Chapter 3

Participation of Women in Agricultural Sector
Agriculture is the chief occupation of the people of India since time immemorial. In the Vedic times the fundamental principles of agriculture were known\(^1\) and followed by the Vedic Aryans, but the information regarding agricultural labour is very scarce. As a matter of fact, most of the heads of the households were farmers cultivating their own fields, where they worked along with the members of their family. They took pleasure in doing the farm operations with their own hands with very minimum support from others. Their zeal and commitment for work manifest in the gambler to abandon gambling and engage himself in agricultural work which is sure to bring a wife, wealth and cattle.

The Vedas were followed by Brahmanas and Sudras. Even these theological works refer to farmers but furnish no information about agricultural labour. In the Mahabharata and the Ramayana we have a few references regarding the employment of labourers on farms. These labourers though they were employed on other's farms, they were paid proper attention both by the

\(^1\) Jain, P.C.: LABOUR IN ANCIENT INDIA Rigveda VIII 22, 6, Atharvava Veda, VIII 10, 22.
kings and the people,\textsuperscript{2} they were not recognised as a separate class. In fact, they were considered the members of the family of the employer.

In the Buddhist period we find Kshatriyas tilling the soil and Brahmins engaged in agricultural operations. Brahmans are also mentioned in the Jatakas as hiring themselves out as cowherds and even shepherds.\textsuperscript{3} During the periods of Gupta and Harsha Vardhana the farmers were put to too much hardship by the kings, their watch and ward staff and the army. But even here there was no mention of agricultural labour.

The Mughal period was marked by several changes in the ownership of land as well as the management of the land system. We do get an account of family servants working on the fields but there is no mention about the existence of a distinct class of landless agricultural labour.

The agrarian society of pre-nineteenth century India consisted largely of self-sufficient and self-perpetuating village communities. In these communities, the cultivators and the artisans working in domestic industries had lived together for centuries on the basis of traditional arrangements relating to the exchange of the cultivator's products with that of the artisans' services. Each cultivator carried on the cultivation of his farm with the assistance of his own family. In such a society, there was no room for the existence of an independent and distinct class of agricultural labourers whose main source of livelihood was work on the land of others for which they received compensation in kind or cash.\textsuperscript{4}

\textsuperscript{2} Jain, P.C. \textit{LABOUR IN ANCIENT INDIA}, P. 57.
\textsuperscript{3} Jataka IV, 38, 146, 315
Sir George Campbell, in one of the best accounts of India during the first half of the nineteenth century, referred to the fact that "as a rule, farming is not carried on by hired labour." Sir Thomas Munro, Census Commissioner, in 1840 reported "There were no landless peasants in India." J.C. Clerk in his Treatise "Economic Life of the Bengal Districts," mentioned "The landless labour so common in England is unknown here." In fact, the landless agricultural labour as a distinct class did not exist in India till the 19th century.

Later on, with the advent of Britishers, the traditional form of rural society began to disintegrate rapidly. This disintegration was reflected in the growth of an independent class of agricultural labourers and the increase in the strength of the agricultural labourers is a significant aspect noticed in the 20th century.

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.

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However in the overall context of Indian agriculture the definition is not adequate because it is not possible to separate 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.9

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.10 Since the agricultural labourers form a heterogeneous 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 land owners who do 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

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9. Ibid.
lands but also work on other land.\textsuperscript{11} This definition of cultivators was accepted by the Census of 1961. It has, however, been restricted to those whose primary activity is cultivation in Census of 1971. 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.\textsuperscript{12}

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 leave their work at will. Some labourers of this group are also sharecroppers.\textsuperscript{13}

Sharecroppers\textsuperscript{14} 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.\textsuperscript{15} 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, difference in the pattern of classification of the agricultural labour do exist in almost all parts of the country.

