CHAPTER II

WOMEN AND NATURE OF INDIAN AGRICULTURE
In this chapter, an attempt is made to examine the characteristics of agricultural labourers. The nature of Indian agriculture and general landholding pattern is also discussed and the status of women in the overall context of the mode of production is determined.

Though the term 'agricultural labourer' is extensively used in many studies there is no unanimity in defining the term. It is generally said that an agricultural labourer is one who works on farm for wages.

The first agricultural labour Enquiry Committee (1950-51) defined the agricultural labourers as those people who are engaged in raising crops on payment of wages. The Second Agricultural Labour Enquiry Committee (1956-57) enlarged the definition of the agricultural labour to include those who are engaged in other agricultural occupations like dairy, poultry, farming and horticulture, etc.¹

However in the overall context of Indian agriculture the definition is not adequate because it is not possible to see separately those working on wages from others. According to the National Commission on Labour, an agricultural labourer is one who is

basically unskilled and unorganised and wholly depends for his livelihood on his personal labour. But all these definitions, with little difference, accept broadly the principle that an agricultural labourer is one who is engaged on wage employment either permanently or casually. Thus persons whose main source of income is wage employment fall in this category.  

Agricultural labourers in general can be classified into two sub-categories:—(i) the landless agricultural labour, and (ii) the small cultivators whose main source of earnings is wage employment and not their small and sub marginal holdings. Landless labourers, in turn, can be classified into two broad categories:—(a) permanent labour attached to a cultivating household and (b) casual labour. The small cultivators can be divided into three sub-groups—cultivators, share-croppers and lease-holders. Since the agricultural labourers form a heterogenous group of workers more details can be worked out by classifying them into different sub-groups.

While the census data classify the agricultural workers into only two categories, viz. cultivators and labourers, this classification, in fact, does not reflect the realities of the agricultural community. The cultivators include the absentee landowners who do

2. Ibid.

not cultivate their land themselves and get it cultivated by hired labourers, lease-holders, and tenants of different categories including share croppers and marginal farmers who not only cultivate their own lands but also work on others' land.Labourers, on the other hand, include casual, daily wage labourers, attached workers, whose wages are fixed by contract, and bonded labourers who have entered into contract with the landowners to pay off the loan taken from them by working for them. The labourers of the first and the second categories may include those who have very small and sub-marginal holdings but whose major source of income is wage employment only.

The labourers of the second category get somewhat higher wages than the casual labourers and they are assured of employment even during the lean season. The National Commission on Labour described them as 'permanent' labourers. Their mobility, however, is restricted as they cannot lease their work at will. Some labourers of this group are also share croppers.


Share croppers share the produce of the land with the landowners for their work while working as wage labourers. The labourers of the third category, in the words of the National Commission on Labour, "Can best be described in terms of debt bondage, fixed for a time or a life time, one hereditarily descending from father to son in some cases".

As their earnings are meagre, it is difficult for them to come out of the clutches of the debt bondage. But due to regional variations, differences in the pattern of classification of the agricultural labour do exist in almost all parts of the country.

The existing variations impede the classification of the agricultural labourers. Besides, the changes in the income patterns, employment, land values and degree of indebtedness make the stratification of the agricultural labourers a difficult job. Some recent studies have indicated that two separate processes have contributed to resumption of land by owners after evicting tenants:

(a) Increase in the productions due to the new methods of cultivation and the consequent prospects of higher returns from the land.

(b) The governmental efforts to confer ownership rights on tenants. While a certain degree of upward mobility may be found among the very small minority, the general pattern of change is in


the downward direction, through the increasing pressure of growing families on the small land holdings and the growing indebtedness which leads to the loss of land. 9

The increase in the strength of the agricultural labourers is a significant aspect noticed in the 20th Century and several reasons may be ascribed for this increase. The disappearance of cottage and domestic industries, decline of handicrafts and other subsidiary occupations, are some of the causes responsible for the decline of the village economy, which, in turn, made a large number of people depend more upon agriculture which is the only alternative occupation available to them. In the absence of other alternatives, people in rural areas, who are generally unskilled, continue to stick on to agriculture and women are no exception to the phenomenon.

The reasons for women sticking on to agriculture may also be the same as in the case of man. Further, factors like large size of the family, pauperism, illiteracy and ignorance to acquire any other job compelled the womenfolk to depend more upon agriculture which does not require any special skill. But this does not last long, since most people have no land of their own.

