CHAPTER VIII

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This study enquires into the employment, level of income and consumption, the economic and social conditions of 720 female agricultural labourers spread over 48 villages comprising 48 mandals in the geographically heterogenous regions of the district of Nellore in Andhra Pradesh. It reveals certain characteristic tendencies such as the socio-economic position of female agricultural workers, the level of literacy, change in average employment, wages, income, indebtedness and the general level of living. It has also examined to what extent the various schemes launched for rural upliftment and poverty alleviation have benefitted the real needy in the matters of employment, wages and living standards.

The findings of this study reveal that in spite of our continuous efforts, the conditions of agricultural labour, especially the women, have deteriorated socially and economically. While rural unemployment and the creation of landless agricultural labour class is the outcome of the rape of rural structure and organisation, the destruction of village handicrafts and transformation of the ancient land system; the increase in the number of women agricultural labour is the result of growing
poverty and hardships, increasing costs and decreasing purchasing power and the growing economic and social inequalities in rural areas.

The unchecked growth of population on one hand, the destruction of village economy and the continuous outflow of rural capital in urban investment on the other hand, substantially contributed to the poverty in rural India. The decreasing fertility of land, disintegration of joint families, excessive fragmentation of holdings, have not only turned the once prosperous agricultural economy into a deficit economy, but has compelled the women folk of the lower classes and the lower middle classes to seek wage-employment. The unemployment and poverty in rural India is a glaring evidence of the wrong strategy of our economic development and planning.

In India the pull and push strategy cannot be made to work. Because the push and pull effect in development works differently at different situations. When cities and urban areas offer higher incomes and attractive working conditions, they tend to pull out a portion of the rural labour force—when this magnetism of the urban economy is inoperative, the surplus population has to be pushed out. The magnetic force by which push and pull effect is made operative is more political than economic. Massive mobility can be achieved only by a
concerted political action. China is an example of this type. In a country like India which is wedded to democratic ideology and planning, it is difficult to bring about these effects without people's active co-operation. We have therefore, to be contented with the measures which can be taken within the economic, social and political framework of this country.

The question of recruiting an army of unutilised labour force by a central authority is out of question. A silent democratic changeover is, therefore the natural answer. It is in this context of these basic postulates that the conclusions of this study must be read. For the sake of convenience they can be divided into categories of

1. Employment
2. Wages
3. Earnings and level of living
4. Impact of the developmental schemes.

The problem of employment is closely connected with the problem of poverty. In our plans and also in the schemes of development drawn, no efforts have been made deliberately and directly towards making the provision for employment in rural areas. Indirect benefits accrued to them due to intensification of agriculture, construction activities etc., were very insig-
significant. On an average, a woman agricultural labourer could secure only 20 days of non-agricultural employment by participating in various schemes of development vis., NREP, IRDP etc. On the other hand additions to agricultural labour force have outstripped all the increased demand due to the developmental activities. With the result that unemployment and under-employment have been on the increase. It is therefore necessary that in our five year plans as well as in the specific schemes drawn for rural development, effective steps should be taken for the generation of more and more employment opportunities. Towards this end the following measures are offered.

1. Measures within the Agriculture:

Utilisation of waste lands should be maximised. All area under cultivable waste and current fallows should be brought under the plough. It has been estimated that if a family holding could be limited to thirty acres, about fifty five thousand agricultural labour families could be settled. Besides if one fourth of the land under pastures is utilised, about 15000 additional families can be settled.

II. Accent on Rural Industries:

Practically in all the districts a masterplan for rural development is being drawn. Here care is to be taken
to see that the industries are complimentary to agricultural operations and farm activities. Agricultural processing, fruit processing, oil extracting and such other industries should be given high priority and those located in the cities and metropolis should be decentralised.

2. The District Industries centre is to be geared to meet the needs of rural industrialisation. The mode of its operation and administration needs to be changed.

3. It is important to bring about a much desirable correlation between the various developmental schemes of the government and link them to the needs of the women agricultural labourers. Schemes pertaining to development of industries suitable for the women agricultural labourers are to be set up in the village itself so that they are made capable of providing jobs to the women workers near to their homes. This can be achieved by decentralising industries. The example of Punjab and Gujarat where the smaller components of gadgets are being prepared by women labour sitting in their homes is worth experimenting.

