

Studying Women and the Women's Movement in India

Methods and Impressions

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This paper is an autobiographical account that draws on the author's research over close to six decades on India as a feminist anthropologist interested in agrarian south India. The feminist lens to her includes looking at all of the issues that concern social scientists, workers in the humanities and in the legal and health professions, as well as political activists, making use of methods already developed (by women as well as men) but now including a crucial women's approach. In addition, as opposed to the male approach which has been dominant until fairly recently (despite the pressure early on from B R Ambedkar), a wide range of feminist approaches has come to include, since independence, the effects of caste and class on women's lives. The paper attempts to provide an account of the author's work especially in Kerala and Tamil Nadu and her current engagements with movements for sustainable agriculture.

1 Introduction

One of the reasons I was asked to write this paper is because I have been working on women's issues since 1958, long before the women's movement started either in the United States (us) (where it only began in the 1970s) or in India. One thing that does stand out is that even before any movement existed, women working on women's issues were basically using the methods and ways of thinking that originated in the academic disciplines they were trained in. These methods were all theoretically gender-neutral, although in practice, male anthropologists often only talked to men. This was partly because access to women was difficult for them in some societies, and also partly because males were seen as more powerful by some anthropologists. To the extent that women had been working in anthropology as the field itself developed, at least in the us—starting with Ruth Benedict, a prize student of Boas—the field was slightly different.

To me, basically the feminist lens includes looking at all of the issues that concern social scientists, workers in the humanities and in the legal and health professions, as well as political activists, making use of methods already developed (by women as well as men) but now including a crucial women's approach. In addition, as opposed to the male approach which has been dominant until fairly recently (despite the pressure early on from B R Ambedkar), a wide range of feminist approaches has come to include, since independence, the effects of caste and class on women's lives.¹ When I first started work in India, especially in rural India, very few scholars were interested in the work I was doing, or in my perspective—not only as a scholar, but also as a woman, who also had the handicap of being a foreigner (though some were also interested in me as an American—perhaps because they had known few if any, before me). However, it would have made more sense to them if I had been a male scholar, or even a mere wife, focusing on people's felt experience rather than just seeing people as “subjects.” Today this has changed somewhat, though even now economists generally command more attention than anthropologists.

2 Feminism and Anthropology

I cannot say how feminism became a part of my life, because I was less than six years old when I first noticed people giving less value to what a female child said, in contrast to how they

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listened to a male child. Even when I was in elementary school I was aware that female lawyers (my mother had two friends who were lawyers) had either inferior positions, or no serious legal role, compared to my father's lawyer friends. Thus thinking about feminist issues predated my high school and college education. Though my classes were mixed before high school, I attended an all-girls' high school for grades 10 to 12, and then (after a single year at Hunter College in the Bronx, a newly co-educational college) I transferred to an all-women's college (Smith College) for the remaining three years. Both in high school and at Smith, I was in an institution where it was taken for granted that women are entitled to receive a complete education and to become working professionals.

I decided to go into anthropology for graduate studies instead of continuing in Physics for numerous reasons, which included reading Margaret Mead's and Ruth Benedict's writings for pleasure while taking physics, mathematics, and philosophy courses. Furthermore, I had heard through the grapevine when I was in New York that the head of the Physics department at Columbia had said that he would never give a PhD to a female student. This had a very negative influence on my thinking, and led to my applying to Columbia for entrance into its anthropology department. At that time there were several women involved with the anthropology department at Columbia including Margaret Mead, Ruth Bunzel and Gene Weltfish (whose class I attended during my first year).

As both Mead and Benedict had begun to show in their research based in diverse societies and in different socio-cultural contexts, gender roles were often different from what existed in the us or even in Europe. This appeared very clearly in Mead's work in both Samoa and Bali, and to some extent in hunting and gathering societies like those found in New Guinea. Also, even though neither of them was given tenure at Columbia, Mead primarily was a strong influence on my thinking through her writing—and later also in person, especially after she became one of my dissertation advisors. Mead and Bunzel, along with other Columbia women, made me feel accepted there.

With the male students I often felt that I was fighting or struggling against them, even though they were older than I was—perhaps partly because I felt that my words were not heard. This was similar to the arguments I had often had with my father as a child, which covered almost every subject imaginable. But it was just assumed by (at least some) people at Columbia that the words of women also counted, especially to the women anthropologists I came to know as mentors, as teachers, and by reading their books. From the very beginning of my anthropology graduate school experience, at least the female graduate students knew that they needed to talk with women as well as men in order to fully understand another culture.

In addition, before I arrived in India, I was aware of how political and social philosophies affect women's functioning, and of the important use of a feminist lens to look at just about anything and everything in human life. I had been aware of gender inequality from childhood, and later on had learned from what people told me about how to fight for women and how important this fighting was.

