

AGRARIAN CRISIS: WOMEN'S ROLE IN REVOLUTIONARY TRANSFORMATION

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**A POLICY PAPER BY
FOCUS ON THE GLOBAL SOUTH
JOSHI-ADHIKARI INSTITUTE OF SOCIAL STUDIES
IN COLLABORATION WITH
Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung – South Asia**

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Cover Image: Google Commons Images

Images (Inside Pages): PARI (People's Archive of Rural India),
Google Commons Images and Vikas Thakur

Published by: Focus on the Global South with support from the Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung – South Asia office.

The publication is sponsored by the Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung with funds of the Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development of the Federal Republic of Germany. This publication or parts of it can be used by others for free as long as they provide a proper reference to the original publication.

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August 2022



JOSHI-ADHIKARI INSTITUTE OF SOCIAL STUDIES





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AGRARIAN CRISIS: WOMENS' ROLE IN REVOLUTIONARY TRANSFORMATION

Hira Mukane is a 45-year-old tribal woman from Dalkhan village in Thane district, Maharashtra. She lives with her 52-year-old husband Vitthal, 27-year-old son Manoj, 25-year-old daughter-in-law Shalu and 15-year-old daughter Sangeeta. Vitthal suffers from sickle cell disease. He has to undergo blood transfusion twice a month at the district hospital. Hira, Manoj and Shalu used to work as agricultural labourers in nearby farms. During sowing and harvesting seasons they earned Rs. 100 a day. To supplement their income Manoj also worked at the construction sites in Thane, Kalyan and Mumbai. What they earned was just sufficient for bare essentials like rice, oil, salt and Vitthal's medical expenses.

This fragile livelihood equilibrium was broken in 2017, when farm owners in the region started selling their land to make way for the Mumbai-Nagpur Expressway. Hira and others stopped getting farm work. When they did not get work for the entire year, Hira and her family decided to move out in search of work to the brick kilns near Ganjal village of Palghar district. It was a difficult decision but in March 2020, Hira, Manoj and Shalu left home to find work in the brick kilns. They had planned to work there till May and earn around Rs. 50,000. The schedule planned by them was unfortunately cut short by the nationwide Covid-19 lockdown announced on 24 March 2020. The brick kiln owner abruptly stopped work and told all the workers to go back home. Simultaneously, the state transport buses also stopped running because of the lockdown. Hence, on 26 March Hira, Manoj and Shalu started their journey back home on foot. They walked continuously for 21 hours and covered a distance of 104 kilometers. They did not stop even for a small break in between and reached home in the early hours of 27 March. They had brought back with them their clothes and utensils, a 12 kg sack of rice, an 8 kg sack of ragi flour and Rs. 8,000 as wages for their work for three weeks.

(A report by Jyoti Shinoli published in the People's Archive of Rural India, 17 April 2020)

This short report describes the fragile livelihood equilibrium of a major section of men and women, who constitute the agrarian workforce in India. It also tells us how development initiatives of elite India have uprooted the lives of the marginalised people. It narrates the consequences of the thoughtless and callous response of the government to the Covid-19 pandemic threat. In the end, the story also highlights the grit of men and women living at the periphery. This mettle gives them the strength to face extreme adversities and yet not break down.

The nationwide lockdown announced by the government with merely four hours' notice led to complete mayhem in the country. An unprecedented crisis of migrant workers was unfurled by this sudden decision. Factories and workplaces shut down and millions of unskilled and semiskilled migrant workers were thrown on the streets without food, money and shelter. They thronged railway stations and bus stands to go back home to their villages. There were no buses and no trains. Like Hira, Manoj and Shalu, tens of thousands of migrant workers walked hundreds of kilometers back home to their villages. There were old and sick and disabled people among them and there were women with small babies. They walked in the glaring sun and in the dead of night. As many as 981 people allegedly died due to hunger, exhaustion, road and rail accidents and police brutalities.

In September 2020, the Ministry of Labour and Employment stated in the Parliament that the government had no record on the migrant workers who walked back home and died on the way.

This, however, was only the beginning of the drama enacted during the pandemic era. One and a half months after the abrupt announcement of nationwide lockdown, on 12 May 2020, the Prime Minister announced a mega package of Rs. 20 lakh crore to provide relief to the people and help the country fight the fallout of the Corona virus pandemic. The finance minister Ms. Nirmala Sitharaman explained in detail the provisions included in the package over the next five days. On 15 May 2020, she announced the third tranche of the relief package, which contained 11 measures for the agricultural sector. These included setting up of infrastructural funds, formalising Micro Food Enterprises, vaccination drive for cattle, etc. However, most importantly, the finance minister introduced three reforms in the agricultural market structure as part of the 'relief package'.

These reforms referred to amending the Essential Commodity Act, abolishing the Agricultural Produce Marketing Committee (APMC) Acts of state governments and formally institutionalising contract farming between farmers and companies. All three reforms aimed at deregulating the existing market structure. When the pandemic and the lockdown had aggravated the agrarian crisis and distraught small farmers and landless workers needed protection and material help from the state, the government announced reforms providing easy pathways to the corporates and multinationals to enter the agricultural markets and make unrestricted profits.



FARM LAWS FAVOURING THE CORPORATIONS AND AGRIBUSINESS

The reforms announced by Nirmala Sitharaman were approved by the Union Cabinet and three ordinances were promulgated by the President on 5 June 2020: 'Amendment in Essential Commodity Act 1955' Ordinance, 'Farmers' Produce, Trade and Commerce (Promotion and Facilitation)' Ordinance and 'Farmers (Empowerment and Protection) Agreement on Price Assurance and Farm Services' Ordinance. When the monsoon session of parliament began on 14 September, bills corresponding to these ordinances were placed in both the Lok Sabha and the Rajya Sabha and were passed. On 27 September, the President gave his assent to the three bills passed in the Parliament and they became laws. The three new farm laws were to introduce the following changes in the agricultural marketing structure.

