CHAPTER VIII

CONCLUDING REMARKS
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CONCLUSIONS

This research study has provided a detailed analysis of the problems of women plantation labour in the coffee estates of Chikmagalur district. These problems have been analysed from an eclectic perspective juxtaposing the work-related aspects of their lives with their domestic life cycle. The study has adopted a sociological perspective in understanding these problems in the wider context of gender inequality and resultant discriminatory treatment prevailing in the present Indian society.

In every known society, certain rights and opportunities have been denied to women often on the assumption that women are inferior to men in certain respects. Further, such an assumed inferiority of women has been seen as a subservient fact of nature. India has not been an exception in this regard. Both men and
women in the Indian society, historically, tended to share this assumption since post-vedic period which is passed on from generation to generation as a part of culture.

Recent experiences of the developing societies demonstrated that the development exercise tends to bend towards marginalization of women. The development programmes in these societies have been generally in favour of men by giving them access to economic resources and socio-cultural control mechanisms. New opportunities and prestigious vocations tend to be cornered by men mainly because, women have little openings for training and skill acquisition. Thus, women are often relegated to the lower end of the occupational hierarchy mostly consisting of manual and unskilled jobs. Although women work for longer hours as compared to men, their tasks tend to become devalued and lowly paid. This happens inspite of the fact that these developing societies cannot afford to survive and develop without active participation and contribution of their female labour force.
As stated above this study is an empirical research work on the nature and extent of various problems of women workers in coffee plantations in Malnad. Four hundred women workers in the plantations of Chikmagalur District, drawn carefully for an in-depth analysis constituted the study sample. The study was based on empirical data collected through individual interviews supported by careful field observations. The study data thus collected find expression in tabular form with the percentages calculated for the frequencies obtained. Conclusions have been drawn by interpreting data and analysing the information in the broader context of Indian social realities.

The research work has reviewed important studies relating to women's problems in Indian society. Major research works analysing women and work in organized and unorganized sectors have been discussed and referred to. Further, the nature of work in the plantations, keeping in mind the nature of work in agriculture and allied activities in rural India, have been focussed. The study also looked into the changing nature of women's participation in India through ancient, medieval and
modern times. The need for and importance of the study of women workers in plantations were also discussed in detail. Chapter one of the thesis contains details on the contents of the chapters to follow.

The study highlighted the nature of women's work life in India in all its complexities and dimensions. An account of the growth of plantation sector in India and in Karnataka makes this study to conclude that this sector will gain further importance both in terms of its commercial significance and human dimensions. Coffee as a commercial crop, as established with facts and figures during the course of this thesis, will be of immense importance for women workers in the State. Compared to other crops in plantation sector coffee has a special place. The volume and variety of work done by women in coffee plantations hardly find parallel in the work environment in general. In the relatively new area of women and work the study has made a modest attempt in presenting facts about the nature of gender relations in and outside plantations.
An important conclusion of the study is about the growth of women labour force in the plantation sector historically. The study concludes that although plantation is considered a part of organised sector, it shares features with the un-organised sectors specially when the labour force and its problems are concerned.

The study reveals some important insights interms of the interaction of women workers with their work environment. it has been demonstrated by the study data that what is of utmost importance for the position of women is the way the general socio-economic context interacts with the specific work environments in the plantations. The demographic and socio-economic factors of these women workers represent not only their individual positions but also the position of women in the total social context. It has also been established by the study data that the extent and nature of domestic work for these women workers depends on the level of socio-economic developments, social amenities available and nature of problems at the work place.

The present study comes out with conclusions some
of which are different from such earlier studies. One of the hypotheses is that there is domination and exploitation of women by both plantation owners at the work place and at home. This hypothesis is only partly proved with interesting dimensions of this problem. Contrary to exceptions, study data establish that when men and women perform the same type of work they invariably receive equal wages. This conclusion is different from earlier studies of similar nature. The reason for this is reflected in the indispensability of women workers in plantations. It is found that the planters prefer women workers because they tend to be more regular, sincere and less union minded as compared to men. While this is true with most of the tasks on the plantation, there are special jobs like tree climbing, digging large pits, etc., which receive higher wages than the normal tasks. These jobs which require physical stamina are normally performed by men and in these cases men receive higher wages than women workers.