During my graduate studies I became more aware of a gender perspective whenever I did any type of research, even for a class exercise. I was fascinated by what I read about the female suffragettes and how they fought not only for the right to vote, but also for the right to hold office and all that entailed. I remember being often told I was too militant by some of my father's friends when I would venture an opinion. I wanted to be a strong woman because standing up for women's rights was an important part of my life, and I wanted to show that I was aware that women's words were often ignored or twisted. Thus even as a young girl I made my opinions known forcefully, though not always tactfully.

I had applied to Columbia's doctoral programme in anthropology while I was finishing up my BA in physics. Early in my graduate studies I wanted to go to India, and in fact had studied some Hindi to satisfy one of my language requirements, though I ended up doing my doctoral research as part of a large-scale study of Puerto Rican immigrants in East Harlem (part of New York city), which taught me a great deal that turned out to be useful in doing fieldwork in India. In this research project, which was based at a small health clinic in New York, my responsibility was to work with women, mothers of young children and elementary-school students. I was able to get to know the women quite well, using what has been called Spanglish (a mixture of Puerto Rican Spanish and English). I found the women I met in East Harlem, especially those who had come from Puerto Rico, quite open and friendly to me, especially when they found out that I was interested in their own lives, not only their children's, and in understanding their relationships with their husbands or boyfriends. As I spent more and more time with them, I came to know about their lives up to when we met, and also their current lives—how they managed people, how they manipulated both their biological families and the other males in their lives, and how they handled their finances. Life histories, which I had already learned about in my anthropology courses (building on my earlier experiences of talking with the women in my life), became an important part of my tool kit, both in this study and later in much of my fieldwork in India (Mencher 1958).

By the time I arrived in India I had been exposed to many diverse methodologies for doing research, including standard personality tests such as the TAT (Thematic Apperception Test), ways of interviewing children about their perceptions of gender roles, and interviews of both women and men on a wide variety of topics, including their life histories. I had also been exposed to poverty and family issues in the us during my doctoral research, along with the often complex ways in which government policies dealt with the needs of women (as well as men) in terms of housing, children's schooling, and such issues.

3 My First Trip to India

While I was writing my thesis I applied for two research grants to go to India after receiving my degree in the summer of 1958. The first of these, a post-doctoral grant from the American Association of University Women (AAUW), covered

my research and some travel expenses, and was predicated on completing my PhD before starting the work. The second, a Fulbright-Hayes pre-doctoral grant, paid for my travel to and from India as well as some travel within India, and required me to have an affiliation with the University of Baroda in Gujarat.² Because I was fascinated by matrilineal societies for a number of reasons, I applied to go to Malabar District (formerly a part of the Madras Presidency), which had become a part of Kerala state by the time I reached India, though up to that time it had been part of the Madras Presidency, and people in Malabar still retained close ties to the city of Madras. Malabar, along with Cochin and Travancore, constituted the main matrilineal (and to some extent matriarchal) area of India.

I was particularly interested in the Malabar region, because in the north there were matrilineal Muslims as well as Thiyyas (a semi-untouchable caste) and Nayars, and also because I had already made contacts with people from this area when I was in Delhi, Baroda, and Madras city (now Chennai). Just before I left for India, I was fortunate in being visited in New York by Kathleen Gough, who was on the way to the UK with her small son. She had worked in Malabar in the very first years after independence, and brought along a copy of her doctoral thesis on *The Traditional Kinship System of the Nayars of Malabar* (Gough 1954; see also Schneider and Gough 1961), which I was able to go through at night while she slept, so I was able to take notes and read it before she left for the UK. She also suggested that I stay at first in the village where she had worked in north Malabar, which I ended up doing before switching to work in south Malabar later. One of her comments always stayed with me: she mentioned that she was not able to learn much from women, and most of her conversations and discussions were with the men. She found the women less interesting, and I could understand that when I first spoke to the middle-class Nayar women, but later when talking to their daughters, and also to the Ezhava/Thiyya (lower-caste) women, my understanding changed a great deal because women of both groups were freer than the older high-caste women in telling me about their lives and personal issues. I became aware first in north Malabar, and then later when I moved to Kottakal in south Malabar, of the importance of crossing class lines and of working with both women and men.

3.1 Cheriamma's Family

In addition, even before leaving for India, I was fortunate in obtaining an introductory letter to a woman member of Parliament who came from Malabar, Ammu Swaminadhan, whom I met after reaching Delhi. She had already heard from several people that I was coming to India to study *marumakkatayam* (matriliney). She asked me to address her as *cheriamma* (the Malayalam word for mother's younger sister). Through her, I had the opportunity to meet other female parliamentarians, including Lakshmi S Menon, who was working with other MPs (Members of Parliament) on special laws to perpetuate the rights of women belonging to matrilineal traditions—rights which were then being threatened by

proposed new all-India uniform marriage and inheritance laws for women. I also met some of Swaminadhan's relatives living in Delhi, in Madras city, and in Malabar, and later on some who came to New York after my return.