4. The IRDP should plan out programmes by which the women agricultural labour may get jobs during the slack agricultural season.
The payment of minimum wages is more a myth than a reality. The study reveals that wage rates in agriculture vary according to place, sex and operation. They are more influenced by custom and practices in vogue rather than by any fixed norms. The mode of payment also varies along with the rates. The employer usually has an upper hand in the fixation of wages and the casual female agricultural labour has little or no say, in influencing the wage structure. The seasonal nature of work does influence the wage structure and causes periodic fluctuations in wage rates. This periodic fluctuation makes the payment irregular and uncertain.

According to the recent announcement of the Government of India, in many states minimum agricultural wage has been fixed above Rs.11/- per day. The Government of Andhra Pradesh has been the first state to make quick and fast revision of the wage for farm servants. But the notification of the Government of Andhra Pradesh has not mentioned the criteria in fixing the minimum rate of wages which in turn has made the implementation of the fixed minimum wage a difficult task.

The study reveals that the income composition of the female agricultural labour comprises of wages from agricultural work which is 63.16 per cent, non-agricultural employment
18.86 per cent and self-employment 17.97 per cent. The average annual per capita income of the female labour is ₹1,932.90. This has little variation from region to region. In the dry region the per capita income of the female agricultural labour is ₹1,892.77, wet region it is ₹2,164.85 and in mixed region the annual per capita income is ₹1,801.00.

The study of the family budget, income and expenditure of women agricultural labour shows that they spend more than what they earn. The deficit between the income and expenditure is made up by borrowing. The incidence of borrowing is found to be as high as ₹461.23 in dry region, ₹215 in wet region and ₹390.13 in mixed regions. The amount of loan taken is not very large being ₹255.46 on an average, its painful effects are felt when compared to the proportion it bears to income and expenditure of the women agricultural labour. It forms roughly 13.22 per cent of the income and 20.52 per cent of the expenditure of the casual women agricultural labour. The hypothesis that indebtedness is the result of extravagance is far from truth. Nearly 52.98 per cent of the loans are taken and utilised for consumption, 3.59 per cent for ceremonies and functions and 10.62 per cent of the loans are taken for other causes. Nearly 32.82 per cent of the loans are taken to meet this deficit between the earnings and expenditure. 25 per cent of this debt is incurred for the payment of interest at a ranging between
100 per cent to 300 per cent. The remaining debt they arrange at a rate ranging between 18 per cent to 75 per cent.

This explains why majority of them have to lead a substandard existence. The already low income earned by them is evaporated by the twin effects of high prices and high indebtedness. Though the annual per capita income of the women agricultural labour in Nellore district is a bit higher than the National and State per capita income of the agricultural labour, the effect of it is not felt among the increasing prices and consumption levels. A concerted effort is therefore necessary to regulate wages, reduce indebtedness, improve earnings and elevate the living conditions. The following are a few suggestions towards this:

1. A machinery to fix and regulate minimum and living wage for various types of agricultural operations may be set up. A wage board may be constituted to go into the problems of women agricultural labour and recommend measures for evolving suitable norms of wage fixation taking into consideration the different processes involved. It may also examine the regional and seasonal disparities of wages and select a respectable optimum wage.

2. The payment of wages act which at present applies to mainly to the industrial workers may be modified to include the women
agricultural workers by regulating the method of wage payment on the farm.

3. Since agriculture has its peak and slack seasons and it cannot offer regular and continuous employment. There is a need to increase the total earnings of the women agricultural labour through enlarged avenues of non-agricultural employment and income. For this purpose new channels of employment as suggested earlier should be consciously and carefully planned and operated under the scheme of rural development.

4. The most important aspect is to break the vicious circle of low earnings, high prices and high indebtedness. The effort of the state of Andhra Pradesh in this respect is commendable. However, care has to be taken to see that the system of providing rice at subsidised rate of Rs.2 per kg. does not perpetuate as a dole. Efforts are to be made to set up consumer co-operatives for the agricultural labour with substantial subsidy from the state prices and this is possible by promoting women agricultural labour co-operatives. These co-operatives may take the responsibility of rural-works-programme and thus help their members to improve their earnings and reduce their indebtedness.

Another way to face the menace of eroding purchasing power of the rupee would be to fix a part of the wage in kind,
paying fixed quantities of food grains irrespective of their current market value, which would certainly give stability to the wage structure of this class of labour.

5. The expansion of social facilities and civic amenities like hospitals, schools, transport facilities would go a long way in cutting the social overheads and compensating the low standard of living of the women agricultural labour.

Closely related to the problem of levels of living and traditional values is the question of planned parenthood. Family planning movement in the country does not appear to have touched any significant portion of the poorest strata of the rural society. For achieving higher standard of living and a better life, expansion of education as well as the facilities necessary should be extended to rural areas and adequately propagated among the women workers in the rural areas.

