

Socio-Economic Conditions of Women Agricultural Labors in Tamilnadu During 20th Century - A Historical Study

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Abstract: This paper presents a historical study on socio-economic conditions of women agricultural labors in Tamilnadu during 20th century.

Keywords: Socio-Economic Conditions, Agricultural Labors

1. Introduction

An attempt is made to analyze the social status of the female agricultural laborers in Tamil Nadu. The women folks were although treated at par with male agriculture laborers certain level of discriminations prevailed. Women agricultural laborers were facing different experiences based on their age, caste, marital status and possession of parental assets, migration and daily wages.

It is evident from the analysis that poverty compelled the female to join in the work force in their early age. Due to this early involvement of the employment, female had to forgo their studies. The female children were given more responsibilities of maintaining their domestic affairs. Due to lack of skills they were given less salary. Early marriage was very common in the agricultural families. Due to poor economic conditions and bad practice of the dowry system among the agricultural families, unmarried girls were commonly found among the agricultural women laborers. Relevant information from various sources were collected and properly cross checked for the effective Research on the above said topic.

Agriculture is the largest Sector in India. It was continued to be the main source of livelihood to the majority of the rural population. "Agricultural labor means those who were engaged in raising crops on payment of wages" [1]. Agricultural laborers constitute the largest chunk of the labor force. Most of the agricultural labor were illiterate, unskilled and hail from depressed class communities. They were landless and depend on wages. Generally, women spent 13 to 15 hours for different agricultural and house hold work. These valuable contribution of rural women were not only income generating but also expenditure saving.

2. Objectives

To study the Socio-Economic conditions of the agriculture

based female laborers.

To examine the problems and difficulties faced by agricultural laborers.

To know their wages compared with men for the same work.

3. Methodology

To study the contribution of female labor in the field of agriculture and other house hold works required primary and secondary materials. which were collected from different sources. Primary materials were collected directly from the field to know about the women labors strategy. Materials from the written sources like book and journals, Manuscripts and Magazines were collected from various Libraries and Archives as secondary sources.

4. Social and Economic condition of the women

Women in India play dominate and important role in agricultural products. Nowadays there are visible changes in women participation in Agricultural production because of the greater opportunities. Large number of skilled women laborers were forced employee in various organization. In the agriculture sector, women have less education and technical skills and majority of them use low yielding and labor intensive and traditional farm practice which may adversely affect agricultural production.

The main reason for accepting lower wage than men is physical hard type of work. The biological weakness of women is considered as a second reason. The third reason is the traditional practice and following the unorganized manner. Social responsibility like cooking 2-3 times a day for the family, women feed, swaddle loves, caresses, washes and lull the child to sleep become a routine job.

Nearly 65% of the scheduled caste and scheduled tribe laborers were living in the huts which are under the two laths housing schemes implemented by the Government for weaker section. In general, Agricultural laborer's houses were small huts with mud walls with thatched roof. Only a 58% of the back word caste people have house which is something better to live in with mud walls and tiled houses [2].

The huts and huts like houses without proper ventilation affected their domestic functions. Insanitation around the colonies creates unhygienic atmosphere. Washing the cloths, cleaning the Utensils, taking bath in front of the house were result of insanitation and spread of epidemics. Those who possess cattle have constructed shelter right in front of their houses and this act was also spoil the atmosphere.

5. Water Supply

Generally, in the absence of taps they depend upon wells for water. Hence women have to go long distances to draw water from the well and carry it to the home which was considerably affects their health and labor power. Women have to work with these difficulties along with minimum facilities, they have to work hard in discharging their domestic work also.

6. Wages

The female agricultural laborers receive their wages both in cash and in kind. They receive their wages in cash during the time of transplanting and weeding and in kind during the harvesting season. In both the cases, however, the situation was not bright. When they receive cash payment, they had to bear the burden of purchasing food items. But in the case of payment in kind they lose their freedom of purchasing different food articles. The mode of payment had other implications also.

The female agricultural laborers were overburdened with work both at home and at the work spot. Yet they undertook the job of purchasing food stuff. After collecting the wages from the land-owners, they go for shopping either straight away from work spot or in the next morning. The major food items were purchased from the Ration shops for daily consumption includes rice, oil and pulses. As rice is the staple food, major part of their wages and the other income of the family were spent on groceries and rice. As a consequence, they left with only a little money. Hence many a time they satisfy themselves eating ground red chili powder mixed with salt in lieu of vegetables [3].

The meager wages hardly entails them to go for the paddy of good quality. Hence, they always prefer low variety of food grains for consumption. They also prefer tapioca or millets as a staple food many a time. It is considerably cheaper than rice and would be easily available in large quantities at a lower cost.

In the majority of the households, women discharge the executive responsibilities of family. The women collect the wages of their husbands to purchase the grains for a day or a week depending upon the purse and also market rates. Many a time they return home with only a handful of commodities due to high prices. Though they spend their entire wages they could not get provisions in the required quantity.

During the harvesting season the female agricultural laborers receive their wages in kind. They receive food grains of low quality which would be full of chaff. Except in a few cases where the women take it to the rice mill for grinding. Majority of cases they would do it on their own by undertaking the

additional work. In some cases, they also exchange the paddy to purchase daily requirements like sweet oil, kerosene and vegetables.

