CHAPTER 1

WOMEN IN INDIAN ECONOMY:
A HISTORICAL REVIEW
CHAPTER - III

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It is not easy to place women in India's work force in a historical perspective because of the complex nature of the problem itself. It has been mentioned in Chapter-I that women since time immemorial have been participating in economic activities of societies, but an exhaustive and comprehensive account of the details of women's work participation in different periods of time cannot be placed on record due to absence of reliable records. As a result, any research attempt to gauge women's participation in economic activities mostly relies on scanty resources that are made available to us now through literature, archaeology, mythology and the like. This chapter attempts to go in depth on this subject by presenting thoughts from various sources including literature and other available written records.

In India, like most other societies, women have been participating in the productive system from the
very beginning in the subsistence economy of that time. Until a few hundred years ago, women have contributed significantly both in the fields and at home, often linking these two spheres of life in an intimate relationship. That was so because production during that historical epoch was based on activities which were directly conducted as family enterprises. In such a situation, women found themselves managing both the formal role of a producer and the traditional roles of a wife, a mother, or a daughter-in-law without much role strain or role conflict. Thus, women played a vital part in strengthening the traditional economic order. As pointed out by the Committee on the status of Women in India,

"the traditional village community in India consisted of the cultivator, the artisan and those perform manual services. In each of these categories, women played distinctive roles in the process of earning a livelihood for the family putting in some times more, some times less and often an equal amount of labour in both production and marketing of products of agriculture and handicrafts. Markets were mostly local or within an accessible distance. By and large, this pattern is still found prevalent in the
traditional form of the economy"¹.

As long as family and the local market were the major clients and consumers of production, and the place of work was next to the dwelling unit, women participated in the production process as equal partners. However, once there was a shift from the household and localised economy to a consumer-oriented national economy, there was a marked change in the status of women as production partners. When technological advances started displacing manual labour with process of mechanisation, the axe fell on female labour in the traditional domains. Thus, these displaced women workers had to turn towards the fields away from homes where agriculture and allied occupations like plantation work provided them a means of their livelihood. The predicament of a large number of women workers in coffee plantations, like in other allied fields, began with this change.

It has been proposed earlier in this work that the first step towards understanding the process of

¹. Towards Equality, op.cit. p.149.
development in rural India is to redefine and reanalyse women's work. It is suggested further that in order to understand the nature and causes of the problems of underdevelopment, roles and position of women in the community, and their worldview in relation to work is necessary. Such an analysis gains critical significance in relation to economic and social values attached to women's work because this viewpoint assumes that women's work is socially valued and rated as much as that of man. Further, this point of view also indicates that women are producers in their own right and they contribute economically and socially to the developing process of society even without their contributions being rated by men as important.

Adopting this perspective, an attempt is made to trace the nature of women's work participation in modern India. Though systematic efforts at understanding women's role in the Indian work force date back to the census of 1881, a clear picture about the nature and extent of women's participation in gainful employment is yet to emerge. This seems to be the case not only of India but of several other developing countries as well.
The problem lies partly in the social values and social norms, and partly in the very nature of women's work in our society. For example, until the census of 1961 several tasks performed by women were not included in the category of 'work' and hence a large number of women were excluded from the definition of work and employment. The significant contribution of the 1961 census was to include many of the tasks performed by women, especially in the unorganised sector, within the purview of the definition of work. As a result the census of 1961 showed a sudden increase in the number of women workers. Details of the consequences of this will be discussed later in this Chapter.

While the census definition of 'work' is being reviewed in relation to the contributions of the female labour force at this juncture, yet another related factor needs to be noted. There is a significant difference in the number of women workers in the organised and unorganised sectors in India from one census to another mainly because until the census of 1951, income was the chief criterion to classify population into the categories of earners, earning
dependents, and non-earning dependents. In the 1961 census, however, the entire population of the country was divided into two by-polar categories, namely, workers and non-workers. This introduction of the concept of 'work' instead of 'income earnings' as the basis of population classification allowed not only certain changes but also the volume of population in terms of work. A liberal view that even a person puts in just one hour of work every day is also to be regarded as a worker resulted in a sharp increase in the number of women workers on the Indian workers map. Further, this has also resulted in the inclusion of a large number of women at home under the category of workers who were otherwise excluded. Quantitatively the percentage of the female work participation rose from 23.33 percent in 1957 to 27.95 percent in 1961, an increase of nearly 4.6 percent in the number of female workers over the decade as against an increase of 2.8 percent in case of men.