While workers in other organised sector jobs are entitled to paid holidays and other leave benefits, plantation workers do not enjoy this facilities. The
reason for this is partly out of choice but partly out of compulsion. In a work situation wherein a work day is measured not in terms of fixed hours of work but in terms of quantity of work done, paid holidays simply cannot exist. For these women workers who constantly look for some extra income, an additional work day becomes important for survival. Thus, the idea of 'over time' becomes a tool for exploitation in a situation of economic desperation.

Another important conclusion of the study is about the nature of plantation work itself. Unlike most other jobs in organised and even un-organised sectors, seasonal and temporary workers receive wages higher than those of permanent labour. But this should not lead to the hasty conclusion that temporary labour is better placed than the permanent labour in coffee plantations. Whereas there is plenty of demand for the temporary workers during peak seasons, they are not in great demand during the off season, making the total number of workdays fewer in a year compared to the permanent workers.
The study hypothesised that due to the poor living conditions and life opportunities, women workers in plantations constitute a highly neglected, exploited group among Indian women. Though the spirit of this hypothesis is proved beyond doubt the empirical data show that they are comparatively better.

In general, women workers in coffee plantations are in better conditions in terms of their work environment than those in agriculture and allied occupations. However, the study also points out that these women workers do not avail several benefits which are accorded to other organised sector jobs. Even in this regard, plantation is more akin to agriculture than industry as it is often referred to.

An important hypothesis of the study is with respect to the influence of the caste system on the plantation work. The hypothesis is that caste is still a dominant factor in the maintenance of plantation work. The study data proved this hypothesis beyond any doubt. As established by the empirical data, the study group is wholly constituted by the lower rungs of the caste hierarchy. As it has been demonstrated large section of
the study group comes from the Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribes. It is interesting to note in this regard that the highest layer of the caste system finds no representation among the respondents, proving the validity of the hypothesis.

Data reveal another interesting and unique feature. It is commonly found that women workers have double burden of performing tasks at the workplace as well as at home. In most cases the responsibility at the domestic front is not shared by the male members in the family. Contrasting this general observation the study data reveal that although women workers take the sole responsibility of performing household chores, they are assisted by the male members in a large number of cases. This is uncommon in most Indian households. The reasons as found out by the research is that both men and women have to work in same or similar jobs and, therefore, sharing domestic work help men as well as women to get their work on time. More over, not being in a numerically sizeable community around men do not find regular opportunities to chit-chat with neighbours and others during the off-hours.
The study established the prevalence of alcoholism among the male members in the study area. This is in tune with similar studies of plantation workers elsewhere in India. The prevalence of drinking and resultant problems in the family are a common feature among lower class working families. The study reconfirms this commonly found conclusion.

One of the hypotheses of the present study relates to socio-economic and socio-cultural sources of power in the family. It is proposed that such sources of power are split vertically and are based on gender, that is men among the plantation workers monopolise these sources of power. This hypothesis is also proved by the study.

An important conclusion in this regard is with respect to the capacity of spending one's earning. While these women workers earn almost as much as men, they in most cases donot have the freedom to spend their earnings as they wish. The decisions regarding allocation of the family resources under different heads is commonly made by the male member, and woman is
expected to simply accept such a decision. The study data reveal important insights regarding the prevailing powerlessness of women workers in the domestic front. Such a conclusion is in accordance with the findings of several other research studies in India. An important outcome of this conclusion is that though women earn as much as men, they are not given the power of decision making with regard to family matters due to the unequal and inequitable gender relations prevailing in our society. Further, this may be concluded that in such a predicament it is not only the earning capacity of women which accords her a high status in society. The values and norms prevailing in the given culture wield a significant influence in determining the status and power dimensions and the nature of exploitation of women in association with her earning ability.

