

Female Agrarian Distress: A Sociological Study

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Abstract

In this paper female agricultural laborers and their participation in farming activities has been assessed through sociological lens. The category of 'woman' as a subject itself and the occupational role as farmer within agrarian society is an interesting dimension to be studied within varying scholarly work on agrarian distress. The paper aims to assess the socio-economic status of the female farming community in relation to the agrarian mode of production and the means of production. The heterogenous identity of the female farmers is analyzed through the interlinkage of gender, caste and class relations. The feminization of agriculture is related with the process of feminization of poverty in agrarian society. Female agrarian distress gets associated with the reproduction role of women and the productive power of women in the farm.

Keywords: Female Agrarian Distress, Feminization Of Agriculture, Farm Widows, Feminization Of Poverty, Creeping Feminization.

Introduction

Agrarian distress has been a recurring phenomenon within postcolonial society like India. The socio-historical positioning of the colonized state as a peripheral nation created a 'dependency' role in neoliberal era. Further, increasing anthropogenic factors related to climate change acted as a catalyst in agrarian distress and agricultural crisis. Multiple factors like indebtedness, crop failure, informal credit facility, lack of social infrastructure and poor return creates a vicious cycle (Mishra 2006). Male agrarian distress has been elaborately studied which gets manifested in the most horrifying acts of suicides. Female agrarian distress needs to get attention as there is invisibility of gender based statistical analysis and policy formulation.

Although, globally 400million women participate in agricultural work but their invisibility in a male dominated workplace creates a zone of contention. Female farming laborers remain marginalized within a marginalized community. Female agricultural laborers participate in non-mechanised farm work including sowing, harvesting, winnowing and labor intensive work like rice plantation. Performativity of femininity by women within agricultural space creates gender inequality.

However, with increased migration of male participants from rural areas to urban areas has led to feminization of agriculture. Female farmers become de-facto managers of the agricultural land post male migration, but not socially recognized as owners of the land (Agarwal 1993). Feminization of agriculture is strongly associated with out-migration of males. Women left behind in rural agricultural societies, in practice become female headed families. Women perform domestic labor and physically straining agricultural work to sustain their family in times of inflation and economic distress. Non-farm activities in addition to farming provides additional income, but the casualization of female workforce leads to uncertainty in regular wages.

Agrarian studies have highlighted that in post-liberal developing societies there is increased isolation and individualization within rural societies (Verma, 1979). Increased individualization and lack of integration creates stress within families due to lack of communal security in times of distress. This has added further distress for female farmers as kinship and extended families acted as a cushion during life-events like death of male members or male out-migration. The conflict is created as the withdrawal of communal support has not been replaced by modern social system.

Increased participation of women in agriculture creates additional burden upon females, and this gets further association with feminization of poverty (Lahiri-Dutt 2014). 'feminisation of poverty' has been described by Gimenez (1987). Social well-being indicators in terms of maternal mortality, infant mortality, increased anemia and low economic wellbeing gets further enhanced. On one

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hand feminization of agriculture labor enhances women's control over their bodies in certain areas while also depriving women's health status in many other areas. There is also a shift from unpaid family labor to visible wage related female agricultural labor. Such shift creates new relations of production at the agrarian mode of production. This has repercussion within domestic household gender based relations. Women belonging to lower caste develop more decision making capacity with increased economic autonomy. However, no direct correlation can be established between women's economic status and household status as patriarchal norms force women to hand her wages to the male members. Srivastava (2011) noted that post liberalization female participation in farm increased from 1.2% to 1.4% and male participation fell from 1.5% to .5%.

Further, it has been noted that the participation of women in farm work in relation to total rural employment is much higher than the men. This suggests there is a shift of male participation from agrarian work to menial non-farm work whereas women struggled to fill the peripheral spaces in the agricultural work. Srivastava and Srivastava (2009) formulated the idea of 'creeping feminisation' to identify this agrarian change. Migration related scholarly works in agrarian societies have identified that increased out migration of small and marginal farming households males has created more issues for women than other non-migrating households (Hardikar 2004; Garikipati 2006). Reddy (2015) while establishing a correlation between migration and agrarian distress assessed that there is less capital formation and profit generation in an out migrating household.

Further, it becomes significant to relate the idea of reproduction in addition to the producing power of the female farmers. Herein, the focus extends to the role of women in household and other domestic activities that remain unpaid and unnoticed. The sexual division of domestic labor in households in terms of care work gets interlinked into the productive sphere. Socialization of female roles into feminine work reproduces patriarchal relations in both on field and off field. Beneria and Sen (1981) paid immense attention to the reproduction in household and the social relations associated with it, shaping 'woman problem'.