During my first two trips to India I was unmarried, and as such was welcomed into homes, looked after, and also taught how young women were supposed to behave, in a way that would not have been possible if I had been travelling with a husband. I noticed the difference later on when I travelled in India with my husband.

My first stop in India, six days after arriving in Bombay (now Mumbai), was Baroda, where I was to be affiliated with the sociology department at the University of Baroda, where M N Srinivas was a professor.³ While in Baroda I had the opportunity to meet one of the first Nayar social anthropologists, Raman Unni, who was affiliated to the University of Baroda and who had done fieldwork in Malabar. Once I reached Kerala in the fall of 1958, he helped me to visit several lower-middle-class *taravads* (traditional matrilineal households) which were still in the process of partitioning, and in 1962, to visit some of the best-known Namboodiri Brahmin households along with several middle-class Nayar *taravads*.⁴

In Baroda in 1958 I became acquainted with several people indirectly related to cheriamma. This included the brother of her second daughter's husband and his wife who worked in Baroda. I also had the opportunity to get to know M N Srinivas, who was officially my supervisor—even though I already had a PhD. I was happy to get to know him, and really enjoyed meeting some of his friends, the Amins, who invited me along with Srinivas for a weekend at their farm outside of Baroda. I had an unusual experience there. As we were talking the first evening before dinner, I felt that some assumptions were being made about me because they had mostly known British scholars and very few Americans. When I mentioned in passing that my mother had been born in czarist Russia and that I was of Jewish background, it was as if a curtain suddenly dropped from Srinivas's face, and he smiled at me warmly. From then on he treated me almost as if I was Indian, and no longer a foreigner. I had never had such an experience before, certainly not in the US, and it was unforgettable, as I was from then on treated as someone they could all be freer with. It added a kind of openness that I never expected.

Through cheriamma, I had the great privilege of meeting numerous other women who had fought for independence, and a few who were coming into important positions under Jawaharlal Nehru, along with others involved with the new laws being added to the Constitution and serving in government agencies and departments. While their numbers were small, they were quite outspoken in Parliament, and in dealing with constitutional issues affecting women. The women coming from matrilineal families were especially concerned that they not lose their traditional privileges relating to the making and breaking of marriages, the inheritance of familial property, and related issues. Even though they were fewer in number than the male parliamentarians by comparison with

the us Senate and Congress, they were quite outstanding women. All of them had been freedom fighters.

I also had the opportunity of meeting some of cheriamma's family members even before I went to the south, including one whose husband was also in Parliament and whose daughter and small children were all living in Delhi at that time, along with other family members, some of whom were passing through and others who lived in Delhi. Even in Delhi, before beginning my research, I felt that I had entered a totally different world from that of the other students who had come on Fulbright-Hayes fellowships, first because I already knew so much more about India than they did and was being welcomed into families, and also because they seemed to have a much more westernised view of India.

4 Women and the Indian Freedom Struggle

This was all before the women's movement had started in the us, and certainly before it started in India. Yet, because of women's participation in India's freedom struggle, in many ways I found many of the women I met when I first arrived, and even later on, to be stronger feminists than most of those I had known in New York—apart from those at Columbia, and in my undergraduate days at Smith College.

Later on, when cheriamma took me around in Kerala (both Malabar and the former state of Cochin), I was also introduced to numerous older women who had been extremely active in the independence movement, and who came across to me as exceptionally strong and knowledgeable and also concerned with women's issues in a different way than women I knew in the us, as well as other women I met elsewhere in India. What I perceived was a sense of presence and entitlement that we see in many young women today, but that was different from what I had experienced in the us or among non-Malayali women in India, especially middle-class women as differentiated from the small cadres of elite women from highly western-educated households. Despite this, I was struck by how kind many of the older women I met were to me wherever I was.

Because I was coming to India with a fascination not only with matrilineal descent, but also the related issues of matrilineal residence and inheritance of family property, I was especially sensitive to all of the direct and indirect things I observed, such as the difference it made for a woman to be living in a house that belonged to her biological family instead of her husband's, and not having to deal with in-laws very much. This made a big difference for the younger women, even though their older female relatives could at times be strict in keeping with their generational roles. The Nayers on the whole were rather conservative (apart from the Marxists and the extremely left-leaning members of Congress), despite the transitions going on and the gradual impact of western ideas of male and female behaviour stemming from both the older British norms and the newer us influences starting in the 1950s on these educated families.