AMENDMENT IN ESSENTIAL COMMODITY ACT, 1955

The Essential Commodity Act, 1955 provided rules to regulate and control production, price and distribution of essential commodities. The list of essential commodities covered food items, fertilisers, drugs, petroleum, jute and so on. The amendment in the Act removed cereals, pulses, oilseeds, edible oils, onions and potatoes from the list of essential commodities. Thus, marketing restrictions on these commodities like limiting the stocks and disallowing their transport from one place to another were to be removed. It would no longer be necessary to procure a license for trading in these commodities.

FARMERS' PRODUCE TRADE AND COMMERCE (PROMOTION AND FACILITATION) ACT

In the 1970s, state governments had enacted 'Agricultural Produce Marketing Committee (APMC) Acts' in order to prevent exploitation of farmers and ensure fair pricing for their produce. The APMC Act makes it mandatory that farm produce is sold in the premises of government market yards (Mandis) through open auction. APMC Act regulates the trade by providing licenses to buyers, commission agents and private markets. The Marketing Committee provides necessary infrastructure for the marketing operations like weighing and grading the produce and conducting price auctions, etc. It also imposes a levy on all the transactions that take place in government market yards or in private market yards licensed by the committee. Procurement of grains by the Food Corporation of India (FCI) also takes place in APMC market yards.

According to the new Act, it would no longer be mandatory for the farmers to sell their produce in the APMC mandi premise or markets notified under state APMC Act. The new Act allowed trading of farm produce outside the notified mandis of the state government. The farm produce can be sold and bought in new trade areas like farm gates, factory premises, ware-houses, silos and cold storages. The new Act also allowed electronic trading platforms in these trade areas. Further, transactions in new trade areas would be exempt from any levy by the state authorities.



FARMERS' (EMPOWERMENT AND PROTECTION) AGREEMENT ON PRICE ASSURANCE AND FARM SERVICES ACT

The Act aimed at creating a national institutional framework for contract farming. In contract farming, the agreement between the farmer and the buyer (the company) regarding price and quality and quantity of produce is made before the actual production takes place. The Act provided for a conciliation board to settle disputes between the farmers and the companies. In case, the dispute remained unresolved, it could be taken to the Sub Divisional Magistrate court and finally to the appellate authority at District Magistrate level. The Act did not allow farmers to go beyond the authority of the District Magistrate. The law courts could not be approached for settling the dispute.



FARMERS' PROTEST

All the three Acts were designed to facilitate greater entrenchment of corporations and agribusinesses in the agricultural commodity markets and withdrawal of state from its responsibilities. Farmers clearly perceived these Acts as anti-farmer and pro-corporate. They refused to accept withdrawal of state interventions from the agri-markets and surrender marketing spaces to corporations.

The protest by the farmers against the government's pro-corporate move surprised the entire world. Starting from 26 November 2020, tens of thousands of farmers gathered at five different sites on the borders of Delhi and camped there demanding the repeal of the three draconian farm laws. As many as 500 farmers' unions across the nation came together to form the 'Samyukt Kisan Morcha (SKM)' - the central organ for planning, coordination and negotiations. It was not just 500 unions that came together in the protest. The protest brought together all sections of the rural population. The movement was initiated by the resource rich and the middle level farmers of Punjab and Haryana, who are the main beneficiaries of government procurement at minimum support price. The new farm laws threatened their economic stability. But soon they were joined by the small and marginal farmers, tenant farmers and the landless wage workers. They understood that implementation of these new farm laws will also give a severe jolt to their existing fragile livelihood equilibriums. Small farmers who sold their produce in government market yards thought that they would lose their market space and eventually their land. Many at the protest sites expressed the fear they felt of losing their land. The landless households were afraid of losing employment. And finally, rural and urban poor households feared that the end of FCI procurement would mean the dismantling of the Public Distribution System (PDS), which provided them subsidised food grains. The protest sites collected more and more participants every day. Many of the rural participants were not even directly linked to agricultural work. Similarly, urban participants from poor households joined the protest. The gatherings cut across all class, caste, regional, religious and gender barriers. Students, activists, artists and professionals all extended their solidarity and

stationed themselves at the protest sites. The joint platform of Central Trade Unions (CTUs) supported the united front of farmers all through and with great commitment. Repeated strikes were undertaken by the working class to express their solidarity. On the other hand, the farmers' protest was also supported by the traditional and conservative khap panchayats of the states of Haryana and Uttar Pradesh. In September 2021, the farmers organised a Maha Panchayat in Muzaffarnagar district and gave the call of Hindu-Muslim unity. Muzaffarnagar is the district in western UP, which was ravaged by communal riots in 2013.

There were 11 rounds of talks between the farmers and the government to find a solution, but the negotiations failed each time. The farmers affirmed that they would agree to nothing less than the repeal of the three laws. Finally, in January 2021, the Supreme Court issued a stay on the implementation of the farm laws. The farmers continued to camp at Delhi borders. Resources were pooled to sustain the year-long protest. There were a large number of old people at the protest sites, who were not in the best of their health. Nonetheless people sat through the shivering cold, the scorching heat and also the nonstop rains. As many as 700 people died during this one year. People died because of ill health and physical hardship and also on account of mental stress. Some died in accidents. At Lakhimpur Khiri, four protesters and a journalist were killed in a deliberate attack. Even then, the common refrain at the protest sites was, 'We are here and will stay here till our demands are met'. Throughout there was no diffidence, no violence and no apparent crack in the united front. Almost all opposition political parties supported the peasant struggle, but the peasant leadership did not allow political parties to formally participate in the struggle. The struggle was, however, unambiguously political with a clear agenda to oppose the neoliberal policy-frame and corporate takeover of the public-sector and the informal economy. The 2020-21 farmers' protest in India indeed set a precedent. The protest became the symbol of 'People of India' versus the 'Corporate World'.





