

Agricultural Labour and the Gender Dimension: A Note

Social Change
45(4) 605–612
© CSD 2015
SAGE Publications
sagepub.in/home.nav
DOI: 10.1177/0049085715602791
<http://sch.sagepub.com>



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Abstract

In this commentary, we examine the gender dimension in Indian agrarian history. For doing so, we review the scholarship of three economic historians, Surendra J. Patel, Dharma Kumar and Utsa Patnaik, who have looked at the evolution of the agrarian classes in modern India. We argue for the importance of giving a rightful place to female labour, outlining the persistence of the multifold oppression they face and the general conditions of their existence. Historically, they have suffered, and continue to do so, under the dominance of patriarchy, class and caste. Lastly, we conclude that including a gender perspective will help in ameliorating the status of female labour through state action.

Keywords

Agrarian history, agrarian conditions of production, female labour, sexual division of labour

I

There appears to be a marked androcentric slant in India's agrarian history. This lacuna is not the result of a conscious bias but perhaps more due to a limitation in the methodology of writing history (Clark, 1994). This is particularly evident when we examine the history of the agrarian labour class. This comment attempts to discuss briefly that missing dimension of female labour in three well-known texts of economic history. By an androcentric bias, we mean a male bias in the writing of history with a particular reference to class formation. Often, there is no focus or reference to female labour. Again, to reiterate, this oversight is perhaps unintended.

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At the outset, one point appears to stand out: the issue of gender becomes important only when we look at the class formation process from below, that is, the formation of the working class and peasantry. The question of gender does not appear to be as important when we examine the history of the formation of the dominant class. For example, the formation of the bourgeoisie does not appear to raise substantive questions of gender. In this text, essentially, the question of the formation of the female labour class is being reviewed.

II

It is common knowledge that a sexual division of labour plays an extremely crucial role in agriculture and farming, in general, where the role of females is all pervasive: from preparing seed beds to sowing and weeding; often, all the work till harvesting is undertaken by female labourers. In fact, much of the work exclusively reserved for women is often backbreaking and very arduous. It is true that an agrarian class differentiation plays an important role in this division of labour.

In the Indian agricultural structure, primarily it is the women and children coming from the lower class/castes who work in the fields while women belonging to the landed gentry often stay within the cool environs of their homes. Additionally, working class women generally have to combine farm labour with domestic work. A review of some literature on the topic reveals that the development of productive forces, such as the Green Revolution, instead of lessening the burden, leads to an intensification of farming work (Ramamurthy, 1994), especially in the work done by female labour. This happened in spite of the use of improved chemicals/pesticides and increased mechanisation. Much work is still divided between male and female participants of labour.

Cultural sanction also plays an important role in this division of labour. While work with the plough is done exclusively by men, female labour does all other forms of agricultural labour. Here, one should stress that not only agricultural labourers, who are landless, constitute female labour but also all other agricultural classes, except the women who are part of the landlord's family, constitute female labour. That is to say, even rich peasant women either supervise female labour working in their fields or they themselves work in the fields. The middle peasant and the landowning poor peasant women participate in the labour process or hire out themselves as agricultural labour. Thus, the differentiation of the peasantry has a crucial bearing on the female labour force.

It is very important to note that the wages paid to the female labour are never at par with male labourers. More often than not, female labour receives only half the wage in comparison with her male counterpart. For example, in Telangana today, a male labourer receives ₹ 200 daily while the female labourer receives only ₹ 100, even after the implementation of the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act. Even these wages are subject to seasonal fluctuations. In non-peak agricultural seasons, the wage rates go down even further. Unequal wages clearly constitute a part of the agricultural economy.

The struggles for an improvement in wages, too, do not address themselves to the question of wage inequality between male and female labour. Cultural sanctions also play a very important role in wage inequality when they legitimise the division of labour between male and females. Not only are women labourers not performing agricultural tasks such as ploughing but they are precluded and not allowed to perform these tasks. Wage inequality reflects the social inequality present between and male and female participants of the labour process. The absence of struggle for the betterment of wages and working conditions of female labour is the reason for the state of affairs. Even the left parties underplay the necessity of taking up the issues of wage inequality between male and female labourers. Patriarchy, thus, plays a significant role in this absence of attention towards the condition of female labour force.

In this discussion, we attempt to read modern Indian agrarian history backwards. That is to say, if conditions in the post-Green Revolution period in the early 21st century are those as have been described above, then the conditions of female labour could hardly have been better in the 19th and early 20th centuries. In this article, we briefly discuss three economic historians—Surendra J. Patel (Patel, 1952), Dharma Kumar (Kumar, 1965) and Utsa Patnaik (Patnaik, 1983, 1987) while some other writings are kept in mind in this analytical note (Harvey, 1990; Deere, 1987; Clark, 1994; Kapadia, 1999 etc.).

