

Women's Participation in the Agricultural Sector: A Study in Jalpaiguri and Darjeeling Districts, West Bengal

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Abstract:

In India, the agriculture sector employs 80% of all economically active women, accounting for 33% of the agriculture labour force and 48% of self-employed farmers; 85 percent of rural women work in agriculture, while only approximately 13 percent own land. According to the Economic Survey 2017-18, there is a 'feminisation' of the agriculture sector, with an increasing number of women in numerous positions as farmers, entrepreneurs, and labourers, as a result of increasing rural-to-urban migration by men. Women from Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes, who belong to the economically disadvantaged and underprivileged sections of society, are mainly landless, make up the poorest segment of West Bengal's population. A significant percentage of the 200 respondents in this study belonged to the schedule caste community; 76 and 71 out of 100 were from the West Bengal districts of Jalpaiguri and Darjeeling, respectively. The majority of respondents in the Jalpaiguri (57%) and Darjeeling (76%) districts were between the ages of 18 and 35. The respondents were largely involved in sowing, manuring, and transplanting during the pre-harvest period. Respondents from Jalpaiguri and Darjeeling districts spent an average of four and two hours per day sowing, respectively, while during the post-harvest period respondents from both districts spent nearly eight hours per day cutting and threshing, despite spending at least five hours on household chores and some time on marketing activities. Overall, the majority of working women's primary motivation was to improve their families' financial status.

Key Word: Rural women, Agriculture, Participation, Female Labour, Pre-harvest, Post-harvest

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I. INTRODUCTION

With the increasing number of males relocating to cities from rural areas, the agriculture sector is becoming more feminised, with more women taking on numerous roles as farmers, entrepreneurs, and labourers. According to the Agriculture Census (2010-11), women made up 30.3 percent of the projected 118.7 million cultivators. Similarly, females made up 42.6 percent of the estimated 144.3 million agricultural labourers. Between 2001 and 2011, the number of female agricultural labourers increased by 24 percent, according to Census 2011.

In India's agriculture and rural economy, women are a valuable resource. They contribute significantly to agricultural growth as well as associated and household activities, and they pursue a variety of livelihood choices. Cultivation, animal husbandry, working in rural enterprises, engaging in commerce and marketing, caring for family members, and maintaining their dwellings are examples of these activities. Agriculture employs 63 percent of all economically active males and 78 percent of all economically active women.

Women have traditionally played a key part in agriculture as farmers, co-farmers, wage labourers, and farm managers. From seed to plate, they've been food producers. Women do more labour in food production than males, yet they earn less money as a result of gender discrimination.

Women's various roles result in a major contribution to the productive system. Unfortunately, her contribution is undervalued in a male-dominated culture, and her function is not sufficiently appreciated. In the development process, they have been underrepresented. Despite their overwhelming presence in the workforce, women in India continue to face significant disadvantages in terms of pay, property rights, and representation in local farmer organisations. Furthermore, due to limited access to productive resources in agricultural production, women face several hurdles that prohibit them from increasing their output¹.

Considering the productive and optimistic participation of women in agriculture the present study has been undertaken. Many of the systematic studies identify the trends of working female labour in agriculture. Empirical studies were conducted and explained on gender roles and gender analysis. The present study will

also highlight female participation in the different agriculture operations with reference to the state of West Bengal.

West Bengal is primarily an agricultural state and for the year 2019-20, crops contributed more than 60% to the State Gross Value Added (GSVA) for 11 states viz. Assam, Chhattisgarh, Gujarat, Karnataka, Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra, Manipur, Nagaland, Sikkim, Uttar Pradesh and West Bengal².

In majority of West Bengal's districts, industry and services have yet to account for a significant portion of the net district domestic product, let alone provide employment to a big portion of the state's rapidly rising labour population. The female participation rate in this labour force varies per West Bengal district. During the period 1991 to 2011, it was highest in Purulia district and lowest in Howrah district. When the percentage share of women agricultural labourers in total rural women workers is examined district by district, it can be seen that the percentage share of women agricultural labourers in total rural women workers has increased in Darjeeling, Jalpaiguri, Coochbehar, Purulia, Medinipur, and South 24 Parganas, while decreasing in all other West Bengal districts.

II. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

Following are the main objectives of this study:

- i) To know the socio-economic background of the women who are actively involved in agriculture.
- ii) To identify the major agriculture activities performed by the women in the study area.
- iii) To estimate the time women allocate to various farm activities in the study area.
- iv) To determine the time women spend in various domestic household activities.

III. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The sample included 200 respondents, 100 from each of the two districts of Jalpaiguri and Darjeeling. Cabel para, Kadamtala, Ghauri para, and Sonar bari under Shikarpur Gram Panchayat in Jalpaiguri district were surveyed. Mangol Singh jote and Borojharu jote of Hatighisa Gram Panchayat in Darjeeling District's Naxalbari block were surveyed. A proper survey schedule was designed to acquire information from the respondents in order to achieve the study's objectives, taking into account the demographic pattern and socio-economic state of the area.

IV. ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

The percentage share of Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribe women in total women population in a district's rural areas has been deemed a significant explanatory factor for women agricultural labourers' employment participation. Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribe women, who are generally landless, make up the poorest segment of the population of West Bengal, belonging to the economically disadvantaged and downtrodden section of the society. They have no other choice except to work as low-wage agricultural field labourers. As a result, it is reasonable to conclude that the higher the number of Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribe women in a district, the greater the proportion of female agricultural labourers among total female rural workers. In 2011, Jalpaiguri had the greatest percentage of SC and ST females (27.71%), while Darjeeling district had the lowest (19.27%). (Source: Statistical Abstract & Economic Review of West Bengal). A large number of the respondents belong from schedule caste community in Jalpaiguri district (76%) and in Darjeeling district (71%).

Table 1: Distribution of respondents according to their socio-economic characteristics (N=200)

Characteristics	Categories		
		Jalpaiguri	Darjeeling
Age	Young (upto 35 years)	57	76
	Middle (36-55 years)	37	22
	Old (more than 55 years)	6	2
Type of Family	Joint	75	59
	Nuclear	25	41
Educational Status	Illiterate	56	41
	Primary(upto class 4)	22	23
	Upper Primary (class 5-8)	22	37
Monthly Income of the family	1000-3000	39	23
	3001-5000	49	56

	5001-7000	10	20
	7001-9000	2	1
Possession of land			
	Yes	70	40
	No	30	60
Land holdings			
	1.0-4.0 bigha	51	28
	4.1-7.0 bigha	16	8
	Above 7	3	4
Agricultural produce			
	Paddy	75	72
	Vegetable, Paddy	12	17
	Paddy, Jute	6	5
	Pulses, Vegetable, Paddy	4	2
	Jute	3	4
Involvement in agriculture			
	5-9 years	11	29
	10-15 Years	60	42
	16-30 Years	29	29
Aware about updated information relating to agriculture			
	Yes	26	34
	No	74	66
Source of updated information			
	Radio	5	13
	Television	18	16
	Others	3	5
Special facility or assistance from Govt for doing agricultural work			
	Yes	37	22
	No	63	78
Working hours/day in agriculture			
	9 hours	63	47
	8 hours	9	18
	7 hours	5	5
	4 hours	23	30
Farm Activities			
	Cutting	92	91
	Transplanting	87	100
	Ploughing of field	2	1
	Marketing	5	3
Average day spent in pre-harvest activity			
	Sowing	2 days	1
	Manuring	1	1
	Transplanting	2	2
Time spent in pre harvest activities (hours/day)			
	Sowing	4	2
	Manuring	2	4
	Transplanting	8	8
Average days spent in post-harvest activity			

	Cutting	2	2
	Threshing	2	3
Time spent in post-harvest activities (hours/day)			
	Cutting	7.72	7.76
	Thrashing	3.57	3.33
Marketing Activities			
	Sale of Milk	11	16
	Selling and purchasing e of Animal	40	52
	Sale of Chick	8	3
	Vegetable(others)	41	29