WOMEN'S PARTICIPATION IN FARMERS' PROTEST

Whenever the peasantry has risen against authorities to protect their land and livelihood, the women of the community have invariably stood by their menfolk and participated in the struggle with all their might. Women participation in the freedom struggle, particularly since 1920, had led to the general awakening of the nation. Mahatma Gandhi made it a point to involve women in the 18-point- construction programme as well as the major non-cooperation movements he launched. His mass mobilisations involved peasantry and women. Women participation in the peasant movement is better understood in the wider context, then as well as now. The wider inspiration of the freedom struggle had mobilised peasantry and women then. Be it the Telangana Armed Rebellion or Tebhaga Movement or the valiant Warli Revolt - the courage and tenacity of women participants has always been overwhelming. So has been the case with farmers' protest of 2020-21. The threat of corporate capital swallowing the land and livelihood of the material and spiritual core of India has fired the imagination of peasantry, both men and women, now.

In the month of January when weather conditions deteriorated due to heavy rains, the Supreme Court of India suggested that women and elders should be persuaded to go back home. Their safety should not be put at risk. Women took this suggestion as a

challenge to their robustness and their capacity to put up with adversities. From the deeply patriarchal heartlands of Punjab, Haryana and Western Uttar Pradesh (UP), women started pouring into protest sites in huge numbers. They came with their families. They came with other women. And they came alone from distant areas. Women came with their small babies and spent days and nights away from home with all the enthusiasm and commitment to assert their identity as farmers. And women in their mid-seventies arrived with their heads held high. They sat together strong and tireless. Women from prosperous Jat families were there and women from landless dalit families were also there in big numbers.

Apart from Punjab, Haryana and UP, women also came from far-off regions to join the struggle. They came from Karnataka, from Maharashtra, from Jharkhand and from Chhattisgarh. Many of them were from landless Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribe (SC-ST) households. Giving up daily wage-work and travelling long distances to join a struggle was no small sacrifice on the part of these women.

On 8 March 2021, 50,000 women reached the Singhu and Tikri borders. They were there to celebrate international women's day and the successful continuation of the protest. They were there to assert their identity as farmers and/or workers. Again, on 26 July 2021, 200 representatives of women farmers from nearby districts reached Jantar Mantar in Delhi to hold Mahila Kisan Sansad. They of course condemned the three farm laws and demanded their repeal. But women representatives also demanded 33 per cent reservation for women in India's Parliament thus asserting their right to participate in national politics.

It should be noted that women's contribution to the struggle was not limited to joining the protest gatherings. They also contributed by being in the villages taking care of farm-work and house-work, so that men could devote all their time in public gatherings. At village level, women gathered in small groups and in big meetings to update themselves on recent developments and boost each other's morale. Women's contribution in this way played a vital role in sustaining the year-long protest.

FARMERS' VICTORY AND POTENTIAL GAINS

On 19 November 2021, Prime Minister Narendra Modi announced that the farm laws would be repealed in the winter session of the Parliament. Samyukt Kisan Morcha wrote an open letter to the Prime Minister pressing for other demands before they withdrew their protest. One major demand was to ensure remunerative MSP procurement of all agricultural products and give legal entitlement to this effect to all farmers. The farmers

also demanded compensation for the families of those who lost their lives while participating in the struggle. On 11 December 2021, the 380-day-long protest of farmers formally ended. Having won a victory, the farmers and others returned back home and to their work place with exuberance and confidence.

Actually, the farmers' success in resisting corporate encroachment on their production and marketing space is a big leap forward towards resolution of the agrarian crisis, which has engulfed the economy for the past three decades. The year-long protest, in which thousands and thousands of men and women sat together with commitment to a common cause and with ideological clarity, has tremendously energised the political base of peasantry and of the working people in general. The political base has become more cohesive and more focused. At the same time its dimensions have widened. One may expect a continuum of protests and struggles by working people in the coming days. Any encroachment of their economic and political space will be resisted forcefully and effectively. But one also expects that the political base so created will engender struggles that would demand enhancement of economic and political space available to the marginalised peasantry and working people. In fact, the present demand of legal entitlement to every farmer to get MSP for his produce is one such agenda. Translating it into practice would not only require infrastructure built by the state but also an effort by the movement to make every farmer aware of his/her rights and prepare him/her to fight for the rights.

It is not necessary that the segment of peasantry that is dominant in the 2020-21 struggle and the leadership that has emerged therein will lead the entire future trajectory. As the dimensions of the political base expand, one expects that in future different segments will assert their agenda in different regions. It may be the tribals of Maharashtra and Madhya Pradesh or the migrant workers of Bihar who will assert their agenda in the next phase. One hopes that the unity and solidarity that has been achieved in this struggle will be sustained.

In the end, the resolution of the deep-rooted agrarian crisis will require that the agenda of radically restructuring the land-labour relations is brought to the centre-stage. When and how this agenda is taken up will be decided by those who are part of the peasant movement. But women workers who constitute an important segment of the workforce as well the political base will play a lead role in this endeavour. In order to elaborate the hypothesis of radical restructuring of land-labour relations and the role of women, we will give a brief overview of the agrarian scene and situate women workers in that scene.



LAND GRAB, FARMERS' SUICIDE AND MIGRATION UNDER NEO-LIBERAL POLICY FRAME

Under the neo-liberal policy frame, agricultural land rapidly got converted into non-agricultural uses. The domestic and multinational companies directly grabbed land from the peasantry and indigenous population for mining purposes, for setting up industrial units and real estate development. Initially, the state facilitated corporate land grab by invoking the antiquated Land Acquisition Act of 1894 and used force to oust peasantry and indigenous people from their land and livelihood. There was widespread and sustained resistance to this use of force and direct takeover of land. The government was then compelled to repeal the 1894 Act and replace it by "The Right to Fair Compensation and Transparency in Land Acquisition, Rehabilitation and Resettlement Act 2013". The Act made it mandatory to get the consent of the land owners before the land could be transferred for non-agricultural uses, either to a private party or to a public-private venture. In 2014, when the NDA government took office, ordinances were passed to dilute the Act and enable smooth transfer of land and then in 2015, the state govern-

ments were given the authority to amend the Act according to their requirements and bypass any obstruction that comes in the way of land transfers.