One thing I had to put into action very fast after getting to India was to keep redrawing and revising as I went along, my genealogical chart of this amazing family who in many ways

influenced my research. They also made me realise how different a view of India I was getting because of my early connections with matrilineal households, though even in those households males were fairly dominant.

The formation of Kerala state, and the push by some of the Kerala males to be respected by the more conservative Tamilians, especially Tamil Brahmins and others they came in contact with in the large cities like Mumbai and Delhi and when they travelled abroad, also led to some of the westernised Malayalis becoming more conservative than their grandparents. For example, a Nayar woman who worked as my assistant much later on (1972 to 1984) told me that her grandmother had had two husbands and was quite a free woman, but she herself had to observe greater propriety.

When I first went to Madras city and was introduced to many Malayalis living there who came from northern and central Kerala, along with their high school and college-going children, I could easily see a difference between these matrilineal women and girls and the Tamil ones, especially in the early 1960s. And this helped me to focus on how the rules of inheritance and descent of a group of related and very distant or related people could affect women's roles (Mencher 1962, 1963, 1965, 1966a, 1966b, 1966c).

5 My Second Trip to India (1962–64)

During my second trip to India, I also had a chance to meet some of the matrilineal Namboodiri Brahmins in the extreme north of Kerala, and also the only (to my knowledge) matrilineal Muslims in India. This has been noted to be extremely rare among Muslims worldwide, and there was at least among some of them a sense of pride in being different. During my first two weeks in Kerala in 1962 I stayed at the home of a well-known lawyer, Parappil Madhava Menon, who was helping various large and famous taravads partition their property. He took the time to show me a number of books written by earlier British legal experts and government servants who were concerned about preserving knowledge about matrilineal traditions. While staying there I also learned a lot from his wife about her own life. She was a strong Congress leader at that time. (This family already had relatives in New York at the United Nations.) He was one of the main advocates involved in the partitioning of the Kovilakam in Kottakal which took many years, and was still going on when I lived there first in 1959–60, and later in 1962. Kottakal was the home of one of the main branches of the royal family of the Zamorin (ruler) of Kozhikode, the ruling family of this area prior to the arrival of the British. According to their rules for becoming the Zamorin, which went by age, often the Zamorin was appointed from the Kottakal Kovilakam (palace).

My interests changed somewhat during this visit, as I came to be more aware of just how different Kerala was from the rest of India. I also kept hearing the poorer women (especially those who worked as agricultural labourers) over and over again asking me one question: "So what are you going to do for us?" Since I did not have money or goods to give them, the one thing I could offer was to write about them and try to publicise

their situation, especially that of the poorer Thiyyas/Ezhavas) in north Malabar where they are matrilineal, and when I moved to south Malabar, the Ezhavas and other women. During the time I was collecting life histories and related data, I not only took histories from middle-class women, but also from low-caste poor women, who worked as day labourers in someone's house or in the fields transplanting paddy, etc. I also became quite aware of how the better-off tended to moralise about the behaviour of the poor. This was especially true among the Thiyyas in north Malabar, and both Ezhavas and Pulayans/Paraiyans in south Malabar.

Following that earlier visit I had changed my focus, and the proposal I drafted when I got back was a comparative study of agroecology, settlement patterns, agriculture, women and farmers, which I sent to the National Science Foundation (NSF) for funding. It was the beginning of my awareness of how important a role women played in food production, especially agriculture, and how the ecological setting in which they worked related to family structure. Prior to starting work on my NSF grant, I did a small piece of research on the Namboodiri Brahmins because I had come to understand that I needed to know more about them—especially their women, but also the males (which included the head of the then united Communist Party of India, E M S Namboodiripad).

In 1962 (for five months mid-July through half of December) I worked on a study of Namboodiri Brahmins in Kerala while also working on agriculture. I divided my interests in this way because I had come to realise that I could not fully understand how the matrilineal groups in Kerala functioned without looking at the traditional elites. It was quite striking to compare the Namboodiris with the other much more prominent matrilineal groups in the state, such as Nayars and Ezhava/Thiyyas. Among the Namboodiris I came to really understand how this elite group of people mistreated their wives and daughters, and the tremendous efforts women had to make in order to get educated. Even among Namboodiri boys there was often a struggle to be allowed to get what they called western education, and there was even greater opposition to education of daughters—though they had always been literate in Malayalam and they all read sacred texts in Malayalam. Indeed in traditional Kerala, there was an important ceremony for each child's first writing, which was performed on a special sacred day in their lunar calendar. It was performed for all Brahmins, Nayars, and other upper-caste boys and girls even traditionally, and stood in a sharp contrast to the rest of India. Yet the Namboodiri girls did not learn the Vedas, though they did learn to read various scriptures. Many of them were jealous when they saw all the Nayar girls getting western-style education. In one village where I lived in 1962, young Namboodiri girls figured out how they could go to the temple, and then sneak out to go to Communist Party meetings, then go back to the temple and return home without their fathers' knowledge. This was a time of real rebellion and they were very proud of their ability to do this.