In the 1971 census the definition of 'work' and 'workers' underwent still further changes. At this stage, 'worker' was defined as a person whose primary
activity is to participate in an economically productive work either by contributing physically or mentally. As a result of this change, a large number of women who were primarily engaged in household work were excluded because they were not considered as full-time workers. This change has swung the pendulum back by resulting in a dramatic cut in the number of women in the workforce. This was the primary reason why the female work participation rate has fallen from 27.95 percent in 1961 to 13.18 percent in 1971.

The 1981 census showed a marginal increase in the female participation rate taking it up to 14.44 percent. Such an inconsistency was not introduced in the earlier census with regard to male participation rate. Generally the growth of male participation rate of 51.22 percent has shown a steady increase from census to census.

In summary, the census data as such present an imprecise and a disappointing picture of women's work participation rate in India. Adding to this difficulty of problem of inconsistent definitions, when a further
look at the distribution of women in different types of work is considered, the picture becomes even more hazy. The distribution of female labour force in different occupations and professions shows a near total absence of women in some occupational categories, and a relatively higher concentration in other categories, depending on the status of such a profession, the material benefits and the power it wields.

Census data adequately establish that agriculture and allied occupations still continue to be the main source of livelihood for the rural workforce particularly for majority of women workers. India traditionally has always been an agrarian society and agriculture remains the major economic sector for women even to this date. In addition, women who have been engaged in agriculture-related labour along with men, also helped men in the rearing of live stock, poultry, fisheries and other allied occupations. Historically dairy farming and growing vegetables have been mostly managed by women, and in fisheries women literally looked after the whole of marketing business since centuries. Succinctly, women have significantly
participated in all the major areas of traditional Indian economy and life. The following table gives a comparative picture of the employment of male and female workers in India for the last two decades:

**TABLE 3.1**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total population</td>
<td>548.16</td>
<td>685.18</td>
<td>844.32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male population</td>
<td>284.05</td>
<td>354.40</td>
<td>437.90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female population</td>
<td>264.11</td>
<td>330.78</td>
<td>406.63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total workers</td>
<td>187.47</td>
<td>251.46</td>
<td>318.31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male workers</td>
<td>98.08</td>
<td>132.32</td>
<td>164.25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female workers</td>
<td>26.62</td>
<td>49.54</td>
<td>72.26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>14.02</td>
<td>20.91</td>
<td>22.07</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Census of India-1991 series I (India) 1991, p.3 provisional population Table-workers and their distribution.

The adoption in 1991 census of the definitions and concepts of workers has made compatibility of all census figures possible. Karnataka stands somewhere in the middle place as far as the female work participation
rate is concerned. This rate was 14.02 percent in 1971, 20.91 percent in 1981 and 22.07 percent in 1991. Presenting it differently, the state stood 14th in 1971, 12th in 1981 and 13th in 1991 out of a total of 29 states and union Territories. Speaking in general terms, it may be said that the female work participation rate at present in Karnataka represents the national average which is pretty low in comparison to several developed and developing countries.¹

Appropriate it is to remember here that unlike the economically developed counties, India still has a large unorganized sector and comparatively a moderate organized sector. The percentage of female labour force in the organized sector is negligible. The following table shows the ratio of female employment to the total employment in the organized sector in India between 1981 and 1987:

1. An indepth analysis of these figures is presented in Shanmugasundaram, Y: Women Employment in India, Allied Publishers, Madras, 1993. p.82.
TABLE 3.2
RATIO OF FEMALE EMPLOYMENT TO TOTAL EMPLOYMENT IN THE ORGANIZED SECTOR

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Public sector</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>PRIV</th>
<th>GRANT</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Central State</td>
<td>corporate/semi</td>
<td>Local</td>
<td>Govt</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1981</td>
<td>0.69</td>
<td>14.7</td>
<td>09.4</td>
<td>11.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1982</td>
<td>06.9</td>
<td>15.1</td>
<td>09.8</td>
<td>11.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1983</td>
<td>08.4</td>
<td>15.1</td>
<td>09.3</td>
<td>11.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1984</td>
<td>08.5</td>
<td>15.5</td>
<td>09.5</td>
<td>11.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1985</td>
<td>09.0</td>
<td>17.3</td>
<td>09.6</td>
<td>12.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1986</td>
<td>09.0</td>
<td>18.0</td>
<td>10.0</td>
<td>13.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1987</td>
<td>09.5</td>
<td>18.3</td>
<td>10.0</td>
<td>13.5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