Apart from direct transfer of land, the neo-liberal economic regime imposed a stringent income squeeze on farmers. The tariffs on agricultural commodities were removed and the input and output markets of agricultural produce were handed over to private companies and agribusiness. The state support to farmers in terms of irrigation, credit and marketing got diluted over the years. The new markets erected by companies demolished the traditional community linkages and the government's infrastructure. This substantially increased the risk factor involved in the entrepreneurial space available to farmers. Small and medium farmers found it especially difficult to cope with new technology and new market structures. They took loans and became so vulnerable that the slightest of perturbation led to a complete breakdown. More than 300,000 farmers have committed suicide in past three decades.

Apart from those who committed suicide, a great many small and marginal farmers have been forced to give up their meagre resource base, mainly land, either partially or wholly in order to repay their debts. These farmers have transcended to the category of wage labourers. As mechanisation of farm operations increased, the employment space for agricultural wage workers shrunk. Hence, a large number of small and marginal farmers left their holdings behind and migrated to urban centers or far away land in search of work. The shrinking employment space in agricultural wage work compelled the government to enact the Mahatma Gandhi Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MGNREGS) in 2005. The Act gives every rural household- with unskilled workers, a legal right to demand 100 days' employment in public works. MGNREGS is acclaimed as the largest public works employment project in the world. Although MGNREGS does have an impact on the rural employment scene, what is achieved is very little compared to what is required. The problem of immiseration and unavailability of productive and dignified livelihood opportunities looms large on the rural scene.

INADEQUATE RESOURCE BASE AND ITS SKEWED DISTRIBUTION

The National Sample Survey Organisation (NSSO) conducts 'Household Land and Livestock Holdings' survey in every 10 years. From 2002-03 onwards, NSSO has also been conducting 'Situational Assessment Survey of Farmers (Agricultural Households)'. The latest report for the year 2018-19, has an integrated schedule that combines the situational assessment survey of agricultural households with land and livestock holdings survey. The NSSO reports tell us that the land available for household operational

holdings has declined rapidly in the past 30 years. In the year 1991-92, the area under household operational holdings was 125.10 million hectares. The total number of holdings in 1991-92 was 93.45 million and average size of holding was 1.34 hectares. In the year 2012-13, area under operational holdings declined to 94.48 million hectares and the number of holdings increased to 108.78 million. The average size of the holding got reduced to 0.87 hectares. The situation has further worsened in 2018-19. The total land available is only 84.64 million hectares. In 2018-19, the total number of holdings has also declined to 101.98 million, indicating that during this period, many of the households have given up farming altogether. The average holding size has been reduced to 0.83 hectares. Hence, in the past 27 years, the households have lost 40.46 million hectares of operational land.

Apart from the fact that the land available to rural households is insufficient and is rapidly declining, the agrarian scene is also delineated by the skewed distribution of available land. The 2018-19 situational assessment survey estimates the total number of rural households to be 172.443 million. Of these, 8.2 per cent households do not have any land whatsoever i.e., not even house-land. Following them are 32.1 per cent households, who own only homestead land and no farmland. Next, 30.8 per cent households who own farmland have extremely small size holdings. The average size of holding in this group is 0.2 hectares which is less than an acre. After that we have 13.6 per cent households with average holding size of 0.7 hectares and 9.3 per cent households with average holding size of 1.3 hectares. Only six per cent households have holdings that are larger than two hectares in size. But these six per cent households own 40.6 per cent of the total farmland, whereas the remaining 94 per cent households possess 59.4 per cent farmland. The soil quality of the land possessed, accessibility to water and other farm inputs further exacerbates this inequality.¹

The statistics on availability and distribution of farmland succinctly illustrates the deep-rooted crisis in agrarian economy. As many as 40 per cent rural households have no farmland and 44 per cent have marginal size farm holdings. Majority of these marginal holdings are very small in size. Such small holdings neither provide employment to the available family labour, nor do they fetch sufficient income to fulfil basic needs of the family. Members of landless households as well as marginal farm households look for wage work in the village or migrate outside. With low wages and insufficient work, they take small loans to meet their daily requirements and pay exorbitant interest on these small loans. In the event of any contingency, they meet the required expenditure by selling off their land, either partially or wholly.

¹ Situation Assessment of Agricultural Households and Land and Livestock Holdings of Households in Rural India, 2019, NSS 77th round, Government of India, September 2021.



CARDINAL NEED TO RESTRUCTURE THE LAND-LABOUR RELATIONS AND EXPAND THE EMPLOYMENT SPACE OF AGRARIAN WORKFORCE

NSSO also conducts employment and unemployment surveys in every five years. Since 2017-18, it has been conducting the Periodic Labour Force Survey every year. According to the 2018-19 survey, the total workforce in the country is 467.4 million.² The share of agriculture in this workforce is 40.9 per cent which means that 191.17 million men and women are dependent on agricultural and allied activities for their livelihood. As many as 142.6 million persons are self-employed, 46.3 million are engaged as casual labour and 2.3 million are regular salaried or wage employed. Given the statistics on availability of land, it is clear that neither the self-employed persons have enough land for viable livelihood, nor the casual workers have enough employment to meet their daily requirements. Unless the employment space is substantially enhanced and the land relations are radically restructured, the agrarian crisis will become increasingly unmanageable and may repeatedly explode into mayhem like the migrant workers walk during the COVID lockdown.

² (Labour Force and Employment Growth in India, Balakrushna Padhi and Venkatanarayana Motkuri, EPW 20 Nov. 2021)



On the other hand, the wide spectrum of the political base energised and consolidated in the farmers' protest of 2020-21, offers hope that the marginal farmers and landless households will be able to build organised struggles with concrete demands to enhance their employment and livelihood space. We present in brief a programme proposal in this context for consideration of all those involved in peasant movements and their struggles.

