Chapter 7

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

The literature on various aspects of employment and unemployment is extensive and varied. Yet, a review of relevant material has indicated the paucity of detailed analysis of female employment characteristics. This thesis is an attempt to understand various dimensions and characteristics of female participation in agriculture in India as a whole and by states and to see how these features have changed over time. The effort has been to collate systematically as much of the relevant data as possible and in as much detail as an individual researcher can. This is perhaps the first time that such a comprehensive exercise for the country as a whole has been attempted on the basis of secondary data. The scope for improvement and refinement is recognised. Nevertheless, the material assembled here provides a basis for (a) getting an idea of the level and structure of the female work force and its variations over time; (b) examining whether the conditions of casual workers in agriculture (especially female) have changed over time; (c) understanding the various dimensions of unemployment and underemployment; and (d) exploring the factors associated with regional variations in different characteristics of female participation.

The widely alleged decline in the female labour participation over time is not substantiated by the study. In fact, female worker population ratios have risen gradually and steadily.
over the period of study. The structure of the work force in terms of sectoral distribution, after remaining unchanged over a long period, has begun to show a shift away from agriculture in rural areas in the recent decade. This shift is, however, more prominent for male workers than for female workers. The trend towards increasing casualization of the work force in rural areas and more specifically, an increase in the proportion of workers dependent on wage labour in agriculture cannot be denied.

Casual workers in agriculture are found to be a very vulnerable section of the population. There are year to year fluctuations in the real earnings of these labourers, which are dependent on the vagaries of the monsoon reflected in fluctuations in the total agricultural production. These fluctuations seem to have an impact on the work participation of women in these households who enter the wage-paid labour force in a bad agricultural year and withdraw in a good year.

The phenomena of unemployment and underemployment are quite complex and difficult to capture in any large scale survey. This is particularly so for women, where given their social environment, they often do not recognize their unemployment. The secondary data on unemployment refer to only open and visible unemployment. Even according to these estimates, unemployment and underemployment are higher among females than among males.

The task of explaining regional variations in various characteristics of female employment is obviously complex.
As noted in the introduction, the inter-play of social, cultural and economic factors makes it difficult to define precise casual relationships. However, an attempt has been made to understand some dimensions of these relationships. The overall work participation of women was lower in more agriculturally developed regions and regions with a predominance of rice cultivation, while it was higher in regions with more bovines per household and greater percentage of scheduled tribe households. Intensity of female employment per hectare was greater in regions with higher rainfall, but not in the more agriculturally productive regions. The number of tractors per hectare had a negative effect on the days of female employment per hectare. Days of employment available per female worker were lower in the agriculturally more productive and developed regions, while they were higher in regions with more bovines per household and a greater percentage of agricultural labour households. The proportion of agricultural labourers was higher in regions with a predominance of rice and cotton cultivation, higher percentage of landless and scheduled tribe households, and a larger proportion of population below the poverty line. Unemployment rate was higher in regions with higher agricultural productivity, higher levels of agricultural development and poverty. And finally, increased demand for labour presumably raised average wage earnings of agricultural labourers in the agriculturally developed regions while the greater supply of hired workers in regions with a high proportion of agricultural labourers depressed them.
While a documentation and analysis of the various dimensions of female employment forms its core, the thesis also has an underlying theme which runs through most of the chapters. This pertains to the processes which result or culminate in the participation of women in economic activities. Some insights gained on this issue are discussed below as hypotheses for further research.

While any generalisation at the international level is not possible, it has been suggested that at least during the early stages of economic development a decline in female labour participation is likely. This is possible if increased income levels causes a significant proportion of women to withdraw from the labour force and attend to their 'primary duty' of domestic work. However, while at the cross-sectional level female WPRs in rural areas of India are lower in the agriculturally developed regions, there is no decline in the female WPRs over the period of study. At least two explanations for this phenomenon are possible. First, it is possible that the income levels in the aggregate have not risen sufficiently to warrant a large scale withdrawal of female workers. Second, there has been a large increase in the proportion of labour households as opposed to self employed households in the rural areas. The corresponding increase in casualisation of the work force has also been well recorded. Such a trend could also lead to an increase in the overall female work participation rate due to the higher levels of participation of females in labour households as compared to other households.
"In present or 'primitive' economies, labour force participation is constrained only by health, nutrition, the rhythm of seasons and the demand for income". (Standing, 1976: 223). Most of these factors, except for the seasonal demand for labour, are really factors associated with the supply of labour. It is when the economy changes and agriculture becomes commercialised that the demand for labour becomes an important component influencing labour force participation. However, according to the present study of female labour participation, agricultural development leading to an increase in demand for labour appeared to influence mainly the male work participation and intensity of employment per hectare. The female labour participation and intensity of employment per hectare were still predominantly influenced by supply factors.

While studying regional variations in the proportion of female agricultural labourers also, the supply conditions were the more important explanatory factors. The dominant factor which provided the push effect was poverty. It manifested itself as the impoverishment of the region, such as a higher percentage of landless rural households and scheduled tribe households or as poverty of the population reflected in a higher percentage of population below the poverty line.

This push effect of poverty was also observed in agricultural labour households. The entry and exit of women from the work force in these households appeared to be dependent on the fluctuating income levels of the household. In a year of
agricultural scarcity a larger proportion of women from labour households in rural areas entered the wage force, presumably because of reduced household income.

Female labour participation is found to be subject to certain constraints which prevent their free entry into the labour force; restrictions on their mobility are perhaps the most important. However, some of these restrictions seem to break down in the case of casual labour women. Perhaps the poverty of these women weakens or removes some of the traditional barriers to the entry of women into the work force.

The above evidence regarding the labour participation of women points to the hypothesis that the entry of women into the work force is related to the household income. In other words the push effect of poverty is a very important factor explaining female participation in economic activity.

Open and reported unemployment was expected to be low in regions where female participation rates are traditionally low. Evidence on unemployment rates in the six states where female participation is low indicated that UEs were higher in the relatively backward states, perhaps due to lower income levels in these areas, and also in labour households as compared to all households even in the relatively better-off states. Though the data analysed here is too aggregate to draw any firm conclusions, it is possible to hypothesize that reported unemployment, particularly among women, is also dependent on the economic status of the household.
The impact of poverty and household incomes or status on the entry of women into the work force and their reporting unemployment can perhaps be probed further in a micro level study. Other household level factors influencing female participation and the sexual division of labour by operations and by crops are also issues that can be investigated at the village level.

In conclusion, a note of caution for would-be researchers using secondary data sources to study time trends may be appropriate. First, the concepts and definitions used in any large scale survey or census have to be studied carefully before using the data source. This is particularly true when one is comparing data from two sources or the same source of data at two time points. Secondly, the end points chosen for study seriously affect the time trends observed. While looking at a series of data it is necessary to have at least three or more point observations. Year to year fluctuations in estimates are otherwise likely to influence the results.

This study on female participation in agriculture is by no means exhaustive. Many important aspects such as the sexual division of labour in agriculture, detailed crop-wise intensities of employment, seasonal variations in employment, occupational diversification of women over time and across households and so on could not be investigated. Though this was partly due to non-availability of data it was not the only reason. A satisfactory theoretical framework which captures all these
interrelated features of female labour participation is yet to be evolved.

Evidently, emphasis on only the economic aspects of female participation restricts one's understanding of the complex phenomenon. It is also necessary to bring into focus the social and cultural factors influencing this process. Although inter-relationships between these factors are important, as a student of economics I do consider the economic factors to override the other factors in the final analysis. However, an inter-disciplinary approach to the study of female participation clearly constitutes a major area for further investigation.