The table demonstrates the well-established fact that female work participation in the organized sector is ruefully low. Although a slight improvement between 1981 and 1987 was recorded in the state sector, the organized labour in the private sector as well as the central sector have not registered any substantive growth. The total growth, therefore, is not very
encouraging when compared to the expected rise due to state policies in this regard.

Agriculture was the main occupation in medieval India and the population was divided into two major groups: those who owned large tracts of land affording to engage wage labourers or bonded labourers; and the working class itself. In ancient India we come across reference to slave girls or 'Dasis' who performed various domestic and farm operations and this practice seems to have continued in parts of India even during medieval times. In cases where slaves were not employed, family members, particularly women and children, were obliged to assist in agricultural operations. As discussed earlier, the contribution of women in farm operations was an important feature of Indian agrarian system since a very long time.

Many significant changes took place in the Indian agricultural sector after the advent of British rule. Along with modern ideas regarding woman's education and employment as previliled in the West, large scale industrialisation affected woman's econinic role in
domestic and farm sectors. Until the British introduced 'Raythawari' system of land settlement, woman's contribution in agriculture was considered important and their role useful. However, after the introduction of this rule by which individual ownership of land was established, the male head of the household started dictating his terms. This, obviously, undermined the freedom, the economic rights and the social power of women by curtailing their rights over property and confirmed the authority of the male member as the head of the household, with all economic powers resting in him.

The changing position of women in agriculture and allied activities since the last century can be generally observed as reflected in literary writings. Although women have constitute about half of the total workforce, systematic studies on the quantity and the quality of their work and related dimensions of female labour force participation are still rare and patchy in nature. The Census of India as well as the National Sample Survey have provided vital quantitative information, but this has overwhelmingly concentrated on
the female labour force in the agrarian sector. Although evidence pointed to the fact that a very large proportion of women workers were engaged in unskilled labour, census surveys being what they are, this aspect was not seriously considered at the national planning level until recently.

It has been noted that women, in relatively large number, work in cultivation of commercial crops. It may be further added that composition of such workers into wage labour tends to be across typical caste lines. Whereas there is good number of research studies looking into the circumstances and the compulsions behind the entry of women into the agrarian labour force, such studies are few in the case of the women workforce in plantations. Several studies on female labour force in agriculture pointed out the importance of poverty as an explanatory factor. The impact of commercialisation in agriculture and plantations along with the advent of 'new agricultural technology' have been specially considered significant in this regard. Important it is to point out here that the majority of women workers who enter into the labour force as unskilled wage labourers
belong to the poorest stratum of households and are often driven by their elder's economic compulsions, and survival strategies.

Certain developments in Indian economy seem to have greatly influenced the supply of as well as demand for female labour in agriculture and plantations. On the supply side two sets of factors may be identified. The first set of factors relates to the rapid growth of population all over the country during the preceding few decades contributing to the surplus labour within rural labour households. This has motivated women of working age group to move out of homes in search of employment opportunities. It must also be remembered that they have hardly any training or access to skills. In association with this fact, the growth of market economy and commercialisation of agriculture must be recognised as factors which lead to the differentiation of the peasantry and polarisation of the class forces. This has also lead to the proletarianization of the lower rungs of land holdings, pushing them in to the category of workers as predicted in the classical Marxian schema. The growing commercialisation of agrarian economy has
brought about a number of changes in the traditional techniques of production within the domestic front. This has resulted in reducing the domestic work for the elite class of people and lowering work opportunities for the working class women thus releasing more and more women from the working families into the labour force. As a result of this availability of cheap labour, commercial crops, in particular, plantation crops like tea, coffee, rubber and cocoa started deploying large scale female wage labour. This hiring was motivated by the new technology, increased demand for these products, legislative protections for the planters and expansion of the estates in considerable measure.