- As a first step, an immediate moratorium should be demanded for profit-based transfer of agricultural land for non-agricultural usage to corporations and other private interests. In the long run, a people friendly and a scientific land-use policy needs to be worked out. It should be environment-friendly and 'market-proof'. This is absolutely necessary for ensuring food security at the macro level.
- The next demand should be to revive the land reform programme. There are still a significant number of erstwhile landlords and large farmers who control land far beyond the ceiling limits imposed by their respective states. Religious institutions, trusts and plantations are exempted from ceiling and possess large tracts of land, which they do not require. All the surplus land needs to be recovered and redistributed.



- Redistribution of land is a necessary step but it is not sufficient to resolve the agrarian crisis. As the land available is limited, even the most efficient and extensive redistribution programme will not ensure land to all the landless houses. In any case, numerous holdings of very small size are not tenable in the long run. There already exist a large number of such holdings. A certain minimum size farm is required for efficient use of machines, optimal water management and optimal crop choice. This requires pooling together individual small holdings and converting them into optimal size cooperative (collective) farms. Thus, the next step will be to persuade small and marginal farmers to form cooperative (collective) farms. Both at the production and at the marketing stage, an elaborate support structure should be demanded from the state to ensure sustainability of these cooperative farms.

- When many such cooperative farms are formed, they need to be federated at the village, district, state and national level. In effect, a national level movement is required to bring together small and marginal holdings and convert them into cooperatives. This entails an institutional restructuring of land ownership patterns - from individual to collective. It is indeed an extremely complex and challenging task, but once realised it can work wonders for the country's agricultural economy. As mentioned already, the small and marginal holdings control 59.4 per cent of farmland. If land reforms are revived, this share will further increase. If small and marginal farms can be brought together and decisions can be taken not on the basis of profit considerations but according to what is desirable and sustainable for the entire society, then markets will change, technology will change and cropping patterns will change. We will have an alternative agrarian structure, where small farmers' cooperatives will produce what is needed by people. We must also note that once the small holdings are integrated in a cooperative structure, it will not be possible to snatch them away for non-agricultural usage - neither by the state nor by the market.

- Land redistribution and the programme of cooperative farms will not be able to provide dignified and sustainable livelihood to all

the 191.2 million men and women, who constitute the agrarian workforce. There will still be landless households that will not be included in the cooperative farm economy. Moreover, even in those households that are part of the cooperatives, not everyone will be recruited in the farm work. This section of the workforce will have to be integrated in the cooperative farm structure by forming a parallel federated structure of labour collectives. The labour collectives should be assigned the entrepreneurial responsibilities in providing required inputs to the cooperative structure and in processing, transporting and marketing its produce. At present, the entrepreneurial space in sectors that constitute the input-output linkages of farm economy is largely controlled by big farmers, domestic companies and multinational agribusiness. In the alternative cooperative farm economy, this space should be reserved for the labour cooperatives formed by the agrarian workforce. In this way, we envisage the expansion of the entrepreneurial and employment space of agrarian workforce beyond the confines of farm economy. Once the labour collectives from agrarian workforce break the confines of farm economy and enter new domains, it will be the beginning of restructuring of the entire economy.

Forming farm cooperatives and integrating labour collectives into the cooperative structure, is indeed a revolutionary project. Formidable adversaries will come in the way. The political base will have to be robust enough to face violence and force. And it should be impervious to all attempts at machinations and co-optation. The exact trajectory will of course be worked out by those who will become the main protagonists in this project. But nothing less than this revolutionary project can promise a permanent and sustainable response to the crisis situation in agriculture and in the informal economy as a whole.

The next sections describe how women workers are integrated in the present crisis ridden agrarian economy and discuss how women can play a vanguard role in this revolutionary project.





WOMEN WORKERS IN AGRICULTURE

We mentioned that according to the periodic labour force survey of NSSO for the year 2018-19, there were 191.2 million workers in the agriculture sector. Women constituted 31.38 per cent of this work force i.e., there were 60 million women engaged in agriculture and allied activities. The occupational profile of these 60 million women is primarily determined by the placement of their respective households. It is then further qualified by gender division of labour in farm operations. Out of these 60 million women, 40.8 million are classified as self-employed in agriculture, 18.5 million are classified as casual labour and 0.7 million are classified as regular salaried or wage employed.

WOMEN AS CASUAL WAGE WORKERS

The 18.5 million women wage workers invariably belong to landless households or households with very small holdings. They are mostly Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribe women (SC & ST). In the community of casual agricultural labourers, the women

are at a disadvantage. There is a gender division in agricultural tasks given to workers and there is a gender bias in wages paid for the work. There are tasks done only by men. These include ploughing, well digging, cane crushing, etc. Wage rates for these tasks are higher. There are other tasks like planting, weeding and harvesting that are done by men and women both. Wage rates for these tasks are lower. And for every such common task also, wages received by women are lower than those received by men. This is true for every state in the country. At all-India level, the average agricultural wage rate for field labour in the year 2018-19 was Rs. 330 for men and Rs. 262 for women. The lowest wage rate was in Chhattisgarh. It was Rs. 214 for men and Rs. 156 for women. The maximum discrimination against women was in Tamil Nadu. The wage rate was Rs. 372 for men and Rs. 180 for women. In Kerala, wage rates were highest for both men and women, but gender bias was present. It was Rs. 673 for men and Rs. 506 for women.³

Apart from low wage rate, the period for which agricultural wage work is available is also limited. Labour is required in large numbers only during sowing and harvesting seasons. Increasing mechanisation has rapidly reduced labour demand even for these operations. According to NSSO reports in the year 2011-12, there were 75.2 million persons (47.7 million men and 27.5 million women), engaged as casual labour in agriculture. In 2018-19, only 46.3 million persons (27.8 million men and 18.5 million women) were engaged as casual labour in agriculture. While men have shifted to other sectors as casual labour, women have not. Their mobility is restricted, both region wise and sector wise. One option available to them has been MGNREGS works.

