

Changing Rural Scenario and Women's Participation in Economic Activity

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A number of Significant changes have overtaken in Indian villages and have contributed to its transformation. These changes are not always visible, and they have also not maintained an even pace over time and space. While their impact on the rural society have been generally slow and imperceptible, at times the pace of these changes has been quite rapid. The forces which have brought about qualitative changes in the character and organization of village life may have been brought to bear upon the rural societies from without by agencies like the government or they may have been intrinsic to the process of societal change itself. Viewed broadly as a process in which human beings are engaged in transforming their conditions of existence, these changes raise some very interesting questions. A major question concerns itself with the nature and extent of women's participation in these changes. It is increasingly realised that the bulk of the rural women have "not only been bypassed in the distribution of the fruits of development but whose

traditional roles and status in their own society are also being altered adversely by the nature of the development process" (Majumdar : 1978). Even in the consciously designed programmes the programmes for women have been marginal and little efforts have been made to increase their productivity and income earning capacity.¹ It is now generally conceded that growth in itself will not necessarily ensure that its benefits will 'trickle down' to the poorest and weakest; it is not equally appreciated that policies to reduce unemployment and promote expansion of employment opportunities in themselves do not necessarily lead to an improvement in female employment. (Sunda : 1981)

Role of Government Sponsered Programmes

The official agencies in India have since Independence under-taken several programmes for rural development. However, programmes for women have been marginal in economic development activities. Little conscious efforts have been made to inte-

grate women in the development process. On the contrary, several programmes initiated since Independence have shown negative results and have in fact, restricted women's participation in economic activity. (Saradamani and Hehra : 1983)

Ironically enough, various measures implemented by official agencies with a view to bringing about rural development have resulted in progressively restricting female participation in economic activity. In most cases the models of rural development on which the programmes were based did not contain any special provision for rural women. The only special programme for the rural women was the establishment of programme called **Mahila Mandal** conceived of as the institution for making available new ideas and skills to village women. However, "this programme was nothing more than the adoption of a middle class model biased towards home economics and welfare. This was the result of the policy makers' unidimensional view of the women as home-makers and neglect of their contribution in macro-productive work outside the home, whether remunerative or otherwise" (Saradamani and Mehra : 1983)

Even progressive programmes such as land reforms have proved restrictive to female participation in economic activity. Bardhan (1979) convincingly argue that the enforcement of land reforms in West Bengal resulted in large scale eviction of tenant farmers and their transformation into wage earners. The process of eviction of tenant farmers in early seventies, therefore, has often been associated with a

complete withdrawal of female population on tenant cultivated plots from labour force, since cultural factors prevented the women to accept wage employment away from home.

Late sixties and early seventies witnessed an unprecedented accent on food production and agricultural modernization with a massive increase in facilities like irrigation, mechanization coupled with larger and better inputs in terms of seeds, fertilizers, pesticides etc. This development is known as "Green Revolution" which in reality turned out to be mere "Wheat Revolution" affecting favourably a few states in North-West and small pockets in the rest of India. The effects of "Green Revolution" have been restricted to coastal plains of Tamil Nadu, Punjab, Haryana and Western Uttar Pradesh; Eastern Plains of West Bengal, Karnataka and Kerala. (Kundu and Raza: 1982). On the other hand, the extensive "hungry belly"² of India remained chronically underdeveloped in areas of sub-marginal subsistence benefitting little from the so called "Green Revolution". A large area in Andhra Pradesh and Maharashtra, which formed part of the "hungry belly" showed negative growth rates in agricultural productivity during the period 1962-65 and 1970-73. (Bhalla and Allagh :1979).

In "Green Revolution" areas there has been a near exclusion³ of women in the labour force. According to 1971 Census, less than two per cent of the women are reported to be gainfully employed in Punjab and Haryana, the show piece of Green Revolution⁴. The picture is no different in West Bengal. On the other hand, in

Andhra Pradesh and Maharashtra more than 25 percent women are reported to be "working". The fall in the worker rate females is phenomenal in "Green Revolution" areas⁵. It is widely held that increased mechanization and an increased prosperity displaced women from agricultural activities. Increased prosperity in these regions has brought a new concept of "social status" which does not encourage the womenfolk to go out to work as wage earners. Agricultural mechanization particularly has resulted in a decreased demand for labour and the women have fallen the first victim to such shrinkage in labour requirement.

Capitalist Penetration Into Rural Economy and Female Participation in Economic Activity

Colonial history of India provides valuable insights into the process of diminishing participation of women in economic activity. It introduced a new system of land revenue administration which brought about the disintegration of the earlier structure. Land itself entered the market as a commodity with changes in the pattern of land ownership, and the introduction of the concept of private property. Colonial subordination also brought India into the orbit of world capitalism and subsequently got integrated into the world capitalist market.