ENTRY OF WOMEN IN THE PLANTATION SECTOR

Plantation sector assumes special significance in the discussion on female labour force in modern India because of two important reasons: One, that it is a major employer of women workers; and two, that it has special features which become relevant in understanding gender relations in rural India. It has been pointed out that:

"Employment of women and children in large numbers is a striking feature of plantations."
If fact, the basis of recruitment to the plantations is the family, and recruitment of individuals, though countenanced, is not encouraged. All the members of the family men, women and children are provided with work. This is especially the case in tea and coffee estates.¹

It is estimated by the Rege Committee that plantations employ more women in proportion to men than any other organised industry.

Why female labour is attracted towards plantation work is a question that needs to be answered succinctly. Das points out that women workers are found in the plantation sector in large numbers because

"In the first place, being akin to agriculture, plantations are more congenial to women than other organised industries, such as factories and mines. In the second place, the very fact that the labourers not only work but also live on plantations or in the vicinity gives women a chance to work on them. In the third place, the system of labour contracts based on the principle of utilising every able bodied person in the family for labour and of fixing the wage rates accordingly, compelled women to seek employment in order to balance the family budget"¹.

¹ The Labour Investigation Committee (Rege Committee) Report on plantations, Govt. Of India, Delhi.
Thus, women workers find it relatively easy to balance not only their family economy but also their traditionally defined roles within the socio-cultural milieu. Because of this special feature of plantation labour force and combining the personal and the occupational environments at one place, the plantation can be meaningfully approached as a 'system' for study.

COFFEE AS A COMMERCIAL CROP: ORIGIN AND PRESENT STATUS

Coffee is of recent origin when compared with tea. Tea was being used in China and Japan long before Christianity and it was popular elsewhere too. Coffee appeared on the scene much later with plentiful opposition from religious leaders. However, it is said that Pope Clement VIII (1585 - 1605) appreciated the taste of coffee, calling it to be truly Christian. Although grown in tropical countries, Coffee is used in Europe and the Americas more than in other parts of the world. There is a dispute over the birth place of coffee and it is not certain whether coffee was first cultivated in Ethiopia or Yemen. Until the Seventeenth

century Yemen was the only country cultivating coffee and growing it for commercial consumption. Coffee came to India during the Muslim rule and it is held that Chikmagalur district was the first district to have Coffee plantations in the country.

The legend has it that the hill Baba Budan Giri in Chikmagalur district is named after the Muslim mystic who brought coffee seeds to India from Mecca and cultivated coffee for the first time. It is understood that coffee was grown in the Chikmagalur area as early as 1616 A.D. The traveller's records of Edward Terry (1615-1619) and Thomas Bowrey (1669-1679) provide detailed accounts of the extensive use of coffee in various parts of India including parts of south and central Karnataka.

The commercial value of coffee was felt in the Malnad region in no time. People started raising coffee plants in their kitchen gardens and arecanut gardens on a relatively large scale. In 1823 the British sought land in the Chandra Giri area of Chikmagalur district from the Maharaja of Mysore to raise a coffee
plantation. The growth of coffee plantations since then has been in leaps and bounds. Coffee planters were mostly Europeans during the British Raj but after Independence the estates were gifted by them to the faithful Indian servants or were sold cheaply. The plantations have further extended to the districts of Hassan, Kodagu and even parts of Shimoga. Mangalore port was useful to export coffee to Europe during the colonial period and the plantation labour was supplied from Mangalore and adjacent areas as early as in 1860. By the turn of the century, Karnataka held the key position in coffee production in India.

Our country presently contributes only about 3 percent of world coffee production but 70 percent of India's coffee production is contributed by the State of Karnataka. The area under coffee production has been steadily increasing over the past 60 years. This increase is estimated to be about 3500 hectares every year for the past decade while coffee production has been by about 6000 tons per annum. Karnataka also has the highest yield in the country having about 30 percent higher yield than the all-India average. This confirms
the argument that a major area of future expansion of coffee is expected in the state of Karnataka.

It is also significant to understand that coffee constitutes only one percent of the cultivated area in Karnataka but its contribution to the total value of agricultural output in the state is estimated to be about 11 percent. Often it is said that a quick way of increasing the individual as well as the state income is to extend the coffee growing area in the state. Today coffee is treated as an elite crop among the commercial crops and the planters find little risk in expanding their business further. With the free market system introduced in 1993, privatization of the coffee market has completed a full circle.