The notified wage for MGNREGS works for the year 2019-20 is only Rs. 210 per day. The male workers, who can move on to other sectors and other regions do not find employment offered by MGNREGS attractive enough. Women workers have joined MGNREGS works in large numbers. In most states, more than 50 per cent MGNREGS workers are women. In Tamil Nadu and Kerala, more than 80 per cent MGNREGS employment is taken up by women. Unfortunately, the scheme does not provide 100 days of employment to workers. In 2018, average number of work days provided to a household was only 45. Further, the provision to make wage payment into the bank accounts has created problems for women in remote areas and there are many cases where wages are not paid to the workers for long periods.

The shrinking employment space in casual agricultural work has resulted in women withdrawing themselves altogether from the labour force.

³ Agricultural Wages in India 2018-19. Government of India, 2020.



SELF-EMPLOYED WOMEN WORKERS

As many as 40.8 million women workers in agriculture are classified as self-employed. These are women who belong to households with family farms. The family farms also include farming on leased land. Working on their family farms gives these women the status of a cultivator or a farmer. Traditionally, women take care of seeds, cattle, poultry, etc. and engage themselves in various agro-processing activities. But women in small and marginal farm households also work on the farms – sowing seeds, planting seedlings, weeding and harvesting the crop. The exact description of their work varies with region, farm size, crops grown and cultural norms dictated by caste and religion.

What is common is the fact that the land titles of family farms are invariably in the name of male members in the family. Women working on their family farms seldom have land titles in their names. The land rights for women have been a major issue for the women's movement. There has been demand that the land that the government gives to a household should hold a joint title in the name of both husband and wife.

A 1985 policy directed the states to give joint titles to husband and wife in transfer of assets like land and house sites through government programmes. But the directive has not been implemented with rigour anywhere. There has also been a 2005 Amendment in Hindu Succession Act, which gives equal inheritance rights to women.⁴ A recent Ox-fam study has reported that only 12.8 per cent of land is owned by women.⁵

Even if legal title is transferred in the woman's name, the patriarchal norms of society ensure that de-facto control over land and other means of production remains with the man. Consequently, women cultivators do not have a say in decision making. Most of the time, they have no knowledge about the investment and liabilities related to farm operations. And of course, they have no rightful share in the income received from farm operations. The women cultivators participate in the family farm-work not as principal workers but as subsidiary workers. Their work has no separate account and obviously, no separate remuneration. Their participation in family farm work is appropriately pliable to suit the circumstance. When required, they are available for work, and when not required they withdraw themselves quietly. When men move out of agriculture in search of better work leaving their fields, women move in to look after the family farms. If men do not find work outside and return back home, women move out quietly to make space for their men. There is another possibility. In some cases, migrant male workers abandon their fields on a permanent basis. They sell their land or lease it to another farmer. Women who worked as subsidiary workers on family farms are rendered jobless. Some of them look for wage work and others withdraw from the labour force. These women farmers are in practice unpaid family labour and constitute the reserve army of labour for subsistence work.

As in the case of casual wage workers, the number of self-employed women in agriculture has also declined substantially since 2011-12. In 2011-12, there were 51.3 million self-employed women in agriculture. In 2018-19, the number had reduced to 40.8 million. No such decline has taken place in the case of self-employed men in agriculture. Their number was 96.3 million in 2011-12 and has now increased to 101.8 million.⁶

⁴ Land Mark step to Gender equality, The Hindu, 25 September 2005.

⁵ <https://theprint.in/opinion/no-title-no-money-women-grow-80-of-indias-food-but-new-farm-laws-unlikely-to-help-them/620961/>

⁶ 1) From Jobless to Job-loss Growth, K. P. Kannan, G. Raveendran, Economic and Political Weekly, 9 November 2019. 2) Gender Dimensions: Employment Trends in India, 1993-94 to 2009-10, Indrani Mazumdar, Neetha N., Economic and Political Weekly, 22 October 2011. 3) Labour Force and Employment Growth in India, Balakrushna Padhi, Venkatanarayana Motkuri, Economic and Political Weekly, 20 November 2021.



WOMEN CULTIVATORS AS PRINCIPAL WORKERS: DE-FACTO CONTROL OVER LAND AND FARM OPERATIONS

The neo-liberal policies leading to farmers' suicides and migration of small and marginal farmers have brought new protagonists on the agrarian scene. The women who would have remained as unpaid helpers or unseen workers on their family farms, have been forced by new contingencies to come forward and join the community of principal cultivators – a community that is dominated by men.

Farm Widows

Vidya More lived in Kalamb taluk in Osmanabad district of Maharashtra with her husband Sahadev More and two children. Sahadev More had two acres of land. Repeat-

ed crop failures forced him to mortgage his land for Rs. 30,000. His inability to repay the debt and regain his land led to his breakdown. Sahadev doused their tiny hut in kerosene and set it ablaze. But Vidya refused to end her life and her children's lives in this manner. When she saw the hut on fire, she threw her children out of the hut and jumped out herself. Vidya survived with some injuries. She recovered and decided to rebuild her life from ashes.

It was not easy. There was no support from the family. Vidya did wage work in others' farms. She also did stitching work at night to get additional income. With years of hard work, she managed to continue her children's education and also repay the debt taken by her husband. Vidya finally got the land back and became a 'cultivator'. Joining the cultivator community was not simple by any stretch of imagination. People resented the fact that 'she acted like a man'. They stopped water supply to her field. She said, 'I am only acting like a responsible mother.' Ten years hence her son was studying in 11th standard and daughter in 9th standard.

(How Marathwada's farm widows are turning their lives around, Radheshyam Jadhav, Times of India, 29 October 2017.)

