

Feminization of Indian agriculture

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Abstract

Feminization of agriculture refers to the rising share of women undertaking farm work in India. The title itself suggests a major shift in the image and face of rural India that was basically known as being biased towards women and their social and economic roles. This paper demonstrates that, as a process driven largely by the suicide and partly by outmigration of men from rural areas, is more a problem than women empowerment in true sense. The feminization of agriculture here is not a result of women's social or economic empowerment. Instead, women's growing participation in agriculture appears to be strongly related to several indicators of poverty. This paper concludes that women's growing contribution of labour in agriculture adds to the already heavy work burdens of most rural women, thereby further undermining their well-being, and suggests that the feminization of agriculture may better be described as the feminization of agrarian distress.

Keywords: Agriculture, Wwomen farmers, Feminization, Indian economy, economic empowerment

1. Introduction

When farmers commit suicide in India – an occurrence so common that ‘farmer suicides’ is a phrase that’s become commonplace in newsrooms and policy spaces – their deaths are assessed and a compensation is given to their families if, and only if, their suicide is revealed to have been because of the pressure of crushing debt. For a short second of the news cycle, the images of their grieving families become the focus of what the man leaves behind. But, while the story of the men’s poverty and difficult conditions make the news, their widows are ignored, without thought for the fact that the family the male farmer was trying to support is the same for which these women must now earn.

Various studies have been done to establish a relationship between agriculture and suicide and their impact on family but the available studies do not provide a definitive answer about the relationship of location of residence and suicide, but there do

appear to be higher suicide rates in rural versus urban areas both in India and in other countries with large agricultural populations.[4,6,45] If true, the likely explanations for the higher suicide rates in rural areas would include rapid migration, economic hardship, lack of social support, isolation, relatively easy access to lethal means (e.g., pesticides) and the lack of high-quality resuscitation services. The lack of performance however in terms of agricultural success can be said to be the most dominating of all.

Women often end up being invisible in spaces of policy-making, and not just in terms of participation. Aside from the low numbers of women who actually end up making it to the tables of decision-making, policies themselves often overlook the specific needs of women. And the issue of farmer suicides is no different. The village of Diguvalpalli in Anantapur, some 200 km north of Bangalore, has only 100 families. Strangely, very few men are seen around. Most males left in the village are either children or senior citizens. “With rains repeatedly failing us, men go to Bangalore to work as waiters and construction labourers,” said K Nageshwaramma. The 38-year-old owns five acres in the village. With not too many men around, women farmers have not only gained more autonomy over their fields but also more burden. “Farming has been left to us. With unpredictable rains and successive droughts, we are sustaining ourselves by growing more millets,” she shares.

The women of Diguvalpalli along with 130 of their counterparts in three panchayats — Muthyalacheruvu, Eaguvapalli, and Brahmanapalli — registered themselves as a cooperative society to form the Mahila Raithula Uthpathidharula Sangham with the Union ministry of agriculture. Nageshwaramma is one of the leaders of the society. “The aim of the society is to ensure they get fair prices on their products. The society also acts as the connection between the government and women farmers, especially with the implementation of Zero Budget Natural Farming (ZBNF),” said founder president of the Rural & Environment Development Society (REDS) C Bhanuja. The NGO often works with the government to implement pro-poor policies in Anantapur district.

“Of the 100 households in Diguvaipalli, farmlands of 25 households are run exclusively by women. Women take part in agricultural activities in at least 85 households,” said Bhanuja. The latest economic survey by the ministry of finance points out this growing phenomenon. With rural to urban migration by men, there is a growing ‘feminisation’ of the agriculture sector, said the survey.

The buzzword here is “feminisation of the agriculture”. A trend of growing involvement of females in agricultural sector of the economy explains feminisation. Whether desired or forced, the transition is happening. Few may like to take pride from the fact that female inclusive growth can be measured by this new development but a close observation tells a different story. A long suppressed part of demographic structure of economy of rural India is more helpless in being asked to run the show without being trained for the unpreparedness, ignorance, pressure, competence gap and lack of government support. The reality is that feminisation here is not happening by choice but as the only option to survive in most of the cases. This paper is an attempt to study the issues that are emerging as a result of “feminisation of the agriculture”, their causes and possible suggestions.

2. Review of Literature

A considerable amount of the literature has considered the peculiarities of the occupation of farming, and how social practices shape gender relations. Much early research tried to make visible the world of women within the family farm (Sachs, 1983; Shortall, 1991; 1992; 1999; Alston, 1995; 1998; Pini, 2002; O'Hara, 1998; Gasson, 1980; Haugen, 1990; Brandth, 2002; Overbeek et al., 1998; Whatmore, 1991; Bartlett, 1983; Silvasti, 1999; Černič Istenič, 2006). Research considered how men's identity as farmers is tied to their land ownership. Women's identity on the farm was strongly tied to their marital status and much early research refers to 'farmers' wives' - underlining women's identity as spouse of the farmer. Until recently, agricultural statistics also tended to report the activities of women as spouses.