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GROWTH OF AGRICULTURAL LABOUR IN INDIA

The number of agricultural labourers has increased with the passage of time. Rapid growth of population accompanied by inadequate growth of non-agricultural sector has been one of the primary causes for the rapid growth of agricultural labourers. Agricultural labourers have emerged into a major class of workforce who are mostly landless depending purely on wage-paid employment in agriculture. Owing to seasonality of operations and frequent recurrence of drought in large parts due to failure of monsoons, agricultural labourers are the worst affected lot consequent upon widespread unemployment and underemployment resulting in low productivity of labour. Table 3.1 shows the growth of agricultural labourers as estimated in various censuses.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sl. No.</th>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Total Workers</th>
<th>Agricultural Workers</th>
<th>Agricultural Labourers</th>
<th>Percentage of Agricultural Labourers to Total workers</th>
<th>Percentage of Agricultural Labourers to Agricultural workers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>1901</td>
<td>110.71</td>
<td>69.21</td>
<td>17.26</td>
<td>15.59</td>
<td>24.94</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td>1911</td>
<td>121.30</td>
<td>82.53</td>
<td>24.06</td>
<td>19.84</td>
<td>29.15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.</td>
<td>1921</td>
<td>117.75</td>
<td>81.25</td>
<td>19.65</td>
<td>16.69</td>
<td>24.18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.</td>
<td>1931</td>
<td>120.67</td>
<td>79.78</td>
<td>22.11</td>
<td>18.33</td>
<td>27.72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.</td>
<td>1951</td>
<td>139.42</td>
<td>97.24</td>
<td>27.50</td>
<td>19.72</td>
<td>28.28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.</td>
<td>1971</td>
<td>180.48</td>
<td>125.76</td>
<td>47.49</td>
<td>26.31</td>
<td>37.76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.</td>
<td>1981</td>
<td>222.52</td>
<td>148.02</td>
<td>55.50</td>
<td>24.94</td>
<td>37.49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9.</td>
<td>1991*</td>
<td>285.93</td>
<td>185.30</td>
<td>74.59</td>
<td>26.09</td>
<td>40.25</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note:
1. Figures for the 1941 censuses are not available since detailed analysis was not made in the same.
2. Main workers are considered in 1981 and 1991 censuses.
It can be seen from the Table 3.1 that the total workers have increased from 110.71 millions in 1901 to 285.93 millions in 1991. According to 1901 census agricultural labourers account for 15.59 per cent of the total workers and 24.94 per cent of the agricultural workers. Their number has increased from 17.26 million in 1901 to 74.59 million in 1991. The percentage of agricultural labourers to total workers has increased from 15.59 per cent in 1901 to 26.09 in 1991 while the percentage of agricultural workers has increased from 24.94 per cent in 1901 to 40.25 per cent in 1991. The above data reveals that there has been a sharp increase in the number of agricultural labourers over time when compared to other categories of workers.

CLASSIFICATION AND GROWTH OF WOMEN AGRICULTURAL LABOUR

Indian agriculture is predominantly rural. Women constitute a substantial portion of the agricultural labour force and form a large and handicapped section of the rural community. The bulk of women agricultural labour come from Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes and other Backward Caste categories. Women in general have been attending to pre-harvest and post-harvest operations like land preparation, sowing seeds, transplantation, weeding application of fertilizers, harvesting, processing, except ploughing and levelling the field. Several of these operations are exclusively carried out by women only. As such the work of women agricultural labour is mostly
concentrated in the months of July, August, and September. The following are the different categories of agricultural labourers.

1. The landless women;
2. The near-landless women;
3. The small peasant women; and
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 landlords 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 type of women in their category who cannot expect to be supported by their husbands, but independently support themselves and their families.16

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 the near landless women is that the latter have atleast some tiny bits of land to own. The Scheduled Caste women, Scheduled Tribe women and 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 women of this type also have to actively carry out the burden of work in family to a large extent.\textsuperscript{17}

3. The Small Peasant Women

The women of this category work on the family farm which normally does not exceed five 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 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.\textsuperscript{18}

4. The Rich Peasant Women

Most of these women belonged to the 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 well-built houses. They can be compared with the veiled, non-working women of the middle East.\textsuperscript{19}

The women of the first two categories are found in large number in rural India. They occupy lower position in the caste-class hierarchy. They invariably work for longer hours than their men folk both at home, at the work spot and at the landlord’s house. Majority of these women are propertyless,

\textsuperscript{17} ibid
\textsuperscript{18} ibid
\textsuperscript{19} Ibid
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 affect the development of these women. To sum up, the role of women 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 the work. In some what more densely populated regions, where the agricultural system is that of the extensive plough cultivation, women do a 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.  