It has been found that women workers in the coffee plantations like their counterparts in other jobs suffer from work related disabilities, both physical and social. An important finding of the study is that these women workers have become occupationally immobile due to their low level educational attainment and opportunities
for skill formation. Another important reason which sustains occupational immobility in this case is non-availability of alternate sources of employment. These women are born and brought up in the plantations and, therefore, have had no opportunity for any other skill acquisition other than the plantation work. Like in many other forms of agricultural occupations, the plantation work is also learnt through practice with elders. Such occupational immobility leads these women to stagnation, helplessness and total dependence on their employers and the male members in the family.

Among the other work related disabilities the study focussed on the problem of sexual harassment of the study group. Although the study could not bring forth any conclusive evidence in this regard because of the sensitivity of the subject, from the responses of the sample it was evident that women were often subjected to severe verbal abuse in the workplace. It may be concluded that different forms of sexual harassment may possibly be present in the plantation sector, but women workers are hesitant to express their sufferings due to social interdictions.
Health related problems of women plantation workers, specially the problem of severe back-ache prompt us to conclude that these women, are exposed to health hazards due mainly to repetitive overworking. This finding is in line with the findings of other such studies. Therefore, it can be safely concluded that physical disability of women working in coffee plantations are similar to women workers in general.

Study data demonstrate that an overwhelming majority of women workers in coffee plantations are not benefited by the provisions of the Plantation Labour Act 1951. Government response to the problems of these workers being non-supportive, the employers have little to worry. A thorough study on the implementation of labour welfare programmes reveals the failure of several such legal measures in solving the work related problems of plantation workers. Another major finding is that women in the plantations like women in unorganised sector, in general, are less union oriented. However, the study concludes that such a non-participation in labour union activities is more due to compulsions such as obligations in families or management's negative
attitudes towards union activities. This conclusion supports similar findings among women workers in other plantations such as tea and rubber.

On the management front, the planters or their representatives felt that a lot has been done to plantation workers in terms of welfare measures. The study, however, has data to conclude the other way. Study data prove that except for the basic provisions, not much is being done to foster the comprehensive development of these women workers.

The foregone conclusions help the researcher to make some broad recommendations in this regard. These recommendations are made keeping in view the possibility of implementing them in the field. They are the direct outcome of the major findings of the study and hence are expected to have implications for the future policy on plantation workers in general and women workers in particular.
Based on the empirical data collected for the study and also available data sources, the following suggestions have been put forth for trying to ameliorate the conditions of women plantation workers.

i. Given the fact that a large majority of women in plantations are illiterate and as such, have no access to knowledge, either general or skilled, facilities for non-formal education should be provided on a very massive scale. As of now, an organ of the National Literacy Mission is giving some non-formal education. But this programme has not delivered any goods and very few women are making use of this facility. The curricular content of these non-formal education programmes should be changed. More and more skill development programmes, if included as a part of the non-formal education programmes could help women plantation workers to find alternate sources of livelihood.
ii. As of now, most children of plantation workers have no access to schooling facilities. The poverty and vulnerability of women workers have created a vicious circle of further poverty, ignorance and misery in which their children are also trapped. If some meaningful change has to be brought in their lives, avenues for social mobility must be thrown open to their children. Therefore, a primary school must be opened in every plantation where there are a sizeable number of women workers. It is also necessary to open creches where infants are taken care of, so that young children are freed from the burden of childcare.

iii. Local women's organizations and women's representatives in local self government must make an allout and concerted effort to educate women plantation workers about such issues as rights of women, and citizens, small family norm and need for educating their children. Women workers must also be motivated to launch a massive campaign against the liquor lobby, for alcoholic addiction among male members is a major problem for them to reckon
The State Government and District Administration should provide necessary incentives and infrastructural facilities in this regard.