Subsequent research sought to make visible the gendered definitions of farm labour and farming, and in this way illuminate women's work on the farm, and indeed the importance of their work role to their identity. These studies considered women's participation in decision making, the types of work they undertook and the tasks performed, and noted that considerable amounts of this work was not recorded in official statistics. Women's work was private, unpaid and not publicly recognised. Ridgeway (2009) argues that gender stereotypes are not just individual beliefs; rather they are culturally hegemonic beliefs because they become embedded

in social structures such as the media, the law and taken for granted organisational practices. Evidence shows that this is very clear for the hegemonic beliefs about gendered farming identities. Men continue to predominantly inherit land, despite national variations in how the legal transfer of agricultural land is regulated (Shortall, 2010). Agricultural media mainly features men and extension training services are still predominantly orientated toward men (McGowan, 2011; Trauger et al. 2008; 2010).

European Union has different legal frameworks to govern the transfer of land. There are many nations where law is much underrated in case of transfer of property but there are other nations where strict legal guidance is to be followed in the mentioned area. The Allodial Law, in Norway, rules that the eldest child is the legal heir to the farm. However, the actual scenario is much different where though women and men have the same legal rights to inherit a farm, the majority of new entrants continue to be male. Any child can claim the farm under the condition that she or he can manage the farm herself/himself, but again, the heir is predominantly male, In Switzerland. The heir must buy the farm, and the assets of parents are split between all siblings after death, in Denmark. In the Basque Country there is equal distribution of the land amongst all children, and the heir, if wishing to continue farming, must buy the portions of land of siblings. It is argued that the rights of inheritance in the Basque Country threaten the economic viability of agriculture. Despite a variety of legal frameworks, some of which promote greater gender equality, it remains the case that the heir is predominantly male. France, Germany and Italy have community property laws intended to give stronger property rights to women in marital relationships. Each spouse may own property in their own right, typically property acquired before marriage or by gift or inheritance after marriage. However all property acquired by either spouse during marriage, which is not by gift or inheritance, is 'community property'. All earnings by either spouse during marriage and all assets acquired with such earnings, form part of community property. (For further details on European legal frameworks see Shortall, 2010.)

We do not have comprehensive comparative data on the extent to which women are co-owners of farms or partners in the farm. There is some evidence that only when agricultural policy and the taxation system make it rational and worthwhile for women to be partners are they incorporated. Research in Greece has shown that the implementation of the CAP regulations in 1997 had unintended consequences for women's position in farming. It stipulated that to access full agriculture subventions one had to work more than half time in farming. Since most farmers in Greece are smallholders and pluri-active, this led to some transferring

management and/ or the title of the land to their wives, who became registered as the farmers and accessed agriculture subventions. This shows that the CAP can impact on patterns of land ownership.

There is also some evidence to suggest that pre-nuptial agreements are emerging as new strategies to ensure women's limited entitlement to the farm in the case of divorce. This is an issue that requires further research. Given that we know women contribute to the farm through their farm activity but also through their off-farm employment, it is important that their economic rights are protected in the case of divorce (Shortall, 2010).

While economic and legal factors influence the transfer of land, cultural norms and practices appear to be the most important factor. For example, while the Allodial Law in Norway did increase the number of women farmers, it has not led to the gendered equality that would be expected from this type of legal change, and this is tied to the deep rooted cultural norms around gender and land ownership. These cultural norms have historical bases, linked initially to the fact that in most Western societies, women, especially married women, did not have property rights and farming was a physically demanding manual occupation. Cultural norms still seem to govern the inter-generational transfer of land within families, where land is typically passed from father to son. Acquisition of land is based on sex and it underpins the different positions of men and women in agriculture. Men constitute the constant family line through which land is passed, and women float in and out. Not having access to the key resource, land, means that women have less access to farming organisations, they are not considered producers, and education and training is not aimed at them. Property continues to provide access to the public domain of farming. The fact that the public domain is almost entirely male then takes on a cultural power of its own, and this is what we see happening in farming organisations. Access to property has fundamentally shaped women's role in farming. The social norms and customs that regulate the transfer of property to men rather than women also shape and construct gender roles and identities (Shortall, 2010).

3. Issues

While roles are now changing, women have always played a significant and critical role in agriculture. It is patriarchy and a market-driven economy that blindsides them, farm experts and activists say.

“With women predominant at all levels — production, pre-harvest, post-harvest processing, packaging, marketing — of the agricultural value chain, to increase productivity in agriculture, it is imperative to adopt gender-specific interventions,” read the economic survey. “An ‘inclusive transformative agricultural policy’ should aim at

gender-specific interventions to raise the productivity of small farm holdings, integrate women as active agents in rural transformation, and engage men and women in extension services with gender expertise,” it added.

According to one report by the National Mission for Empowerment of Women, 80 percent of women who are employed in rural areas work in agricultural activities. About 60 percent of all agricultural operations are handled exclusively by women. Activists say while the role of women is changing within agriculture, their participation has always been integral. “Their role has been made invisible,” said convener of Alliance of Sustainable and Holistic Agriculture (ASHA) Kavitha Kuruganti. And they do not get equal pay. “Female hourly wage rates in agriculture vary from 50 to 75% of male rates, and are too low to overcome absolute poverty,” read the report. Another [report](#) by the National Institute of Rural Development and Panchayat Raj said almost 90 percent of women workers are dependent upon agriculture.