Patel in his study *Agricultural Labourers in Modern India and Pakistan*, published in 1952, held that a class of agricultural labourers was created in India, basically in 19th and early 20th centuries, though with substantial diversity. He holds that the colonial state was primarily responsible for the creation of a class of agricultural labourers. According to the economic historian, prior to the late 19th century, there might have been agricultural labourers, but there was no 'noticeably large class'.

Patel affirms that by the early 20th century, two developments—first, deindustrialisation of handicrafts and, second, the permanent land settlements introduced by the British, the Raiyatwari, Zamindari and Mahalwari systems—were the chief causes for the creation of the agricultural labour class in India. According to Patel,

The landless agricultural labourers forms more than 40 per cent of the agricultural population in the southern triangle (Bombay, Madras and the Central Provinces); between 20 and 40 per cent in the eastern region (Bihar, Orissa, Bengal and Assam) and less than 20 per cent in the great north (the United Provinces, Punjab, the North-West Frontier Province and Sindh). In each of these three regions, a distinct system of land settlement was introduced under the British Rule. (Patel, 1952, pp. 150–51)

However, when Patel speaks of the creation of agricultural labourers, he is talking of male agricultural labourers. The discourse is gender-neutral and nowhere in his classic work does he speak of the creation of female agricultural labourers. What was the proportion of female agricultural labourers, what were their working conditions and what were the wages paid to them are some of the questions that are not addressed.

Looking back from the present situation in Indian agriculture, one can definitely assume that the female labour must have been prominent in the 19th century

and even prior to that. Because certain agricultural practices, for instance, the weeding of crops, sowing and harvesting, were always conventionally delegated to women in general and female labour in particular, there is no reason to believe that these forms of female labour were not prominent in the 19th century and prior to it. If one were to surmise, under feudal and semi-feudal historical conditions, the oppression of female labour might have been even greater than in the period discussed by Patel. Thus, Patel's pioneering work misses a crucial dimension.

Dharma Kumar in her book *Land and Caste in South India* (1965) discounts Patel's argument that the British created a class of agricultural labourers specifically in the 19th century. Taking the case of Madras Presidency, she weaves a much denser and complex argument. Kumar says that a class of agricultural labourers existed much before the advent of the British. According to her, various forms of agricultural labour prevailed in south India, ranging from free wage labour to absolute and complete slavery. Agrestic slavery and serfdom were integral features of pre-British south India. She notes that particularly in south Malabar, south Canara and Tanjore, slavery was quite prominent while in other parts of the Madras Presidency, relations varied in degree from slavery to free labour. But Kumar adds that the Indian variant of slavery differed from that of the Western or European one in two respects: one, the Indian variant was based on the caste system—where the most depressed and untouchable castes were under serfdom or slavery; two, in the Indian case, the slaves and serfs had subsistence rights. Indeed, certain kinds of 'moral economy', which James Scott talks of, prevailed.

Kumar's argument is that the Indian social structure was as much to blame for the existence of agricultural labour as a class as were the British. The upper landed castes ensured the supply of labour through the basic system of caste. Often castes lower in the caste hierarchy were the slaves. She even argues that the price of slaves varied according to their caste status. Thus, caste played a central role in perpetuating the system of agrarian servitude. All in all, Kumar says that to think that idyllic, self-contained, self-sufficient rural communities existed before the advent of the British is, therefore, incorrect.

Although Kumar emphasises caste, caste-based slavery and serfdom, she does not speak of female agricultural labourers. If one goes by her argument, there must have been a large number of female labourers prior to the advent of British rule. Howsoever varying in slavery and serfdom, there must have been a class of female labour even in the Presidency areas. Kumar, though much more rigorous in her analytical approach, does not pay attention to the existence of the female labour class. In her work, we find no mention of female labour anywhere. Perhaps because of their reliance on colonial census data, the dimension of gender is missing from the works of both Patel and Kumar.

Utsa Patnaik in her article 'On the Evolution of Class Agricultural Labourers in India' (1983), while being sympathetic to Patel's work, does mention the question of women labourers. Though Patnaik notes the presence of woman labourers, this is more by way of incidental remarks from her data on Haryana. Patnaik develops a criterion for exploitation that is basically economic. This E-criterion when applied to strictly family labour would read precisely the opposite of her general economic exploitation criterion. For example, it would apply

Table 1. Women's Labour in Agriculture with the Application of Exploitation Criterion

Class	Value of E (exploitation) ($e = x/f$)
Landlord	E = minus infinite
Rich peasant	E = less than or equivalent to -1
Middle peasant	E = greater than 0 but less than -1
Small peasant	E = less than 1 but greater than 0
Poor peasant	E = greater than 1
Landless labour	E = infinite

Source: Anil Kumar Vaddiraju (Table prepared based on the Exploitation criterion developed by Patnaik, 1987).

to female farm labour and the usage of the family women's labour, as provided in Table 1.

But is that all there is to it? Perhaps not. Gender in the agricultural sector remains much more complex as is usually the case with gender relations all over the country, even in urban India. For example, it involves another extremely critical, economic component in the lives of women, namely dowry, which is almost ubiquitous in endogamous marriages, but also otherwise. Here, the dowry chart would read precisely the reverse of the above, that is, the upper classes pay the highest dowry to get their daughters married than the landless labour. Therefore, it is all much more complicated.