From Kerala, I then went to work for about eight months in Tamil Nadu, and then for about six months in West Bengal.

After completing my field work in villages in these other states, I then went to London and worked with archival material, focusing primarily on Kerala and Tamil Nadu in the early days of British contact. I have used that material in many publications; unfortunately, it contained very little information about women (see, for example, Mencher 1966c).

Following my first two research periods in India, when I was working without an affiliation with any Indian scholars except for official purposes, for my next two studies I was affiliated with male scholars: first K Raman Unni of the School of Planning and Architecture in New Delhi in 1970–72 (Mencher 1974, 1978a, 1978b), and then at the Centre for Development Studies (CDS) in Trivandrum 1972–75 with P G K Panikar, who was then the Director of CDS. While I always had closer relationships with the women I met in the villages I lived in, especially in Kerala, because both studies were focusing on agriculture, I was not able to devote as much time to women's lives.

6 Methodologies

Although nobody had formally developed methods for studying women, their roles, their attitudes, their spirit, etc, just before I settled down in the first village I lived in, it was clear that all the methods of anthropology were as applicable to females as they were to males. When I first started to work in India I hired a female interpreter-cum-assistant (who was older and more experienced than I was) and she was a great help in working in the first two villages where I worked in 1958 and 1959–60. By then I understood enough Malayalam that I could tell if my assistant was leaving things out, or perhaps not correctly translating the questions I was asking. We took life histories both from women and men, and from a variety of castes. I also did formal interviews, both of women and their children.

Because of my earlier commitment, I administered some psychological tests (the data remain unpublished), and recorded many observations and overheard conversations. I also came to understand the difference between the Kerala women who primarily lived in the houses that were theirs by matrilineal inheritance—which were always in their own names in the land records—as opposed to the Kerala women whose husbands bought the houses they lived in; and certainly the houses of Tamil and Bengali village women whose homes belonged to their husbands. In the former case, there was a sense of independence for the women in their own homes by inheritance in how they felt about this ownership, and as one woman explained to me, a feeling that no matter what happened in her life, she had a home. Also, even when they were younger, they did not have to deal with in-laws.

The varied approaches I learned during my early years in rural India, along with my experiences in Tamil Nadu and even (though time was shorter) in West Bengal in 1963, led me to begin to formulate a research proposal for a large-scale study of women's roles in rice cultivation, to be conducted in three of the major rice-producing states—Kerala, West Bengal, and Tamil Nadu. I was looking for a collaborator, and Vina

Mazumdar, knowing it was hard for me to work with senior male social scientists, especially economists like Panicker, and also that it left me little chance to really explore my interest in gender studies, helped me forge a link with K Saradamoni of the Indian Statistical Institute (ISI) in Delhi.

This project, involving ten villages each in Kerala and Tamil Nadu and eight in West Bengal, required many assistants. The villages in Kerala stretched from the northern region near Cannanore all the way south to Trivandrum District. (Where possible, we selected two villages in each of the five districts in each state.) We hired a local educated research assistant to supervise data collection in each state. Then in each village we hired village assistants to work for us, each from a different section of the village where possible. These local assistants were in turn taught how to collect data in their village or locality. They were expected to visit each household in the sample at least once a week. I devised charts to help some of the semi-literate women make marks on to record what they did each day. In a few places women managed to do it daily, while in others the visiting state coordinator had to help out. For many of the women, seeing how much they could do on pieces of paper was revelatory to them—in at least a few cases, it actually helped with their self-esteem. In other places they found it too hard to follow. These records and the notes taken by the more literate village assistants were kept from about seven to eight months up to a full year. It led to a tremendous amount of data, which had to be coded and entered into a computer—a long, boring process (this was still early in the development of computers).⁵

6.1 Some Methods Used

One of the new and important aspects of this research was the use of local people, even semi-educated people, in direct data collection on a daily or weekly basis, and looking at any effects this might have on their thinking. It was made easier because of the extent of education of even the Dalit (low-caste and untouchable) women and men in Kerala and Tamil Nadu. In West Bengal it was much harder to find low-caste people with any education, since schooling was less available there among the poor. One of the charts required noting how much money was contributed to the household by the husband and wife individually on each day. We used lines of different length to show how much each was contributing. In a few instances in Kerala, husbands were actually shamed into increasing what they gave to their wives, as they saw the different lengths of the lines on the charts. Though only a few were so influenced, it was an eye-opener to those men and women (Mencher et al 1979). Though some of the project data has been published (Mencher and Saradamoni 1982, 1984a, 1984b), there still is considerable data that remains to be analysed from our bulk of materials.⁶

While the project was going on, I was often asked by economists (in India) why we restricted the study to three states and did not try to get a broader picture. In my own discipline, anthropology (normally called sociology in the UK, and by extension in India social anthropology, to distinguish it

from physical anthropology), I often was asked why we were trying to collect data from so many regions. The reason I was motivated to design such a large study was that I hoped to be able to come out with conclusions that might have some policy implications, regardless of whether or not they were used by policymakers.