The double burden of work for the agricultural laborer class emanates from the persisting demand of female labor force in informal market while the household burden remains in continuum. Palmer (1978) highlighted that the persistence of patriarchal authority within peasant households is responsible for the ever burgeoning female family labor. The decision making capacity of female farmers has been debated by scholars like Harris(1979) and Chakravarty (1975). Women's role in decision making over questions revolving around the basic infrastructure on field and prices of commodity gets reduced as the social status of farming family increases. This shows that the ritual upliftment of the female farmers has a contradictory relation with the gender equality of the female farmers. Srinivas () had argued that with sanskritisation the lower caste groups adopts the rituals and practices of the upper caste groups. Since, brahmanical groups exists in symbiotic relation with the patriarchal groups, therefore women's position in family declines in decision making as the farming community attains betterment ritually or economically.

Further, there is exclusion of women from agricultural land ownership (Saxena 2012, Rao 2011. Oxfam report (2013) highlights that 80% of agricultural work has been undertaken by women but own merely 13% of land. Bina Aggarwal(1993) contests that a number of factors constrain women in exercising their legal land rights for land ownership. These include post-marriage migration, village exogamy, gendered roles, lack of decision making and low functional literacy. Further, multiple inheritance laws specific to religion creates restriction for women in land ownership. Such multicultural laws are codified by men and therefore remain patriarchal. Although, Hindu Succession Amendent Act (2005) granted coparcenary rights to daughters but women rarely have agency within family structures to demand their entitlement without ostracism or banishment. Exclusion in land rights deprives women in accessing formal credit from banking system and state sponsored benefits. Women's agency and authority in economic benefits derived through family labor gets inaccessible due to patriarchal land inheritance rights.

Female exclusion from entitlements and land rights in agricultural sector deprives women both in legal and economic sphere. CEDAW (2014) stressed that land rights discrimination is a violation of human rights. Further, even the Women Farmers Entitlement Bill lapsed due to male domination amongst the political elite. Land rights for women gets further estranged from women due to lack proper digitization of land records.

Female agrarian distress gets accentuated with increased male farmer suicides. Sainath (2014) addressed that 'suicide is not about the dead, it is about the living'. This has conceptualized the phenomenon of farm widows who suffer from both social and economic deprivation. Mahila Kisan Adhikar Manch conducted a survey of female widows in Marathwada and Vidharbha, only 35% had secured the rights to their family house. Women had been excluded from farmland rights, entitled pensions and other institutional rights being invisible as farmers.

Within the intersectionality approach that aims to contextualize multiple identities, Dalit female farmers suffer from diverse social inequality. Dalit female farmers significantly remain landless agricultural laborers. They are employed as informal and casual workforce with limited bargaining capacity. Cumulative social inequality gets juxtaposed as their social status as Dalit caste, proletariat economic inequality and exclusion in political axis. It has been recognized that there is heterogeneity of female agricultural class. Multiple identities in the form of caste, class and gender play role in determining their bargaining capacity. The labor market gets segmented as the woman agricultural group is divided based upon varying wages and social security. This is the reason why female agricultural farmers as a class are not united politically to become a class for itself (Sundari, 1985). Due to complex nature of conflict in caste and class, the middle and lower female farmers lack sharing common political goals. For instance, the land rights for middle female farmers and landless female farmers govern different meanings. The scheduled tribe participation remained much higher (43%) than the scheduled castes (28%) and general castes (22%). Within female agricultural farmers a key classification is identified amongst cultivators and agricultural laborers. The former assist in supervising the cultivation process and the latter derive their wage or kind working in laboring activity.

Further, the regional variation also plays a significant role in identifying the complex nature of female agrarian class groups. Although the general position of female labor-force remains subordinate to the male farmers, however a contextual study through a longitudinal analysis addresses to the specificity of female agrarian distress. For instance, the positioning of women farmers depends upon the type of agrarian produce ranging from sugarcane, tobacco, cotton etc. The availability of water and irrigation facilities or the rainfed or dryland farming creates further specific female agrarian distress. Regional variation in women's participation ranges from less than 10% in Delhi to 45% in Himachal Pradesh (Census 2011).