The environs of the area under which coffee is cultivated present an interesting scene. Coffee, as mentioned in the earlier chapter, has incorporated features of agriculture as well as industry. The production part of the coffee crop follows a cycle similar to that of any agricultural produce. Different seasons associated with different stages of the crop are
akin to any other crop like arecanut or sugarcane. However, the final product, when marketed, turns itself into the form of an industrial product having different qualities, brand names and marketing channels. Hence, the coffee plantation presents a complex picture of a total system combining in itself the peculiarities of an 'agri-business'. Planters who own 'small' holdings look at their crop as an agricultural product, whereas the 'large' estates follow practices which are similar to those of industries.

TYPES OF PLANTATION HOLDINGS

Coffee plantations are generally divided as small, medium and large holdings. Nearly 70 percent of the coffee plantations in Karnataka are small holdings ranging between 4 hectares and 20 hectares. The category of medium holdings is between 20-50 hectares. However, in general practice the holdings are categorized as small and large holdings. The large holdings generally are above 50 hectares and some of the company estates are holdings as large as a few thousand hectares. Such large planters, either individually or through their associations, influence the growth, sale,
and labour related aspects of the crop. The production of coffee does not covary with the size of plantation holdings. The small and medium-size coffee plantations together constitute about 70 percent of the total cultivated area, but the small plantations contribute only about 15 percent of the total coffee production and medium plantations contribute about 16 percent of the total production in all. The rest of the 69 percent of the production comes from the large coffee plantations which really matter in terms of policy issues and legislative measures regarding coffee. Of the 31 coffee curing plants in India, 16 are located in the state of Karnataka. They process nearly 65 percent of the total Coffee production in the country. Each of these curing plants works with an average capacity of about 5000 tons and provides employment for about 500 persons round the year. Coffee has also provided indirect employment to thousands of individuals with Coffee roasting, grinding and retail selling units all over Karnataka. The potential for such an indirect employment in the coming years is said to be higher than what is at present owing to the liberal marketing policies in recent years.
The National Commission on Agriculture observed in its Report that small holdings of coffee are neither economically viable nor properly attended to. It has been suggested, therefore, that they should be organised on co-operative basis for a better yield and a more efficient management. This is in tune with the new economic policy of liberalisation, open competition and decrease in government involvement in the field of industry and commerce.

It is claimed in various reports of the Karnataka Planters Association (KPA) and UPASI that the coffee yield in India is almost comparable to that of other coffee growing countries such as Brazil, Guatemala and Columbia. India has the potential to increase its present yield rate through improved technology and management. Countries like El Salvador, Costa-Rica and Uganda have increased their levels of productivity by employing better technology and through proper human resources development (HRD) techniques. Among the Coffee growing states in India, Karnataka has registered the highest yield of 836 kg per hectare during 1992-93. Although India's share in world coffee production is not
significant, (countries like Brazil contribute as much as 22 percent of the world’s total coffee production as compared to India’s 3 percent; countries of Central and South America have more area of coffee cultivation as well as a better yield in terms of production), India claims a stable coffee production. The agro-climatic conditions in Malnad area of Karnataka are not extreme and hence the coffee growers can prove dependable suppliers of coffee in the world market. The political environment in our country is also supportive. Considering these factors, it may be deduced that coffee as a commercial group has a bright future in India.

The India Coffee Board, established under the Ministry of Commerce and Industries of the Central Government, has its origin in 1937. The Board until recently acted to control the inland and foreign markets of coffee in India. The Board has been working since 1956 over various measures to foaster higher productivity in coffee. The Indian Coffee Board publishes statistics on the Coffee production, the type of holding, new varieties, etc periodically. After the recent liberalisation of marketing of coffee, the Indian
Coffee Board has lost many of its vital regulatory and supervisory functions.

This chapter highlighted the nature of women's work participation in the Indian society historically and in the modern times. Further details of the growth of plantation sector in India and Karnataka have been provided. Entry of the female labour force in plantation sector has also been discussed in some detail. The Chapter also provided details on the nature of coffee as a commercial crop, its origin, growth in the Chikmagalur area and its present status in the national and global market. The types of holdings in the study area and the styles of ownership of plantations also have been discussed.