Kamala bai Gudhe is a dalit farmer from Lonsawla village in Wardha district, Maharashtra. She is now an old lady in her mid-sixties. In her younger days, she and her husband Palasram worked hard as wage labourers. Kamala bai walked kilometers and brought fodder from the forest. She sold it to farmers and got additional income. With the hard-earned money, the couple bought four and a half acres of land at the edge of the forest. They, along with their children, worked on the farm and dug a well there. But the farm was exposed to wild animals and it was six kilometers from the house. The crops were again and again destroyed by wild boars. The couple could never manage to raise the money required to put a fence around their four and a half acres. Kamala bai and her husband continued to do wage work to supplement their income. One of their sons died. Their debts mounted. And then their crops failed. Palasram could take it no more and one day he consumed pesticide and killed himself.

Kamala bai continued doing wage work and also continued working on her farm. She kept repaying old debts. She lives in a half-broken hut with her son, daughter-in-law and two grandchildren. People think of her as an old woman, as a dalit woman, as a widow, but she thinks of herself as a farmer and walks six kilometers to her farm with her grandchildren with a great deal of pride.

(Suicides are about living, not the dead, P. Sainath, The Hindu, 21 May 2007)

In the above two cases, husbands died leaving their land and their debts to their widows. In other cases, farm widows have had to fight for their right to cultivate the land that was being cultivated by their husbands. Brothers or other male relatives are quick to come forward and take control of the land. Woman is offered a share of the income from her husband's land which is a meagre amount. But more and more women want to know the details of the land and the debt left behind by their husbands and take control of the assets and liabilities themselves.

Taking de-facto control of the land is one part of the struggle. A farm widow's other prolonged and complex battle is to get land title transferred in her name. Without land title, the woman farmer cannot apply for institutional loan or any other official assistance. She cannot sell the land and use the money for any other investment or contingency expenditure. Transfer of land title in the name of farm widow is thus necessary to make farm operations viable. Unfortunately, it constitutes a real uphill task. In many cases, the papers are not in order. Land is owned jointly by the family and the land cultivated by the husband is only an understanding among male members. Sometimes, land title in husband's name does not even exist. In other cases, the in-laws refuse to give papers to the widow. And there are, of course, cases where the woman finds that registration fees and required bribes to the concerned officials are beyond what she can afford. The claimant woman has to wage a long-drawn struggle without a definite promise that she will succeed.

WIVES AND MOTHERS OF MIGRANT WORKERS

Women also get de-facto control and responsibility of land when male members move out to far-off places in search of employment. The control and responsibility of land that women get in this case is different. A farmer's suicide is an individual act but migration of able-bodied unskilled labour from a village is a mass phenomenon. Generally, the labour contractor collects men and sometimes also women from a village and takes them in a group to another village or town for agricultural or non-agricultural wage work. Even when a labour contractor is not present formally, migrant labourers move in a group with a group leader. As a result, one comes across several villages where young men have all moved out and women, children and old people are left behind.

In May 2004, the noted journalist Jaideep Hardikar reported a story from a tribal village Batera of Jashpur district in Chhattisgarh. The region had suffered continuous drought



for two years. All men from Batera and nearby villages had moved out to the urban centre Nagpur in search of work. Women, who were left behind took control of the non-viable farms. They called other women to work in the farms. In all the nearby villages as well, only women workers were available. These women did not have land titles in their names and therefore, could not get any official assistance. Women farmers and women workers did not know how to operate farm machines. As a result, farm operations at all levels were carried out manually. Women took care of ploughing, sowing, weeding and watering. They worked collectively, helping each other. Interestingly, at harvest time, the men returned back to take charge. Jaideep pointed out that many such villages could be identified in Bihar, Odisha and Madhya Pradesh also.⁷

In 2017, Jaideep Hardikar wrote another story. It was from Keelathirupanthuruthi in Thanjavur district of Tamil Nadu. On his way to the village, he came across around 100 old women working on a MGNREGS site. Most of them were above sixty years of age. They were SC women belonging to landless or marginal farm households. The village was situated in the Cauvery delta region, which had got ravaged due to long and severe drought conditions. Young men and young women had left their villages and had gone

⁷ Migration, Agriculture and Women, Jaideep Hardikar, India together, 1 May 2004.

to Thanjavur, Coimbatore or Chennai in search of work. In the year 2016-17, there was no income from agriculture. Neither the farmers, nor the wage workers could get any income. For survival old women in the village took up MGNREGS work. Here also they did not receive wages for two or three months. But they stood on their ground with axes and spades in their hands. They were together.⁸

Bina Agarwal, the author of the excellent book on women's land rights 'A field of one's own' refers to women in agriculture as 'disinherited peasants and disadvantaged workers'.⁹ The subordinate status given to women in the patriarchal society, places them in situations where they acquire resilience to face extreme adversities. These adversities bring them together and they develop confidence in their collective strength. Hence their apparently weak position instils in them potential to take a vanguard role in struggles.

VANGUARD ROLE OF WOMEN IN THE REVOLUTIONARY PROJECT

The pivotal task in the proposed programme for resolution of agrarian crisis is to transform the individual ownership of land into socialised ownership. The collective economic base of land and labour will lay the foundation on which a new people-friendly production and market structure will evolve.

To persuade farmers to convert their individual holdings into a collective viable farm is an extremely difficult task. However small and unproductive the holding may be, it still represents survival security for the farmer. He is not willing to pool it into a collective venture. A nationwide programme to convert individual ownership of land into socialised ownership has only been undertaken in erstwhile socialist economies where the state played the central role. The task of erecting a structure of collective economic base in our country will have to be undertaken by grassroot organisations representing the landless and small farmers. It will be a people's programme and will have to move forward without the organisational and material support of the state. The grassroot organisations will have to evolve their own ingenious methods to persuade farmers to join cooperatives.

⁸ At the '100 day' site, the elderly battle drought, Jaideep Hardikar, PARI (People's Archive for Rural India) 21 July 2017.