Economically, female farmers constitute a magnitude of unpaid labor force. During harvesting and sowing women farmers in India work double the number of hours than their male counterparts engage yet their work remains unrecognized and under-valued. Oxfam report highlights that one third of female laborers on family farms remains unpaid. Women participation in farm based activities is as relevant as in non-farm activities within farming households. Non-farm activities like poultry and dairying engages women substantially, however there is invisibility in terms of ownership of cattle and income generated is not shared equally. Agarwal (1985) and Chatterjee (1984) have propounded that the relative poverty for female farmers has increased much sharply than the male counterparts. The relative wages of the female farmers belonging to Dalits, tribals and upper caste groups establishes a close interlinkage between caste and economic profile of the subject groups. Wage differential in farming economy needs to be assessed on both caste and gender lines. A negative correlation between women's participation in agriculture and per capita income has been established.

In addition, in post-colonial India there is increased unemployment and underemployment amongst female agricultural laborers. This has been certified by Bhagwati committee and Leela Gulati (1976). However, the state policies and

scholarly work is more concerned about work for men as work of agricultural women is considered peripheral and less captured by the statistical data. Within extreme social and economic constrain women seek employment in agriculture depicts the seriousness of female unemployment. 90% of the female workforce remains confined in rural areas, portraying a major human capital that remains neglected. Unemployment is days without work. Therefore within rural labor enquiry the unemployment is calculated in terms of days without economic activity converting partial workdays into full employment workdays. The participation rate in an average agricultural labor household work is 86% for male and 48% for female.

With agricultural modernization the consumption basket of the middle class female farmers has increased whereas for poor female farmers the work burden has increased. Further, inaccessibility to market forces as the primary seller due to restriction in physical and social mobility. Therefore the government regulated market forces created socially safe zone as women were relieved from entering into male dominated agricultural markets to negotiate over price. Gender inequality infiltrates in relation to access to agricultural raw materials, knowledge resources, capital etc. contributes to poor economic status of women.

Female farmers' participation within agrarian agitation is another dimension that needs holistic understanding. There has been a rising demand of increase in wages for agricultural laborers within peasant struggle during post-colonial era. Such contention has created further antagonism between the peasants and the higher castes landlords. The maintenance of existing system of relations with dominance and power display by the upper caste farmers has been confronted by the lower caste peasants who have attained a sense of political awareness through Dalit empowerment politics. Such struggles have witnessed violent repression from the upper castes and sexual violence inflicted upon Dalit woman's body gets embodied through caste domination, political power and economic inequality. Gender based oppression has been highlighted Tebhaga and telangana studies. Nari bahinis formation highlighted the usage of traditional elements by Dalit women in Tebagma struggle (Custers 1986). However the oppression of women within caste groups was neglected and violence in the form of everyday acts of wife-beating and alcoholism was neglected. Women acted as reserve army in the left politics of agrarian struggle neglecting gender based oppression vis-a-vis the class based oppression. However, Dalit feminists like Gail Omvedt(1986) have highlighted the significance of Dalit female participation in agitation acted as a resistance against both the feudal system and patriarchal structure. The debate around gender based violence took significance as women's participation in anti-feudal movements gained significance.

The paper contextualizes the idea of female agrarian distress within a post-colonial neoliberal world order. It has been argued that female agrarian farmer is a multidimensional identity and their distress in relation to agrarian mode of production needs to be identified in specificity to their caste, class and relations of production. Agrarian distress studies have focused upon male farmer suicides and their plight in agricultural production. But, there has been a recurrent need to identify farm widows and their struggle in realization of social welfare benefits. Also, the rural females who manage the farmlands after male migration has been the sufferers in land rights. They also lack agency towards assets in relation to other male family relatives.

An intersectionality approach highlights the specific agrarian issues of women belonging to diverse regions. There is a need to interlink local and national agrarian issues for women to derive gender-sensitive working environment. The social and physical infrastructure of local markets and its interlinkage with national market has to be organized through women friendly measures as social mobility of women remains restricted due to familial responsibilities and patriarchal structures.

Objective of the Study The paper seeks to identify the interrelationship between female farmers and the rising agrarian distress in a developing society like India. Post-colonial social identity of female farmers gets shaped through multiple social identities and local-global interplay. Sexual division of farmers on the farm gets superimposed with the domestic patriarchal social relations. The agenda of the paper is to juxtapose social identity of women farmers with their economic farming relation.

Conclusion Further, economic production and sexual reproduction has to be closely identified. The gender based hierarchy within domestic space and economic producing power in farm interplay with each other. Feminization of poverty amongst female agrarian workers has been associated with poor economic outcome and authority. Multiple social indicators of health and education in reverse impact the economic outcome in agriculture. For instance, the bidi and tobacco female farmers suffer from health hazards while performing menial works which in turn impacts economic growth. Pauperization of female farmers is gender specific.

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