In the absence of even tiny bits of land to cultivate, they turned into mere labourers employed on wage employment which, as a

result of heavy competition, ultimately resulted in underemployment and unemployment in the field of agriculture. Inadequate land is at the root of all these problems of poverty, tenurial insecurity and underemployment.\textsuperscript{10}

Agriculture which is seasonal in nature also conditions the availability of employment. Further, women in this field are mainly engaged in only some works like transplanting, weeding, and harvesting. Concentration of vast number of women in this field also reduced the bargaining capacity of women labourers. It also affected the wage pattern. Migration of agricultural labourers to fertile regions has also had its adverse effect on the wage pattern. Particularly, women labourers in agriculture are much affected because of the unorganised nature of the farm labour, the case with which hired labour can be substituted by family labour, the seasonal nature of the demand for labour and the traditional way of conditioning women to some particular jobs.\textsuperscript{11}

CLASSIFICATION OF FEMALE AGRICULTURAL LABOURERS:

To understand the nature of rural class structure, there is a need to classify women into various categories depending on their relation to the means of production, for women's status does depend,

to a large extent, upon the extent of her control over the means of production.12 The majority of rural women eke out their livelihood by working on land in a number of ways. Based on this, rural women are classified into four categories. Thus, within a single Indian village, which is the social microcosm of the world, identification of different types of female work patterns constitute a study of their work at various parts of the world at large.13 The following are the different categories of agricultural labourers:-

1. The landless women.
2. The near-landless women.
3. The small peasant women.
4. The rich peasant women.

1. **THE LANDLESS WOMEN:**

A large number of rural women primarily eke out their livelihood by working as mere wage labourers on agricultural farms. Many a time they are attached to landlord’s family along with their menfolk. These families own no land of their own and live in thatched huts. Generally a large section of scheduled castes, scheduled tribes, and backward caste women belong to this category.


We find the African women in this category who cannot expect to be supported by husbands, but independently support themselves and their families". 14

2. THE NEAR-LANDLESS WOMEN:-

These women hold tiny bits of land which are dry and uncultivable. Poor irrigation facilities, lack of resources and lack of cattle - wealth impair them in cultivating their lands. The difference between the landless and near landless women is that the latter have at least some tiny bits of land to own. The scheduled caste women, scheduled tribe women, and the majority of the backward caste women belong to this category. Due to the decline of handicrafts, even a large number of women from artisan class depended upon outside employment and mostly on work connected with agriculture. The woman of this type is an active family worker also, who shares the burden of work in family to a large extent. 15

3. THE SIMPLE PEASANT WOMEN:-

The women of this category work on the family farm which normally does not exceed 5 acres. They also work on the farms of others as wage labourers to add something to the meagre income of the family. Generally, the backward caste women belong to this

14. Ibid.
15. Ibid.
category. They also assist their men in the household industries. Women contribute very little to farming, and we recognise this as a characteristic feature in many Latin American Countries. 16

4. **THE RICH PEASANT WOMEN:**

Most of these women belong to upper strata of the society. Depending upon the necessity, they supervise the work done at the family farm where latest means are utilised to the maximum extent. They reside in a well-built house. They can be compared with the veiled, non-working women of the Middle East. 17

The women of the first two categories are found in large numbers in rural India. They occupy the lower positions in the caste-class hierarchy. They invariably work for longer hours than their menfolk both at home, at the work spot and at the landlord's house. Majority of these women are propertyless, landless with no productive assets of their own except their labour power. Lack of skills, wide shifts in the occupation, seasonal employment, migration, low wages, exploitation, at the work spot and at home are the common features that effect the development of these women.

To sum up the role of sex in farming can briefly be described as follows:- the very sparsely populated regions where shifting cultivation is used, men do little farm work and women do most of

16. Ibid.
17. Ibid.
the work. In somewhat more densely populated regions, where the agricultural system is that of the extensive plough cultivation, women do little farm work and men work more. Finally, in the regions of intensive cultivation of irrigated land, both men and women work hard in order to earn enough from their small piece of land to support their family.\textsuperscript{18}

This analysis further indicates that caste-class dimensions have their profound influence on the women of both the upper and lower classes. The upper class women, despite their financial breakdown do not come forward in search of employment and women from the lower castes, though their economic position is comparatively better than others, work and supplement the family income. This phenomenon confirms the view that the women of lower castes are over burdened with the household drudgery, taking care of children and cooking. Thus, women are not only over burdened but are subjected to exploitation at the work spot and at home for a number of hours. These exploitative feudal characteristics are explicitly visible in all the working class families in the agrarian societies. It is not only women who are subjected to exploitation but children are also being exploited. They are employed either to rear cattle or in the weeding job. Thus they live at the mercy of their masters at the tender school-going age.