The nature of operations in agriculture is such that rigidity in working conditions seems to be impossible. The concept of working conditions and working hours as it employs to industry in commerce do not in any way apply to the agricultural labour. It has to expose itself to the open air work schedule. However, it is still possible to evolve some standards by which the conditions of work within the given limitations can be regulated, with the workers from ill health.
The women agricultural labour is subjected to work for ten to eleven hours everyday. She is a multipurpose worker whose duties are not clearly defined and who is required to perform subsidiary jobs in addition to the main job for which she might be employed. Her work must go on the in hot sun and in the rain. It is necessary to regulate some of these things to commensurate with the wages earned. The following suggestions are offered to better the working conditions of the women workers.

1. Working hours should be regulated to the extent possible. The arrival and departure time may be staggered according to the conditions of work and the prevalent season.

2. A suitable agricultural labour code should be evolved which should govern the employer, employer relationships. The court should spell out in detail the obligations of employers as well as workers.

3. Items like payment of wages, working conditions, social security, grievance handling etc. may be included in the code.

4. The women agricultural labour is subjected to inferior social treatment which comes in the way of its contributing the best to the society. Society degenerates where woman is insulted, exploited and ill treated. It is necessary that
they should be given fuller opportunities of participating in social relationships on a footing of equality.

5. Though law has abolished untouchability, the women agriculture labour majority of whom are Harijans and Girijans suffer inhuman treatment because they belong to the depressed classes.

6. Economic uplift which is a condition precedent for social uplift must be accompanied by a war against illiteracy and ignorance, by creating suitable facilities for the spread of education. Provision of scholarship or even starting a school is not enough. Facilities will have to be created to impart the type of education necessary for the people in the area.

A training-oriented education, rather than degree-oriented education, would serve the purpose better. The mode of operation of the institution imparting education training should be adjusted to the need of local situation. Education at the village level should be completely need based and all aspects of rural life should find place in the scope and contents of such education.

7. Equally important are facilities for health, recreation, and other amenities for an integrated rural life which the women agricultural labour is bereft of.
8. Of what use is talking of planning, development and education if even hygienic drinking water becomes a matter of luxury in the villages? Usually women have to fetch drinking water from very distant places. This consumes a lot of time and therefore the wage work suffers.

9. The women worker continues to live under thatched roofs in rural areas. Of late, housing schemes and other facilities have come into existence but unfortunately only rarely do the needy get benefitted by these.

The thatched hut is an abode for her family and the cattle. A large percentage of infant mortality is due to this unhygienic living and malnutrition of the mothers. It is necessary that a specially designed rural housing programme should be provided to these poor people. It is true that the initial investment on the part of the government in such a project is bound to be high. However, this would cause a spurt in construction activity in the rural sector and gainful employment for the unemployed. This will also help in rebuilding our villages and make them attractive to the city dwellers. To undertake such rural construction programmes the labour cooperatives must be encouraged so that the middlemen and contractors are eliminated.
Presently we find multiplication of efforts towards rural development. There are the government agencies and several voluntary organisations which are involved in the task of rural reconstruction. A closer look on the volume of investment in the developmental activities and the volume of cost in the implementation of the same would surely reveal that a substantial proportion of the planned expenditure is away by the very channels through which it reaches the needy.

10. The different schemes in operation at creating employment for the rural poor are of adhoc nature. As a result the special schemes initiated for creating rural employment have not helped in building up durable productive employment as a continuous affair. Further there is duplication of work and more of overhead charges in view of several agencies working in a peacemeal manner. It is therefore necessary that at the national level the programme must be formulated and all the employment schemes for the rural poor should be brought under the purview of one central organisation. The scheme drawn must be continuous aiming at full time employment as well as part time employment to rural poor. In such a scheme special care should be taken to include programmes to provide employment to the women agricultural labour keeping in view the number of days and the season during which they are either unemployed or partly employed.
11. The wages to be paid to the unskilled workers under this scheme should not be less than the minimum agricultural wages fixed in the area.

12. Government machinery alone may not be able to identify the areas of employment and implement them. The local people should be fully involved, in identifying the works, organising the workers into constructive unions, supervising the works and implementing the different measures as their own programmes undertaken for their own benefit.

13. Generally speaking there is no fault with the schemes formulated by the IRDP in Nellore district. But it suffers from operational problems. Improper utilisation of the facilities offered is not because the scheme is defective but because of environmental factors and the way in which the schemes are implemented.