The scheduled tribe agricultural laborers are easily exploited. In this way, the female agricultural laborers are exploited at two levels despite working hard for their livelihood. The landlords offer them cheap and new paddy which is weightless. At the second stage they are at the mercy of the shopkeepers where barter system prevailed much to the disadvantage of the agricultural laborers.

7. Expenditure on food and other things

Generally, the level of expenditure depends upon the level of Income. It is observed that the majority of the female and male agricultural laborers, nearly 50% of agricultural Laborers spent Rs. 6/= per day for their staple food. A large number of agricultural Laborers could spend Rs.5/= a day on staple food. This is mainly due to unemployment and meager earnings of the family. Adequate intake of calories was not possible in these families. It is significant to note that the female scheduled caste and backward caste agricultural Laborers in Tamil Districts spent the major part of their income on purchase of food items. It is also evident that the scheduled tribe respondents fall under the marginal group. It is observed that the majority of the husbands had spent their income on items such as liquor and did not support the family either by purchasing food stuff or by attending to any of the family needs. Next preference is given to the children. In a family women stand lost in the matter of consumption of food. However, the female agricultural laborers, despite working at par with men and contributing to all their earnings for food [4].

8. Cloths

The labor households spend very meager amount on clothing. As they earn only meager wages they cannot afford adequate clothing for all the family members. They buy some cheap clothes of cotton.

Women wear handloom sarees even to eight metres in length which are available at cheap rates. These sarees are more durable than the mill-made ones. Women wear cotton blouses, men wear white dhoti and white shirt of cheap quality available at a low price. The boys are seen always half naked in torn clothes. The girls wear frocks or skirts with blouses. Generally, they buy clothes once or twice in a year mostly on the eve of some festival or the other. They buy clothes from the street sellers who sell on credit. Women rarely go to shops to buy clothes. All the members of the family prefer cotton cloths to adjust money. Families invariably get in to debt to buy clothes [5].

Due to inadequate clothing, the poor agricultural labors become a prey to cough, cold, fever, pneumonia during the rainy season and also in winter. Their bodies are exposed to sun and rain alike in all the seasons. This invariably reveals that woman continues to remain in the secondary position in the

family though she makes economic contribution for the upliftment of the family. The cultural bondage and traditional outlook may be the reasons for this state of affairs. Man continues to dominate his woman. Thus, the amusement and entertainment facilities meant for the people are beyond the reach to the agricultural laborers who live at the lowest range of the occupational hierarchy and earnings are not adequate to give them two meals [6].

The working situation and the living conditions of the female and male agricultural laborers deteriorated over the years with a gradual but steady decline in their earnings. The factors like the seasonal nature of employment in agriculture, preference of men over women, absence of skills, landlessness, migration and lower wages contributed considerably for the depressive work situation of the agricultural laborers in general and the female agricultural laborers in particular.

The provision of the irrigational facilities and introduction of new commercial crops in agriculture did not improve the basic life styles of the agricultural laborers. Discrimination at work and in the payment of wages continued to remain unchanged. The slightly better employment avenues available in the irrigated areas did not bring in any change in their economic condition but in a way introduced new modes of exploitation.

The system of daily payment of wages in cash or kind during the harvesting season depended upon the mercy of the employers. Advances taken from the landlords resulted, cuts in their wages and starvation for some days. Perpetual bondage of the husbands of the female agricultural laborers plunged the families into grief and sorrow [7].

Added to this poverty, drought and famine forced the agricultural laborers to shift their place of work. They generally moved to the irrigated areas for survival. The migration of the female agricultural laborers to the neighboring villages for finding agricultural and non-agricultural jobs during the harvest season is common in the irrigated regions [8].

9. Marriages

Early marriages are very common among these families. Marriages are held when they are just in their mother's arms. Divorce and remarriages are also common events, in their lives. Despite the prevalence of the custom of the early marriages, considerable number of female agricultural laborers remained unmarried due to their inability to pay the required amount of dowry to the bridegrooms [9].

10. Conclusion

The economic position of the agricultural laborers was

deteriorated with man's addiction to alcohol and smoking. The majority of the male members in the family spent a considerable amount of their income on liquor and smoking which in turn, affected their women. In the drunken state, men beat their women for no fault. The helpless situation is discontentment among the family members and also plunged them into indebtedness. The majority of the agricultural laborers of either sex are sunk in heavy debts raised for different purposes. The exorbitant rates of interest charged by the money lenders and the landlords resulted in their continuous bondage. Meager wages, non-availability of work during the lean season resulted in perpetual bondage for which they pledged a high value. Pledging of articles is also not uncommon for raising loans. Significantly in most of the cases, borrowed amount is spent on unproductive items rather than on productive ones. It resulted in an unhappy life. Dilapidated housing conditions, shrinking physical appearance, inadequate clothing, leads to deterioration in the society.

It is obvious that socio-economic status of the agricultural laborers declined, though they worked hard. Their sheer dependence on labor has aggregated the situation. The social conditions in which they live continue to be traditional, exploitative and anti-women in character and impede the development of the agricultural laborers in general and of the female agricultural laborers in particular.

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