gandhian approach.
This belief is consolidated by the fact that Gandhiji's approach to planning was in terms of the "Constructive Programme", i.e. modelling the Indian economy as an economy of decentralised self-sufficient village communities. Instead of the consolidation of the fabric of the village communities in our country, it is almost disintegrating after 46 years of planning in the country.

The various programmes initiated, during the plan period for rural development have achieved limited success. No doubt, the agricultural production and farm productivity have increased and additional employment opportunities have been created but the rural sector seem to be still undeveloped.

In brief the scheme for rural development have still to go a long way to accomplish the task of the welfare of the rural society.