The situation remains largely unaltered even after Independence. The forces of capitalism slowly and gradually penetrated into the rural areas and made deep inroads into the primary mode of economy i. e. agriculture. This development has led to a massive pauperisation and marginaliza-

tion of large masses of subsistence producers in India (Mics : 1980). Women have been most severely affected by these processes than men, who may have actually been absorbed into the labour force. Omvedt (1981) analysing the capitalist penetration into rural economy holds that it took place in the post-colonial economy, characterised by 'still-potent' affects of backwardness and various types of semi-feudal elements including caste. Indian agriculture, according to the author, was predominantly feudal in character before Independence, although important elements of capitalism had arisen. Various types of Zamindars, talukdars, khota, malgars etc. controlled the land. In the post-Independence period, Zamindary Abolition Acts passed in various states in the 1950s did not benefit the landless or landpoor ; rather they resulted in poor tenants being evicted from land, as the richer tenants got control of the land. This laid a basis for bigger tenants and rich peasant cultivators to come to power in the villages and develop as capitalist farmers. Various other developments such as "Green Revolution", spread of education, cooperative societies, land development banks, the new institution of **Panchayati Raj** helped this new class maintain its hegemony in a new way over the increasingly proletarianised and helpless rural majority. But all these development took place very unevenly. In Ryotwary areas, where strong peasant movements occurred, it proved easier to move against land-lordism and consolidate the gains of the new class. Thus south and western India show a clearer prevalence of capitalist relation of production. In contrast, the east and

central regions remain backward, with a significant amount of semi-feudal relations of production. "On the whole, a growth in agricultural - production and the transformation of the agrarian relation of production, in short, the development of capitalist agriculture - even though it remains a backward capitalist agriculture with tremendous hangovers of feudal relations and remnants—has characterised Indian countryside since Independence. (Omvedt : 1981)

The net effect of capitalist development, in short, has been an accentuation in the process of marginalization in the countryside. Marginalization, no doubt has effected the womenfolk more severely than the men. This is reflected in the Census figures which show not only a decline in their overall participation in work, but also a growing concentration of the women workers in the 'casual workers' in the agricultural sector, classified in Census as the industrial category of agricultural labourers. This development, in many areas in the countryside has led to the gradual erosion of the material base of women's subsistence production. Urbanization, with its accompanying industrialization, increasing complexities of markets and production techniques has been a relentless force displacing large masses of rural women from their traditional occupations, make their productive and professional skills obsolete and reduce them to the status of unskilled and unwanted workers. Women are being gradually excluded from the market system where they used to sell or barter products. All these have resulted in an enhanced polarization and inequality between sexes ; long with new elements of patriarchy and sexism.

The process has very badly affected the small farmers who have lost their land through indebtedness, giving a spurt to the number of bonded labourers. On the other hand some of the so called backward castes have managed to rise in recent years to the status of middle peasants. Hitherto, their women used to work in the fields, but once they achieved a certain economic status, they subjected their woman to seclusion and strict patriarchal norms. Moreover, many pauperised men migrate to cities leaving their wives and children in the countryside. Often the men find it difficult to make enough money to remit to their families left behind. The women without any means of production turn to begging, prostitution or to employment for less than the minimum wage (Mies : 1980).

Mitra, Pathak and Banerjee (1980) thus define the real character of women labour force in India as a 'reserve pool of helpless labour':

Lacking unionisation, efficient communication, opportunity of collective bargaining and taking advantage of varying seasons, crops and yields and the multiplicity of miniscule, but highly specialised and non-competing skills, which thanks to a situation of abundant labour supply there is always more on offer than can be absorbed at current levels of technology or production, female labour in the rural areas remains the handiest instrument of minimising agricultural production cost.

Thus, penetration of capitalism has proved detrimental to women's economic

role both in the agricultural sector as well as in the traditional non-agricultural sector i.e. the household industry. The processes have restricted women's opportunities for economic participation, at the same time it has pushed them more and more to the backward sectors of the economy.

Changes in the Demographic Scene

Defying all the initiatives taken by the government through measures like family planning, India's population is increasing at an alarming rate since 1921. The death rate has substantially decreased whereas the birth rate has not shown any perceptible change. Moreover the birth rates are greater in the rural areas than in the urban areas. The consequences of such a rapid growth in population has affected women in a variety of ways. The entire responsibility of bearing and the major share of rearing the children fall on the shoulder of women. Excessive rearing and bearing responsibility, coupled with malnourishment and undernutrition, has reduced the life span of women resulting in a rapidly declining sex-ratio (Mitra : 1979); a phenomenon common to almost all the parts of the country. It is widely held that the above factors are also responsible for the low level of their skills and it forces them to accept low wages and in most cases reduces their employability. However, increasing urbanization has opened up opportunity of tertiary employment for the rural women although higher prestige jobs are only available to an insignificant portion of the working females. A majority of the rural women get absorbed into urban informal sector, particularly in the

low paid jobs like domestic service and the like after they, migrate to big cities.