GROWTH OF WOMEN AGRICULTURAL LABOUR

The most significant fact about labour force in India is the steady growth in the number of persons dependent on agriculture as labourers. The factors responsible for the growth of agricultural proletarial are largely economic and to a certain extent owe their origin to social structure. To quote Dr. R.K. Mukharjee "every circumstance which has weakened the economic position of the small holders has increased the supply of agricultural labourers loss of common rights in the rural economy, the sub-division of holdings, the issue of collective enterprise, the multiplication of rent receivers free mortagaging and transfer of land and the decline of cottage industries.  

20. Ibid., P.35.
The Table 3.2 shows the women agricultural labour population have been increasing decade after decade.

It is evident from the table that majority of the women workers are engaged themselves as agricultural labourers at faster growth rate whereas, the male workers are absorbed as cultivators. In Chittoor district agricultural labourers are lesser in proportion to cultivators that at the state level. A relatively small average size of land holdings and availability of exchange labour in most areas of Chittoor district account for a high proportion of employment of cultivators in the district. At the same time the percentage of women agricultural labour in Chittoor district is higher than in India. In the year 1971, 1981, and 1991 the percentage of women agricultural labour in Chittoor is 14.97, 14.86 and 16.42 respectively, and in India 8.76, 9.33 and 9.94 respectively.

The above analysis makes it clear that the agricultural labourers were not found in pre-nineteenth Century India. 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. During the British rule the disappearance of cottage and domestic industries, decline of handicrafts and other subsidiary occupations are some of the reasons 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 readily available to them. In the absence of other alternatives, people in rural areas who are generally unskilled, continue to stick on to agriculture and the women are no exception.
TABLE 3.2
GROWTH OF WOMEN AGRICULTURAL LABOUR IN INDIA, ANDHRA PRADESH AND CHITTOOR DISTRICT
(Percentage of Labour Force Employed in Agriculture to Total Labour Force)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>District/State/Country</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>Cultivators</th>
<th>Agricultural Labourers</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>Cultivators</th>
<th>Agricultural Labourers</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>Cultivators</th>
<th>Agricultural Labourers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Chittoor</td>
<td>Persons</td>
<td>77.29</td>
<td>43.48</td>
<td>33.81</td>
<td>75.64</td>
<td>43.68</td>
<td>31.96</td>
<td>72.69</td>
<td>37.71</td>
<td>34.98</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>54.61</td>
<td>35.84</td>
<td>18.77</td>
<td>50.19</td>
<td>33.09</td>
<td>17.10</td>
<td>45.19</td>
<td>26.62</td>
<td>18.57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>22.61</td>
<td>7.64</td>
<td>14.97</td>
<td>25.45</td>
<td>10.59</td>
<td>14.86</td>
<td>27.50</td>
<td>11.08</td>
<td>16.42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Andhra Pradesh</td>
<td>Persons</td>
<td>70.07</td>
<td>32.18</td>
<td>37.89</td>
<td>69.53</td>
<td>32.74</td>
<td>36.74</td>
<td>68.61</td>
<td>27.74</td>
<td>40.87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>23.80</td>
<td>5.60</td>
<td>18.19</td>
<td>26.16</td>
<td>7.51</td>
<td>18.65</td>
<td>28.64</td>
<td>7.75</td>
<td>20.90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>India</td>
<td>Persons</td>
<td>69.67</td>
<td>43.34</td>
<td>26.33</td>
<td>66.52</td>
<td>41.58</td>
<td>24.94</td>
<td>64.81</td>
<td>38.72</td>
<td>26.09</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>55.78</td>
<td>38.20</td>
<td>17.51</td>
<td>50.48</td>
<td>34.87</td>
<td>15.61</td>
<td>47.09</td>
<td>30.94</td>
<td>16.15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>13.89</td>
<td>5.14</td>
<td>8.76</td>
<td>16.04</td>
<td>6.71</td>
<td>9.33</td>
<td>17.72</td>
<td>7.77</td>
<td>9.94</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Further the analysis that caste-class dimension 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 that of others, they work and supplement the family income. This phenomenon confirms the view that the women of lower castes are overburdened with the household drudgery, taking care of children and cooking. The women thus are not only overburdened but subjected to exploitation at the work spot and at home for a number of hours. The exploitative feudal characteristics are explicitly visible in all working class families in the agrarian societies.

The women agricultural labour are swelling in large number over the years. An analysis of this growth rate over the years indicates that the women had lost other opportunities and were forced to rely more on agriculture to meet the minimum needs of life for their bare survival.