I restricted the study to (1) states where I had had some field work experience before doing this study, and (2) some of the states where rice was the main crop grown, as well as being one of the main items of people's daily diet (we could not include all of the rice-growing states).

The reason why so many villages were included in the study was that I had become acutely aware of the enormous regional and subregional differences in agrarian relations and ecology, as well as the sexual division of labour. Thus more villages were included, and we only looked at a sample of households in each village—rather than surveying all of the households in each village, as a more intensive piece of research would have required. I tried to visit all of the villages in the study. Nine of the villages were ones where I had lived during previous field trips, and two others I lived in for longer periods during this study; others I visited for shorter periods. At the time of this study the World Bank had estimated that by 2000 (already long past) India would have to feed 632 million rice eaters. In rice areas of India, depending on the region, somewhere between one-third and three quarters of the labour time spent in cultivating a given acre of paddy land was female. We made the decision to do our best to use local females if possible to help with data collection, using males from the village only where necessary. Wherever possible, we hired semi-educated (or in one or two rare cases in Kerala, educated girls) to help with the work (Mencher 1982; Mencher and Saradamoni 1984a; Mencher 1985a, 1985b).

Many of these women, especially the landless labourers, decided then and there to get their children educated enough so that they could do something other than agricultural labour, whereas among those owning land, many decided to hold onto their land and develop it more. Towards the end of work in each village, the state assistant along with that village's assistant interviewed each of the women and their husbands to learn more about their future plans, what they expected from this experience, etc.

In the mid-1990s I hired an assistant to return to a few of the Kerala villages we had studied, to collect data on the women's reaction to the striking decrease in the availability of work in each season. Many were desperate for more work. I was told the same thing when visiting some of the villages in Tamil Nadu during the next few years, while going around with my former Tamil Nadu assistant each time I visited India after 1997.

7 The 'Feminisation of Agriculture'

It is important to discuss the popular phrase the "feminisation of agriculture"—a phrase I have never heard used by any female who does agriculture—either as a landowner, a landowner-cum-labourer, or a simple labourer. Nowadays this

comment is being made by development officers, and senior males in charge of research or trying to influence policy. It is usually stated as something negative. Sometimes this comes out of the automatic assumption that India will follow the US model and its development—that is that people, especially males, will leave agriculture for urban jobs, even though the urban situation they enter is often quite difficult in terms of housing and job availability. Yet, what intrigues me even today is whether this is something negative or something positive. What is really meant by the “feminisation of agriculture,” and why are some of the women fighting to keep it? Since about 2011, whenever I was in India, I have heard even quite progressive male administrators and scholars use this phrase when talking about the situation where women are left in charge of their household farming as males from their households (husbands or sons) migrate to urban areas. Yet, this is only considered a problem where females are not allowed to use implements (that might ease their work).

According to the 2011 Census, several scholars have noted that rural males appear to be moving more to nearby towns and cities, not necessarily to faraway cities. In some cases that may mean that they wish to keep themselves available to help their families in the village, at least during the harvest seasons; this question requires more research and region-wise breakdowns. Often these males spend their weekends back with their village family or even do a little work on their own farm. It can be a small amount of work, but it means being with their wives and children and sometimes their parents. If they are needed to help with ploughing—still not considered something women should do (Mencher 1993)—they can take a few days off from work (at the right time), or engage someone else for the work. In general they are not quite ready to teach their wives to plough, though the situation may be different in Telengana (Uphoff 2015). While I have often heard male administrators as well as research investigators, and even established social scientists, talk disparagingly about this “feminisation” phenomenon, the views of village women are often different. When I have made short visits to the rural areas I knew from before, many women expressed satisfaction with their taking care of and working on their family farms—even though they did not appear to broadcast this attitude. Clearly more research remains to be done on this shift. Looking at agriculture, the critical question has to do with landownership. If they have to work as landless or even semi-landless labourers, then many women still want as many days of work as possible to bring in more money. At least this often holds in areas where female labourers have access to both primary health centres and ration shops along with food from employers, but if they own the land they work on or participate in exchange labour then of course they prefer the least arduous work they can find.