In the case of suicides, women farmers are not recognised. They are simply categorised as ‘housewives’, and not by their professional capacity. Of the 12,602 suicides by farmers and agricultural labourers in the year 2015, the NCRB recorded only 1,018 women suicides, which is about 8 percent of all farm-related suicides. “The cop who is recording the suicide of a woman is from the same community and does not see her as a farmer. He just sees her as the wife of a farmer,” said founder-editor of People’s Archives of Rural India (PARI) P Sainath. “This is the custom across the country. This is primarily because women are not land-holders. Less than 8% of the women in the country have land in their names,” he added.

Telangana, followed by Maharashtra and Andhra Pradesh, leads the country in the number of suicides committed by women farmers and agricultural labourers. “A woman who owns the land is a different person. She is not at the mercy of her husband or the family she is married into and community around. It changes the world for her. She cannot be kicked out by her husband,” he added.

4. Discussion

Traditional obstacles like mobility, education and the inability to interact with the market still exist. However, a few women farmer groups are breaking the mould. Growing millets is a symbol of moving away from the clutches of patriarchy in farming. “Being the least input demanding crops, millets run against the ‘high input = high output’ market logic. Therefore, it leaves an anti-corporate economics. These values of millets bring them closest to the eco-feminist philosophy,” said a statement from All India Millet Sisters Network. The network was launched in November 2016 and received the ‘Nari Shakti Puraskar, 2017’ for outstanding contribution to

women's empowerment. The award was presented by the President of India at Rashtrapati Bhawan, New Delhi on the International Women's Day on 8 March.

The Women's Collective in Tamil Nadu, also part of the All India Millet Sisters Network, tries promoting millets amongst women farmers, as they can keep some of their produce for their homes, giving food security to the entire family. "The challenge, however, is that most women are landless and do not have a say in what can be grown in the lands they are working on," said Sheelu Francis from the collective. "We organise them into collectives and encourage to lease lands in groups of five to ten for them to grow millets. Millets are also hardy and resistant to the vagaries of climate change," she added. Her collective works with nearly 12,000 women farmers in dryland regions of Tamil Nadu.

The All India Millet Sisters Network is an initiative of the Deccan Development Society and has more than 20 NGOs working across ten states. CN Suresh, one of the coordinating members of its parent network, Millet Network of India, believes the knowledge of women in farming, especially in dry-land regions is unparalleled. "In some villages in Telangana, crops are categorised as 'male' crops and 'female' crops. Male crops are commercial crops like cotton and sugar while female crops are millets," he said. "While the men grow only commercial crops, they sell and the money does not leave their hands. Whereas women growing millets keep some for their house and then sell the rest. By growing millets, women are retaining decision-making powers," he said.

Women, in most cases, have a bigger role in agriculture than men — at least in small and marginal farmlands. "Some 85 percent of all farmlands in the country are small and marginal. And in these lands, it is the woman who has a larger role in farming. In most cases, men only take care of plowing, cutting and selling," said a member of Mahila Kisan Adhikaar Manch (Makaam) or Forum for Women Farmers' Rights Sejal Dand. "Recognising the role of women is the best way to revive agriculture and ecology, especially in the era of direct benefit transfers. It gives her social security," she added. The forum has members across 24 states working towards securing due recognition and rights of women farmers in India.

5. Conclusion

In 2011, MS Swaminathan — often known as the father of India's green revolution — introduced a Private Members' Bill for the empowerment of farm women in land and water rights, access to technology, credit, and insurance. The bill was not taken up for discussion during his tenure. "It is, however, time that both state and central governments enact legislation for the empowerment of farm women. An important cause for the present

agrarian crisis is the neglect and disempowerment of women in agriculture," he said in a statement.

Farmer suicides are seen as a political tool by many who sit around the country's decision-making tables. They're thrown around as statistics, used as propaganda, referenced in campaign speeches and dismissed as attempted attacks on the credibility of politicians.

In 2015, census data revealed that 98 million women in India worked in the agricultural sector. And there had been a 24 percent increase in this number between 2001 and 2011. Yet, the debate around farmer suicides always revolves around men because most women don't own property, and thus, despite doing farm work, don't classify as farmers. In fact, in 2013, news reports pointed out that women do 80 percent of farm work but own only 13 percent of land. Just another way in which they remain invisible to the system.

We usually try to create new structures out of the present footing only but there are times when it becomes imperative to start creating new structure with new footings. This is one such time for Indian economy where we are bound to observe that due to alarming rate of farmer suicide agriculture is actually shifting hands. We have ignored the need to equip the female population for uncertainties of future for so long that now the structures are no longer competent enough to sustain the new buildings on their weak shoulders any longer. We must assess the changing needs of training females to accept the agriculture ownership head on. Further we must provide such schemes that support them in an intuitive way while letting them bear their scars of lifelong suppression and lack of economic awareness, courageously.

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