Changes in The Social Shnere

The most important change that has taken place since Independence in the social sphere, is a rapid growth in literacy among women. However, in rural areas the growth is not as impressive as it is in the urban areas. Although a vast majority of rural women still illiterate, considering the change that has taken place in the number of literate females, the change is no doubt impressive. Paradoxically, it has had negative impact on the economic participation of women. Literate young women are no longer keen to low paid jobs or to do agricultural work which they were given earlier; and they are neither qualified nor accepted for better ones. The net result of literacy, therefore, has been a decline in female participation in economic activity (Nayak: 1982).

Another aspect of rural society is still more important. The establishment of British rule and its consolidation brought greater opportunities and mobility to the people. Initially the higher castes benefited out of it; but also at a later stage, the dominant peasant castes, minority groups and the bureaucratic class too. Independence also brought vastly increased mobility and opportunities to scheduled castes, scheduled tribes and other weaker sections of the society as a consequence of protective discrimination policies with higher income accruing to the middle and low castes as a result of higher prices for agricultural produce, and higher production as result of better inputs, these

sections began to emulate the life style of the urban middle classes, mostly belonging to the higher castes—a process similar to the concept of Sanskritization by M.N. Srinivas (1978) to analyse the process of change in rural India and its impact on women's economic participation. Srinivas points out that, "the greatly increased opportunities for secular mobility available during British rule and in Independent India also meant considerable increase in the quantum of Sanskritization. As more and more members of the lower castes obtained access to education, jobs and power, they felt the need to tread the well worn path to legitimizing their newly earned status. "One of the unfortunate effects of this is the moral, ritual and economic subordination of women. Sanskritization coupled with landed wealth contribute to confine women to the four walls of a house".

The various facets of change and their implications on the economic participation of women, analysed so far are intricately interwoven. So it has been difficult to eliminate overlaps.

It may however, be safely concluded that the effects of social change in rural India has widened the gap between men and women and resulted in a decline in women's participation in economic activity as well as in an increasing tendency to push to the backward sectors of the economy. The growth of middle class professions an increasing tendency to push them to the backward sectors of the economy. The growth of middle class professions and increasing participation of

women in such jobs has not compensated their declining economic participation and opportunities in the traditional sphere.

The analysis raises some vital questions. Can social transformation be possible without the participation of half of its numbers? What will be the direction and tempo of these changes? Should it be ignored as inevitable and irreparable? Or, what institutional transformations will be necessary to integrate women in the development process? These are some of the questions, the paper places before all social scientists.

Notes

1) It is often argued that the reason for such neglect owes greatly to a middle class bias of treating women's role to be largely confined to home and family. This is despite the fact that a large number of women, belonging to the lower rungs of the society do actually participate in outdoor economic activity and their contribution to the family income is significant. Such biases have not only penetrated into scholarly circles, they have also greatly influenced the planners and policy makers. The net effect, therefore, has manifested in a greater invisibility of women in the sphere of economic activity.

2) Chottopadhyaya and Raza (1975) indentified three distinct regions in the hinterland of primary production in India. These are : (a) "Green Revolution" areas; (b) areas of uncertain water supply; (c) drought prone areas—each having areas of submarginal subsistence within each category. The latter two categories constitute

the "hungry belly" of India. Broadly, this impoverished area, include, Western Orissa, Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, Eastern Maharashtra, Eastern Karnatak, and Western Andhra Pradesh.

3) However, Pushpa Sundar (1981) maintains that in Punjab and Haryana, withdrawal from the labour force did not necessarily mean more leisure for women. They continue to make an economic contribution by keeping milch cattles and poultry at home as well as through better home and family maintenance. Nevertheless, these women would be enumerated as non-workers, particularly as they themselves would report neither available for nor seeking jobs. The participation level, therefore,

would decline.

4) The picture obtained in the year 1981 does not show any significant improvement in the situation.

5) According to the Census figures (1961 & 1971) the percentage of female workers decreased from 53.44 and 58.46 in 1961 to 1.42 and 4.58 in 1971 in Punjab and Haryana respectively. Such phenomenal decrease could not have been only due to the changes in the definition of 'worker'.

6) Ester Boserup (1970) has convincingly analysed the role played by commercial farming, particularly plantation, introduced by British displacing women from the labour force.

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