Ignoring women in agriculture as the phrase the “feminisation of agriculture” is being used seems to be framing small-scale (even organic) agriculture as not “modern.” Yet being forced off their land can be undesirable both for women and men. It can also be extremely unhealthy for the poor. In

many parts of the world, the so-called “feminization of agriculture” can be something women like because it gives them autonomy. In fact it is now growing at a time when people are fighting corporate agriculture in the US.

One piece missing from some of the discussion of the feminisation of agriculture always was how it gave the landless women a sense of autonomy. Also, it is important to understand the details of the roles of women in agriculture—from the work they do on their own land, to supervising labourers, to making decisions about which crops to plant—and how the women feel about these tasks. Questions about how the women who themselves do field work view their present situation need to be further explored. Clearly, the answers to this question will depend on the following variables, among others: (1) the availability of healthcare to deal with the health problems of women who do hard work for long hours in the fields; (2) cultural customs about the allocation of food, that is who gets to eat enough and who does not—as well as the availability and effectiveness of various state government policies like ration shops and the general availability of low-cost basic food supplies for agricultural labourers; (3) the degree to which the Dalit women agricultural labourers have been politicised to speak out, and have joined together to support one another.⁷

With conventional practices, women working in agriculture perform what can be backbreaking tasks like seedling removal, transplanting and weeding in bent posture and under wet conditions for more than 1,000 hours per hectare. In addition, in areas where green revolution approaches are used, they are exposed to toxic chemicals. New questions have always been coming up, and some do involve new methodologies. Over the past 30-odd years I have become more and more convinced of the crucial importance of small-scale agriculture, especially since I first saw SRI at a non-governmental organisation (NGO) called RASTA in Kerala in 2005.⁸ But SRI enables farmers to work under healthier conditions, with little or no exposure to chemical fertilisers or pesticides, while creating various other physical and social benefits. In addition, there are far fewer seedlings transplanted, because in many instances only one or at most two seedlings are placed together in a hole and that too at larger intervals, so that planting takes less time once the women have learned how to measure the distance between mounds. The consequences are significant, as we learn from women in India, Malaysia and Cambodia (Tiki 2015; Tiki et al 2015). Women from small and marginal farming families doing SRI have been making the news in India for their

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adoption of this new approach, which challenges the conventional beliefs and practices of rice farming.⁹ However, one rarely comes across any discussion of the impact of sri on the labourers' physical well-being.

With sri practices women spend less time in stressful postures carrying out repetitive movements and they handle lighter materials compared to standard cultivation practices (Uphoff 2015). sri fundamentally changes the conditions under which women have to work. Conventionally, women working in bent or sitting postures in flooded fields for long hours come into contact with various disease-causing vectors exposing them to multiple health risks like intestinal to skin diseases and female urinary and genital ailments. This affects their ability to work and earn money, and furthermore drains out their money on healthcare (especially in states that do not have good primary health centres) and make them indebted for healthcare. With sri practices, rice fields are no longer kept continuously flooded, thus reducing women's prolonged exposure to these water-borne disease vectors. Furthermore where organic sri is being practised, women do not face problems from chemical fertilisers and pesticides.

As women are the producers of our food, we cannot afford to ignore their well-being. When they thrive, our agriculture thrives and vice versa. The eco-logic of sri has a body and gender-logic too which needs to be paid attention to and invested in if we are seriously concerned about our toiling women.

I had the opportunity to observe a very striking difference between Odisha and the states where I worked, Tamil Nadu and Kerala. At a meeting I was taken to in Bhubaneswar in

February 2015; just looking at the Dalit and Adivasi women it was striking to me how much harder life was for these women who ate less and lacked any kind of medical care.

8 Conclusions

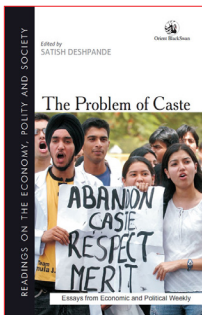
What new generations of scholars can learn from the work I did and what I observed include:

- (1) Having access to historically older documents, which help us to see whether or how much many things have changed over time. This kind of information can also provide some perspective on current battles for women. Today in rural areas, at least some of the poorest women are in danger of losing their land, both through struggles with outsiders, including (mostly male) "developers" who seem to be doing their utmost to make the Indian countryside look like the us or China or to be "modern."
- (2) The importance of going to a number of villages and never stopping with one village, as was traditional earlier on in anthropology.
- (3) Involving villagers in the research itself, and looking at both female and male leaders; also including both small- and medium-size landowning farming households, as well as landless labourers of all castes and religious groups.
- (4) Talking to and including all castes, which often means working with people especially women belonging to the so-called backward classes, as well as Dalits, and if found in the villages, scheduled tribe women as well as the diverse Muslim groups.
- (5) The importance of hiring assistants from the entire range of castes from Brahmins to Dalits, because doing this enabled

The Problem of Caste

Edited by

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Caste is one of the oldest concerns of the social sciences in India that continues to be relevant even today.