\textsuperscript{18} Ibid.
INCREASING STRENGTH OF FEMALE AGRICULTURAL LABOURERS:

An important characteristic of the female agricultural labour in India is that women get wages at lower rates because of the fact that the hired labour can be substituted by the family labour. The wages are not paid even in accordance with the Minimum Wages Act. The wages paid to the female agricultural labourers are much below the prescribed rates. The factors like the casual nature of employment, ignorance of law, low bargaining power of women, fear of losing job and migration have contributed for the wide spread disparities in wages much to the disadvantage of women.

Thus a rural woman, though in reality is an equal partner of man in agriculture, suffers from many handicaps which stall her effective participation in the development process. She herself is not conscious of the impact of the role she plays as a home maker and as an agriculture producer. She believes that men and women are born with defined roles to perform and that none is inferior to her. By nature, an Indian woman lacks urge for self-development.

The women agricultural labourers are swelling in large number over the years. An analysis of this growth rate over the years indicates how women had lost other opportunities and forced to rely more on agriculture to meet the minimum needs of life for their base survival.
## Table - 2:1

### TRENDS IN DISTRIBUTION OF WOMEN WORKERS (1911-1981)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Total female population</th>
<th>Cultivators</th>
<th>Agricultural labourers</th>
<th>Industry</th>
<th>Service</th>
<th>Total female workers</th>
<th>Female workers % to total female population</th>
<th>% of female workers to total labourers</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1911</td>
<td>1,23,898</td>
<td>18,090</td>
<td>12,908</td>
<td>6,137</td>
<td>4,767</td>
<td>41,802</td>
<td>33.73</td>
<td>34.44</td>
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<td></td>
<td>(43.3)</td>
<td>(30.6)</td>
<td>(14.7)</td>
<td>(11.4)</td>
<td>(100)</td>
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<tr>
<td>1921</td>
<td>1,22,749</td>
<td>20,276</td>
<td>10,003</td>
<td>5,409</td>
<td>4,407</td>
<td>40,095</td>
<td>33.73</td>
<td>34.02</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(50.6)</td>
<td>(24.9)</td>
<td>(13.5)</td>
<td>(11.0)</td>
<td>(100)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1931</td>
<td>1,36,075</td>
<td>12,180</td>
<td>14,997</td>
<td>5,147</td>
<td>5,276</td>
<td>37,500</td>
<td>27.63</td>
<td>31.17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(32.4)</td>
<td>(39.9)</td>
<td>(13.7)</td>
<td>(14.0)</td>
<td>(100)</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>1951</td>
<td>1,73,549</td>
<td>18,368</td>
<td>12,694</td>
<td>4,554</td>
<td>4,923</td>
<td>40,539</td>
<td>23.30</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
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<td>(31.3)</td>
<td>(11.2)</td>
<td>(12.1)</td>
<td>(100)</td>
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Contd...2
### Table

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>Female Workers</th>
<th>Male Workers</th>
<th>Urban Female Workers</th>
<th>Urban Male Workers</th>
<th>Rural Female Workers</th>
<th>Total Female Workers</th>
<th>Total Male Workers</th>
<th>Total Female Workers Provisional</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1961</td>
<td>2,12,467</td>
<td>33,103</td>
<td>14,171</td>
<td>6,884</td>
<td>5,244</td>
<td>59,402</td>
<td>27.96</td>
<td>31.53</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1971</td>
<td>2,63,900</td>
<td>9,266</td>
<td>15,794</td>
<td>3,307</td>
<td>2,931</td>
<td>31,298</td>
<td>11.86</td>
<td>17.35</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>1981</td>
<td>3,21,357</td>
<td>14,930</td>
<td>20,767</td>
<td>9,272</td>
<td>44,973</td>
<td>13.99</td>
<td>20.21</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Note:** Figures do not include those of Jammu & Kashmir. Figures within parentheses denote percentage of women workers provisional. The figures are based on one percent sampling. 1941 - figures are omitted as they are based on 2 percent population on sample basis.

**Source:**
2. Census of India, 1981, series India, Primary Census, Abstract, General Population, Part II B. [(1) (pp.7-8)].
Agriculture has witnessed ups and downs particularly in the area of its labour force during the last 80 years. The trend in the economic participation of women indicates an overall decline after 1921 in the percentage of workers when compared with the total labour force. When we look at their distribution in the different sectors of the economy, there are, however, significant variations. Explanations of these trends have to be found in the totality of the inter-connected factors of (a) the pre-1947 and post-1947 periods separately, and (b) the nature of the development of our economy from the first to the second period.\(^{19}\)

In the post-independence period, the rapid industrialisation affected the household industries which subsequently declined rapidly. The hand-spinning and hand-weaving industries which had employed more female labour were relatively more affected.