Besides, the gender aspect in agriculture is also inter-related closely with caste. Caste means basically endogamous or hypergamous alliances to perpetuate the *jati* status. Therefore, women in agriculture are not only subject to economic exploitation, as Patnaik elaborates, but they are also subject to a strict social hierarchy of caste. The biological reproduction of caste does not happen without these above-mentioned alliances that also involve the practice of dowry. We do not know whether in history, a bride price existed instead of dowry. Bride price might have existed in the upper rural classes/castes, but we cannot say about the landless labour and lower castes.

Besides, feminist economists also claim that a care economy should be counted. But this is difficult and almost impossible because an economic value cannot be attributed to affective relations. A mother's care of her child is beyond something that can be calculated. It is even more difficult to put a value on a father's relation with his girl child. Therefore, we do not venture into this terrain. And besides, there is a more insidious calculation of sexual exploitation in gender where it is impossible to say anything with certainty about the historical truth or falsehood of such matters. Therefore, limiting ourselves to strictly economic history, we need to be modest enough to acknowledge that it is not indeed so easily calculable in a complete sense. When we look at only the economic exploitation on the farms, then the reverse of the Table 1, as outlined by Patnaik and shown above, will hold. Thus, these three economic historians miss the dimension of proletarianisation of female labour.

Both Patel and Kumar deal exclusively with and concentrate on the Presidency areas. In this connection, two points can be made. First, it is not clear what was the

impact of the three land settlements on female labourers in the Presidency areas. Certainly, there must have been differences. Systems like the Zamindari system must have had a different, if not worse, impact on female labour. Second, it is not clear what the situation was in the princely states where the general condition of agricultural labour was much worse. The oppression on labour and peasantry, in general, was not only economic but had considerable extra-economic coercion as well. In such historical conditions, extra-economic coercion had a strong element of sexual harassment and exploitation as well, which often lead to peasant rebellions and revolts (Srinivasulu, 1988).

Thus, in agrarian history, in general, it is necessary to give the rightful status to female labour and to note the general conditions concerning their existence. It appears that the female labour class suffered under many kinds of oppression. They suffered, and continue to do so, under the dominance of patriarchy, class and caste. What is attempted in this article is to draw attention to this missing dimension. However, what we have addressed in this note is basically regarding the economic/structural process of forming of female labourers and not regarding their coming into as a class-for-themselves. A number of accounts of women labourers, participating in peasant and agrarian movements, do exist. For instance, there are well-registered accounts of female workers participating in the Telangana and the Tebhaga movements. We contend that the same attention was not paid to either the origins and coming into existence of female labour or its conditions of existence during the more common, non-revolutionary periods.

III

Considering the contemporary situation of state perspectives on female agricultural labour, it is difficult to reflect over the relationship because most of the time what the state does by way of affirmative action towards male labourers itself is minimal. The government schemes in the form of subsidised loans and so on presuppose a certain asset base as guarantee against accessing loans and schemes. To avail of these programmes, the non-asset owning labour is simply not eligible. But with some optimism, one can expect at least two ways through which the state can respond and alleviate the lot of the rural female working force—first, directly and, second, indirectly through systemic affirmative action. But both require, it must be added, a more welfare-oriented state and not a minimalist or a neoliberal state.

First, the state can intervene in the condition of female labour by seeing to it that the legislations regarding minimum wages are implemented properly. Besides, the state can also envisage special programmes and rural development schemes for rural female labour. Schemes possibly generating non-agricultural employment, diverting female labour from agriculture, are needed. Thus, the labour process may be rendered less onerous.

Second, the state can ameliorate the conditions of female labour by improving the overall quality of life. This is precisely what Amartya Sen argues for. What is required is more public investment into the social sector, especially into public

health and basic literacy, that is, primary education. Particularly, more enhanced public health services will go a long way in improving the quality of life of the rural female labour force, so will the primary education. Weiner (1991) has argued quite forcefully that making primary education compulsory will certainly reduce child labour. Similar arguments can be made regarding female labour as well. Sen's example of Kerala as having achieved relatively high level of primary health and primary education, operating within the system, is significantly instructive. But as mentioned earlier, what it required is a more positively intervening state. What appears to be happening presently is a freezing of investment in social sector which means that whatever additional pressure falls on the social sector, that is, primary health and primary education, is perforce diverted into a totally unregulated, anarchic, private sector. Steps towards regulating the medical sector by the judicial system do not have much bearing on rural public health, in general; broadening and making the social infrastructure more accessible is, however, required. And this necessitates at least a social democratic programme on the part of the state as well as a commitment to such programme by political parties.

Acknowledgements

This research note was earlier presented at the Developing Countries Research Centre, (DCRC) University of Delhi. I thank all the members of DCRC present in the seminar for the discussion. All errors are my own.

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