The general perception about caste is that it was an outdated concept until it was revived by colonial policies and promoted by vested interests and electoral politics after independence. This hegemonic perception changed irrevocably in the 1990s after the controversial reservations for the Other Backward Classes recommended by the Mandal Commission, revealing it to be a belief of only a privileged upper caste minority – for the vast majority of Indians caste continued to be a crucial determinant of life opportunities.

This volume collects significant writings spanning seven decades, three generations and several disciplines, and discusses established perspectives in relation to emergent concerns, disciplinary responses ranging from sociology to law, the relationship between caste and class, the interplay between caste and politics, old and new challenges in law and policy, emergent research areas and post-Mandal innovations in caste studies.

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me to get a clearer picture of the diverse ways in which each person viewed her or his world (and in addition actually living day by day with an assistant gives one insight that asking questions or even observing can do). This is because of the many things that come out accidentally as a result of just being with someone day after day.

(6) The importance of both caste and class, and how a full picture has to include the full range, and only really close human relationships would help with this understanding.

(7) Reading from the recent flowering of Dalit women's voices, especially from Tamil Nadu where I have worked before, and in Andhra Pradesh and Telangana. I have had the opportunity of reading English translations from Telugu of Dalit women as directly translated as possible. Their English has been for me

no harder to understand than the English of the Puerto Rican women I worked with in the 1950s, and in many places much easier to read. Their stories tell us better than any other research what needs to be done to make a difference for Dalit and tribal women.

Many women and their families are in danger of losing their land as they struggle with local city, town and state governments, along with the central government trying to move them to urban slums. Yet, having worked in the slums of New York city, I worry about what this will do to both adult males and females as well as their adolescent and younger children. This again takes me back to the work I did before going to India, among Puerto Rican women in New York city, and how they longed for the villages they had grown up in.

NOTES

- 1 Only recently, a group of Dalit women activists came to New York from India and gave a fascinating discussion and performance about how they are doubly discriminated against in India. While they were mostly North Indian women, whose backgrounds were somewhat different from the Dalit women I had known in South India, they clearly had the same reaction to their situation. What was particularly striking was the reaction of some of the black US students in the room, who made it clear how they totally understood this combination of forms of discrimination (gender and race in their own case).
- 2 Though my main desire was to study people living in matrilineal households in Malabar, both my grant applications focused more on child rearing since that was a principal subject of my doctoral thesis. During my time in Kerala I worked on both subjects, though I have published more on matrilineality and other things I became interested in as a result of living in Kerala villages.
- 3 As a side note, it was on the train to Baroda that I met a young woman, Sukumari, whose brother was married to a relative of chieramma. Interestingly, during my first 30-odd years of travelling around in India, I experienced one after another such coincidences involving members of this family.
- 4 In 1970-72, I worked with K Raman Unni and assistants on a comparative study in Tamil Nadu and Kerala on a related but different set of issues.
- 5 I managed to get a fairly large grant from the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, using PL480 funds (rupee funds that were part of the official pay-back for US wheat exported to India during the mid-1970s under President Johnson) which enabled us to pay all of our village assistants what was then a decent salary—for many of them, the first salary they had ever earned. At the time, I did not fully understand all of the issues involved in using these funds, but do appreciate how they helped us to carry out this large-scale study, which at least benefited the poor village women (and a few men) who worked for us in Kerala, Tamil Nadu and West Bengal.
- 6 I would be glad to hear from anyone who might be interested to participate in this work.
- 7 I mention all of this because of recent work by Sabarmatee Tiki, the head of Sambhav (an NGO which runs a large organic and training farm outside of Bhubaneswar). She is the only scholar I know of who has studied the effects of hard manual labour on the bodies of women

and men who work in rice cultivation. Her data clearly shows that SRI is less arduous and painful for the women who do transplanting and weeding. However, all of her data comes from a state where the nutrition of women, especially those who do field work, is poor, and where they do not have the primary health center protections found in Tamil Nadu and Kerala. Thus the situation is especially dire for poorer women in Odisha. I do not know if they indulge in any of the pleasurable activities like those mentioned to me by Tamil and Malayali women, such as singing together and gossiping and laughing, and the sense of comradeship.

8 I have written several articles about SRI/SCI and given numerous talks about it, along with reading the work of many others, including Norman Uphoff from Cornell University, whose latest book (Uphoff 2015) is the best summary of current knowledge on the subject.

9 SRI has in recent years been adapted to other crops, giving rise to such terms as SWI (System of Wheat Intensification), SSI (sugar cane), and more generally, SCI (System of Crop Intensification). This was accomplished mainly through the work of the Centre for Sustainable Agriculture (CSA) in Hyderabad.

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