The variations found in the work and in the strength of women agricultural labourers may also be due to the changes made in the definition of women workers from time to time which altered the previous interpretations of the situation.

Depending upon fertility of the land, different production relations are found in different regions involving a very great number of people, and this in turn, has brought about relations

that have not been observed elsewhere.  

THE MODE OF PRODUCTION AND PLACE OF WOMEN IN AGRICULTURE:

The status and position of a particular class or category of people generally depend upon the mode of production of the society in which they live and make a living. This may be very true in the case of the Indian peasant classes and the peasant women. It may be wrong to classify women as an independent class of its own but there is nothing wrong to characterise them distinctively to specifically highlight the peculiarities. Though women, as a part of the different classes, have, along with men, certain common characteristics, they differ in some other respects. Hence, separate classification may be essential. This may be precisely due to the reason that, in India, we do not find a particular mode of production, which results in the complex socio-economic formation of the society.

There has been substantial documentation on the character of mode of production in India. In the recent years, the debate on mode of production, has thrown much light on the dark areas hitherto untouched. The participants in the debate include such personalities as Ashok Rudra, Utsa Patnaik, Amiya Kumar Bagchi, Depanker Gupta, Nirmal Chandra, Ranjit Sau, Amit Bhaduri, Pradhan Prasad, Jairus Banaji, Paresh Chattopadhyaya, G. Lin,

A review of their studies indicate a wide variation in their data, interpretation of facts, and figures and understanding of the whole phenomenon. As a result, one may find it difficult to identify India with a particular mode of production as a few scholars termed it as semi-colonial or post-colonial mode of production, others semi-feudal, and yet others a capitalist or semi-capitalist mode of production. Also it has recently been called, dual mode or integrated mode of production. Significantly proponents of all these modes of production are Marxists. And among a particular group of scholars who support a particular mode of production, there is no total agreement on certain characteristics and the over-all presentation. Apart from the above characterization, there is also different category of writers who emphasised that India cannot be categorized as entirely belonging to a particular mode of production at all.

An overall review of the debate, however provide certain generalizations of the phenomenon:

(1) Based on the facts of multiplicity and vastness of area and population, there cannot be any single mode of production applicable to the entire country.

Both colonial and imperial modes of production in India retarded the integrated development. The method of historical materialism views the progression of society through a succession of modes of production.

There may be some pressure of the capitalist modes of production in agriculture and industry when individual criterion is applied but capitalism has not influenced much the mode of production in India.

Semi-feudal relations exist in agriculture and they are later strengthened from time to time.

Since colonial and imperial modes of production coexist along with other modes of production it may be said in general that India has a pre-capitalist mode of production.

The trend with regard to the principal classes and their inter-relationship are also not clear, and as a result, the categorization of classes is not very sharp.

Though the state is claimed to be a welfare and development state, it appears to be authoritarian in nature as it is adopting both oppressive and manipulative techniques to preserve the class interest.

The above characteristics coexist in the Indian society and due to this India cannot be considered to be under a single mode of production. It may, however be convenient to say that it is a
pre-capitalist socio-economic formation offering a new kind of mode of production. The class formation in this mode of production also does not seem to be indicating clear cut polarization and a multiplicity of classes coexist, aligning with one another. Though the rich peasantry take the side of the poor peasantry and the agricultural labour class in their fight against the feudal landlord class, at times the rich peasantry and landlord classes align themselves to suppress the popular upsurge of the poor classes. Thus, the poor peasantry and agricultural labourers are being exploited by these classes and ultimately their fight is directed against the rich peasant and landlord classes, while fighting with the state machinery which always comes to the rescue of landowning classes.

In this overall situation, of the Indian Society, women are placed in much precarious position, being the targets of exploitation at every level. Since the emergence of the slave owned society, the woman either became a slave and served the dominant sections of the society or was given the secondary role in the society. She became a part of the private ownership of the means of production, and was made to be subservient to men who happened to be her father, brother, husband or her master, the owner of a property. Such an attitude in the society, had taken its roots in the society. And this phenomenon raises the new question of considering women as a new class. Now it is also discussed whether they should unite to solve their problems themselves. The general trends,
however, indicate that women have to wage a united battle against two fronts, one within the household, and the second outside the household. The woman has to wage her first battle against the male domination both as a member of the family and also as a member of the women's solidarity outside the family. The second battle is against the oppressive classes and the state, which would be fought on the class lines by going with the oppressed menfolk. Thus, woman has a significant role to play in the emancipation of the society in general and the women themselves in particular. Thus female agricultural labourers had to wage a life and death struggle due to the very exploitative nature of Indian agriculture in which they live and make a living.

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