iv. On the economic front too reforms of far-reaching nature are called for. It is no doubt true that wages of plantation workers are revised from time to time, but the amount prescribed as wage is never sufficient to meet even the primary needs of life. So a meaningful increase in the wage rates is necessary. Such a revision must be done keeping two points in mind. First is the cost of living index. When prices of even essential commodities are constantly on the increase and the Public Distribution System has failed to respond to the needs of the poor, the wages have to be revised by keeping these facts in mind. Secondly due to a high incidence of indebtedness, the actual amount which a worker receives is even much lower than the minimum prescribed wage. If wage revision is not in tune with the realities that characterise the lives of the workers it is of little consequence.
v. As of now, welfare measures for workers are woefully inadequate. Be it a primary health unit, a primary school, an adult education class, skill generating scheme, gratuity, maternity provisions or women or child centred programmes, there is a clear lag between policy and practice. At least such of those existing measures should be given implementation so that the process of development could be set in motion in the real sense of the term.

vi. The work day for the women workers starts very early and they retire to bed very late, thus working for long hours with very little rest and leisure. This long working day, which leads to the problem of ill-health and resultant consequences, may be curtailed by providing an adequate and better means of transportation. Thus it is suggested that the management should provide local transportation from the 'Labour localities' to the place of work in the case of relatively large estates during mornings and evenings. The exact timings of such trips, which should be provided
without any additional economic burden to the workers, may be chalked out in consultation with the workers.

vii. Related to the issue of rest and leisure is the question of weekly holiday to the workers. It has been pointed out already that although plantation is included in the organized sector, the workers are deprived of some vital benefits accorded to industrial workers such as paid weekly holidays. Owing to dire economic necessities, these workers cannot think of a weekly-off without any earning on that day. Hence, the management should provide one paid holiday in a week so that the workers, specially women who shoulder the 'double burden' of work and home, will have some time to relax, rest and look for training, education or skill acquisition opportunities.

viii. The study data revealed that women plantation workers are highly vulnerable to health hazards and maternity-related problems. Most of them being casual/temporary labourers, there is no provision
for their livelihood during their illness. It is, therefore, recommended that in all plantations where a minimum of ten workers work, the management must have a work-related insurance to cover the expenses of such contingencies. The mode and the nature of such an insurance may be in the line of agricultural insurance envisaged by the Central Government.

ix. The study data provided the information that quite a number of women workers are unable to work due to physical deformities, health problems, and the like. In the absence of opportunities for new skill acquisition or alternate source of employment, these women live a miserable and poverty-sticken life. Therefore, it is thought appropriate to recommend government measures to alleviate their miseries by implementing existing programmes and starting new programmes. Such measures may be in terms of interest-free loans from banks for starting local enterprises, acquiring new skills, or establishing small-scale industries to cater to the need of localites.
This study has revealed several important problems of women plantation workers which remained unexplored until now. Being in considerably large number and sharing many problems of the un-organised sector, these workers need to be carefully considered for various welfare measures. To get into the mainstream of development, the plantation workers, especially the women workers call for assistance on several counts. Additional skill acquisition through training, awareness through literacy and education, better quality of life through health, rest and leisure are the vital facts which require immediate attention. The task is undoubtedly complex and difficult requiring allout participation of the government, the plantation owners and the local community.

The observation and recommendations are made keeping in view the prevailing situation in the coffee plantations in Chikmagalur district. Most of these observations are generally applicable to coffee plantations in the state and even to plantations in common. It is hoped that these broad recommendations are carefully considered while policies are framed and implemented.
Analysis of problems of women plantation workers with special reference to coffee plantations has revealed the need for future research in this virgin field. The scarcity of systematic research on this sizeable working population leaves several gaps to be bridged in the area of women's studies in Karnataka. The issues concerning the role relationship in plantation worker's family, the nature and pattern of interaction between these workers and outside community and cultural seclusion of the migrant labourers are three of many important areas which need systematic empirical research.