⁹ Agarwal Bina, 'A Field of One's Own: Gender and Land Rights in South Asia, Cambridge University Press, 1995. Agarwal Bina, Disinherited peasants, disadvantaged workers: A gender perspective of land and livelihood, Economic and Political Weekly, 26 March 1998.



The first step will be to identify subgroups in the community of small and landless farmers, who will readily agree to carry out joint production and marketing activities. The women farmers constitute one such important sub-group. The farm widows and migrant workers' wives work on their farms without access to institutional support and in their impaired position because of gender bias in the society. If they get an opportunity to work jointly with other women farmers in a similar position, they will welcome it.

As in the case of pooling their land, similarly in the case of pooling their labour, women wage workers will readily come forward to make labour collectives. Gender division of labour in agriculture is such that men are responsible for tasks that are done individually and women perform tasks in a team. The German feminist scholar Maria Mies has described the Indian women transplanting paddy in these words:

'In transplanting rice seedlings, 20 to 30 women work simultaneously, wading through the mud and putting individual plants into the soil. They work in a row. All bending down and moving forward as they were... All workers performed the same movement: In one hand they held the seedlings; with the other they stuck them into the mud. All followed the same work rhythm.'

('Indian Women in Subsistence and Agricultural Labour', Women Work and Development Series, no 12. Geneva, ILO, 1986)

Working together like this creates great empathy among women and forming collectives comes naturally to them.

In the female agricultural workforce there is a third section of women workers who work as subsidiary labour in the family farms. As mentioned, a large number of these women have withdrawn from the workforce in the past one decade. A women's movement to collectivise economic base will induce this segment of women farmers to break the patriarchal confines of family farms and assert their right over their labour and also over the material resource base.

As an illustration of how the collective economic base has the potential to generate political force that can transform the society, we describe briefly the collective farming programme undertaken by women farmers in Kudumbashree Mission in the state of Kerala.

COLLECTIVE FARMING DONE BY KUDUMBASHREE WOMEN IN KERALA

'Kudumbashree' which means glory of a family, is a vast network of women's neighbourhood groups in Kerala federated across blocks, panchayats and districts. With around 4 million members, the network covers the entire state. It started as a 'poverty alleviation programme' by the Left Front government in the year 1998. Over the years, it has acquired wide dimensions representing women's empowerment and ensuring their meaningful participation in economic development and political processes. Apart from thrift and savings programmes, the women's neighbourhood groups take up various income generating activities and also share responsibilities with local self-governments on various fronts. One important income earning activity taken up in rural areas is collective farming. Women from landless agricultural labour households and small farmer households come together to form Joint Liability Groups (JLGs) as per specifications given by National Bank of Agricultural and Rural Development (NABARD). The JLG members identify a piece of land in the village that can be obtained on lease. The large-scale migration to gulf countries from Kerala villages has resulted in land and labour moving away from agriculture. Consequently, the villages in Kerala often have plenty of fallow land that is available on lease. The jointly leased land by JLG members is cultivated as a cooperative. The decision making is participatory, the work is shared according to members' skills and capacity and the net income received is shared equal-



ly among all the members. The JLG farms get government support in various forms. The government support includes subsidised credit, subsidised seeds and fertilisers, labour support through MGNREGS, training facilities in organic farming and use and repair of machines, cash incentives and so on. The women grow paddy, banana, vegetables and tubers. In the year 2019, there were more than 74,000 registered JLGs cultivating 57,300 hectares of land.

The Kudumbashree JLGs with their scanty resources have changed Kerala's agricultural scenario. In many villages they have transformed every piece of fallow land into green fields. They have built a green army of women workers to revive paddy cultivation in the state. They are the leaders in a state-wide campaign for organic cultivation of vegetables. They grow special varieties of banana. Their endeavour has increased the availability of food crops at village level and it fetched much appreciation from their immediate family and also from village community at large. Apart from the material achievements in terms of changing the village agricultural scene, the experience of working together on a common economic base has radically transformed the JLG

member women themselves. They have acquired immense confidence in their collective strength. They feel confident of dealing with any financial and /or material contingency on their own without any outside help. And their universe has expanded far beyond their immediate family. It not only reaches out to their fellow workers irrespective of caste and religious differences, but it extends to encompass Kudumbashree members across the state, the village people in general and in a way all those people who belong to underprivileged communities.

But most important of all, Kudumbashree women farmers have laid down a new institutional framework for land-labour relations. From individual ownership of land, the women have moved over to a socialised economic base. True, at present they are only operating on collectively leased holding, but one hopes that eventually it will acquire a more permanent form of socialised ownership of land. The advantages of working on a collective economic base demonstrated by Kudumbashree women will induce a wider community to join their individual small holdings and work on a viable collective economic base.

It is clear that the Kudumbashree experiment is not replicable as such in other states, because the required conditions are at present unavailable to women farmers in other states. But once women are convinced of the advantages of collectives, they will evolve their own path depending on their strength and their constraints.



FOCUS ON THE GLOBAL SOUTH

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Focus on the Global South is an Asia-based regional think tank that conducts research and policy analysis on the political economy of trade and development, democracy and people's alternatives. It works in national, regional and international coalitions with people's movements and civil society organisations and has offices in New Delhi, Manila, Phnom Penh and Bangkok

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This timely report by agriculture economist Jaya Mehta begins with an analysis of the 2020 agricultural reforms in India and the role of women in the historic and successful struggle that led to the Government of India withdrawing the controversial laws in December 2021. The report then elaborates on some of the key weak links in Indian agriculture that have been exacerbated during the three-decade neoliberal reform period. These include issues such as land grabs, suicides by debt ridden farmers, migration and the skewed distribution of agricultural land. The report underlines the importance of restructuring land-labour relations in Indian agriculture from a gender perspective and points to important lessons from collective farming in the southern state of Kerala. Mehta asserts that only a strong women's movement to collectivise the economic base can break the current impasse and assert the rights of women over their labour and land.