Source: Field Survey

Table 1 shows that the majority of respondents in Jalpaiguri district (57%) and Darjeeling district (76%) were between the ages of 18 and 35. This contradicts Padmaja and Bantilan's findings (2014) wherein they stated that "the younger female age cohorts... join off-farm employment in greater numbers, whereas women beyond the age of 35 tend to remain in agriculture in the rural areas even as rural-to-urban migratory patterns develop"³. Another study found that, despite formal education and access to information, young women farmers are likely to be more disadvantaged than their older female counterparts (in addition to their male colleagues) in terms of access to productive resources and are more confined as economic agents. This is particularly relevant in the context where non-farm opportunities for young men outstrip those available for young women, so the future of farming will likely involve young women to a larger extent than is currently the case⁴.

Most of the respondents belonged to joint families in Jalpaiguri (75%) and in Darjeeling district (59%). The joint family set-up involves multi-generational co-residence typically with women's parents-in-law or is defined as one which has more than one married couple. The residence in a joint family where two or more generations co-reside may inhibit women from taking up non-farm work due to stricter gender norms⁵. However, in this study, majority of the respondents belonging to joint family is involved in farming activities and it is probably due to more restrictions for women imposed by the joint family in terms of their travel outside home, access to resources and decision-making capacity⁶.

Fraction of illiterate women in Jalpaiguri (56%) is higher than that in Darjeeling District (41%). It is seen that the literacy rate among women farmers remain much below the 65 per cent average for the entire female population⁷, and this is a hindrance to women's ability to access government schemes or experiment with new technologies⁸ further preventing women from participating in more skilled labor sectors. The earlier study has also revealed that the average income per household from all sources contributed significantly in Muzaffarnagar and Baghpat district of Western Uttar Pradesh, which was Rs. 2,36,610 and Rs. 2,57,933 respectively.

In the present study, the respondents involved in harvesting was marginally higher in Jalpaiguri district (92) than Darjeeling district (91) and in case of transplanting, Jalpaiguri district (87) was lesser than Darjeeling district (100). 2% of respondents from Jalpaiguri district and 1% of respondent from Darjeeling district were engaged in ploughing. 5% of respondents in Jalpaiguri district and 3% of respondents in Darjeeling District were involved in marketing. During the pre-harvest period, the respondents were mostly involved in sowing, manuring, and transplanting. Respondents of Jalpaiguri district said that sowing takes an average of 4 hours per day, whereas Darjeeling district respondents disclose that it takes an average of 2 hours per day. The average time required for manuring was 2 and 4 hours per day for respondents of Jalpaiguri and Darjeeling district respectively, while the average time required for transplanting is 8 hours per day for respondents from both districts.

During post-harvest period, respondents were engaged mostly in cutting and threshing. For cutting, the respondents of Jalpaiguri and Darjeeling district spent 7.72 and 7.76 hours per day respectively. For threshing, the respondents of Jalpaiguri and Darjeeling district spent 3.57 and 3.33 hours per day respectively. The respondents were also involved in marketing activities. For the purpose of sale and purchase of animals like goat, cow etc. from market place, majority of the respondents in Darjeeling district (52%) and to a lesser extent in Jalpaiguri district (40%) were found to be involved. 11 and 16% respondents of Jalpaiguri and Darjeeling district, respectively, were known to be engaged in selling milk to consumers. 41 and 29% of the respondents of Jalpaiguri and Darjeeling district, respectively, were involved in selling vegetables. Remaining of the respondents of Jalpaiguri (8%) and Darjeeling district (3%) were involved in selling chicks.

V. CONCLUSION

The majority of women in both districts were found to be involved in various agricultural operations such as transplanting, seeding, harvesting, and so on. Women are extensively involved in agricultural operations in both districts. Women's primary agricultural activities include transplanting during the pre-harvest season and cutting and threshing during the harvest season. Both districts' sampled women are involved in non-agricultural activities as well. In Jalpaiguri and Darjeeling districts, the majority of rural women devote more than 7 hours each day performing various agricultural operations during the pre-harvest and post-harvest seasons. The sampled women are also involved in household/domestic duties utilizing more than 5 hours of daily working time. Overall, the basic motivation of majority of the working women was to improve financial situation of their families.

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