Few other problems in the implementation of IRDP schemes revealed by the study were:

A. Lack of personnel with proper orientation for implementation and the attitudinal deficiencies which lead to several drawbacks and malpractices.

P. Lack of adequate preparation in the implementation of schemes. As a result the projects suggested for beneficiaries were found to be either unsuitable and forced on them. Even
at the state and national level the significant drawbacks pointed out are those indicated above. The beneficiaries were not properly selected. The poor identified and covered under the IRDP are not really those who belong to the category of poor. Even in the definition of poor the ministry of rural development and the NABARD have widely differed. In 1980 the ministry of rural development categorised all households below Rs.3,500 per annum income as poor, while NABARD fixed up a higher limit. According to the survey conducted by NABARD the percentage of beneficiaries wrongly classified were about 7 per cent in the State of Andhra Pradesh. In Bellore district alone the percentage was as high as 11 per cent.

C. Another shortcoming of the programme has been that it has ignored activities with a job potential for women agricultural workers.

D. Communication gap has been the basic drawback of IRDP programmes. A variety of programmes for the uplift of rural poor were introduced but most of them remain on paper as the required information does not reach the beneficiaries. If at all they are implemented the benefits usually go to the rural rich.
E. Most of the programmes providing self-employment failed for want of coordination between bankers and government officers.

The above shortcomings in the implementation of IRDP calls for a change in the approach, which should be participative and based on dedicated efforts on the part of officials and proper motivation on the part of beneficiaries.

14. Last but not the least is the urgent need for properly organising the agricultural women labour unions. The working conditions and the socio-economic environment will not undergo any material change unless the demands are put forth by the women agriculture workers in an organised way with strength and unity. The only way to achieve this is to sponsor unions. In this regard nothing has been done in the district as well as the state. Unless this is done, the women workers will not be able to help themselves. However in organising these unions care should be taken to see that political influence and alignments, which characterise the trade unions do not infect the union of women workers. For this purpose the leadership will have to emerge from the ranks of labourers themselves. This may be difficult in the initial stages, but as the unions grow, such leadership should emerge. This aspect should be included in the educational programme of women workers. If the unions of women agricultural labour are properly organised, they will
prove to be the pillars of democracy in the country. If the democracy in India has to survive, it must have a sound institutional base. The trade unions of women agricultural labours will have to function in a spirit of democracy and yet refuse to become an extended limb of any political party.

To sum up, agriculture women labour in Nellore district as in other parts of the country requires a new deal. The problems faced by them need a five year plan exclusively devoted to solve them. And yet, it may take decades to even touch the fringe of the problem. With a problem of this magnitude, the answer becomes all the more difficult, in view of the scarcity of both internal and external resources. However, in the final analysis the women agricultural workers should themselves be regarded as our most reliable resource for economic development, “veins of wealth are purple” said Ruskin. In India they flow through its rich man-power. If money, material and machines are to be exploited fully for the use of men, he must be the nucleus around which the entire growth model should be built up.

In agriculture it is the casual women agricultural labour around which the entire programme of agriculture development should be built up. More production of fertilisers, better seeds, better irrigation, provision of hospitals and schools, roads and railways will be of no avail if a large
section of population cannot make use of these facilities. Without proper social and economic justice to this class of labour any additional facilities in the rural sector will only tend to concentrate wealth in few hands. The logical conclusion therefore is that the programme of generating rural resources must go hand in hand with the programme of providing a better deal to the women agricultural labour. The deal should include larger employment opportunities, additional purchasing power, suitable working conditions, and congenial social climate. Without such a deal, any talk of ameliorating the conditions of women agricultural labour will be a mockery.

The Government of India's tension to appoint a national commission on agricultural workers is to be welcomed in this context. It is hoped that the national commission would devote considerable attention to the manifold problems of women agricultural labour in India, and will make practical recommendations for improving their lot. However, it can be foreseen that any recommendation of the National commission will have to find support in an organised manner from those who are to be benefitted by recommendations. Unless the women agricultural labour organises itself and puts forth its demands, it is likely to remain neglected. The necessity of organising democratic and healthy trade unions therefore cannot be over-emphasised.
If the study of the life and conditions of agricultural labour in Nellore district attempted in the previous pages is any indication of a similar situation elsewhere, one would wonder why India is not still in the grip of a revolution, why the old values and traditions continue to exist and the country has not degenerated. The probable answer is that the people are awaiting the promise enshrined in the plans to translate into reality. A large section of the rural population cannot be kept outside of this promise any longer. If this fails, the fast eroding values and traditions coupled with the crisis of rising expectations is bound to engulf rural India with all its dire consequences.