

Indian foreign policy makers have to re-adjust their priorities in this changing global context, and have to recognise the importance of agriculture as an emerging issue in Indian foreign policy, which was hitherto marginalised in India's external economic policy. Agricultural exports had only been resorted whenever there was a surplus in the domestic market. Buyers, in the world market, however, sought regular assured supply. Indian foreign policy has to address the later situation and like the ones

as the controversies regarding sustained agricultural exports.

A special cell should be created in the Ministry of External Affairs to undertake regular consultation with their counterpart in the Ministry of Agriculture, Commerce and Finance to further Indian interest at the negotiations on further liberalisation of agriculture which is likely to continue for the next few years in Geneva.

Problems of Farm Women and Their Empowerment

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Agriculture is the traditional occupation, in which women play an active role since ages. As far as subsistence agriculture is concerned the traditional knowledge women inherited through generations was sufficient. But the present market oriented agriculture requires appropriate scientific knowledge. Unfortunately a specific effort to educate the rural farm women is negligible. Women constitute nearly half of the available human resource in India. About 75 per cent of the total women population lives in rural India, out of which 45 per cent are farm labourers.

Participation of farm women labourers in agriculture, horticulture, animal husbandry, fisheries and other allied fields is substantial, but till now it has remained 'unaccounted and undervalued'. Farm women labourers are considered as 'invisible workforce' in agriculture even though they participate in no less measure. Rural women constitute half of the labour force and also have direct involvement in actual cultivation. But in reality women have always been the object of male subjectivity. Government policies, training programmes, other developmental programmes essentially project male as a 'important participants' and females as 'non-participants' in agriculture.

Role of women in agriculture extends to a wide range of activities. Research studies indicate that, women perform almost all aspects except ploughing. According to Umarani and Thangamani (1999) out of 13 major operations under agriculture included for the study, women were frequently participating in harvesting (75.0%), threshing (73.0%), Post-harvest activities (63.3%), sowing and transplanting (65.8%) and weeding (62.5%). With regard to horticulture, women participated frequently in harvesting (69.0%), grading (67.6%), transplanting and gap filling (62.0%), weeding (54.9%) and bagging the product (54.9%). With regard to animal husbandry, it was found that respondents participated feeding (73.2%), watering (75.0%) and marketing (50.0%) activities.

Since time immemorial, women have been involving themselves in backyard poultry production. And recent days poultry farming is emerging as one of the important subsidiary occupations. Farm women are significantly contributing in this sector. Amudha (1999) reported that in poultry farming, women participated in cleaning and disinfecting the house (76.0%), cleaning and disinfecting the equipment (83.0%), temperature maintenance (74.0%) providing feed (85.0%), watering (85.0%), collection of eggs (63.0%), storage of eggs (86.0%), litter management (70.0%), providing medicated feed (75.0%), deworming (65.0%), delousing (62.0%) and selling of eggs (84.0%) with respect to small poultry farm.

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Sericulture is another important income generating occupation engaged by women. Most of the indoor nature of the work involves high participation of women. Shivamurthy (1995) in his study, reported that in sericulture, mulberry cultivation operations like planting of cuttings, storing of leaves for feeding, removal of yellow and soiled leaves, weeding and top clipping of mulberry plants are purely a women's job. In silk worm rearing, the activities like sun drying of trays, smearing cow dung slurry to the rays and other activities were all performed by women. Thus, it is imperative that, women participate significantly in agriculture and allied activities. But, that fact is not reflected in agriculture training and transfer of technology programmes.

Most of the time women perform agricultural operations with trial and error method, through what they inherited over the generations. Recent modern market oriented agriculture requires more skill and knowledge about the recent technological developments. Research conducted by Umarani and Thangamani (1999) concluded that, farm women have lack of knowledge and skills for about 60-70 per cent of the technologies of crop production, grain storage and cattle management, relating to the operations in which they were participating. Women need training on subsidiary occupation such as animal husbandry and sericulture to perform effectively. In this context, Shailaja and Jayaramaiah (1992) expressed the view that majority of respondents need training in nine areas under agriculture and five areas under animal husbandry. It is therefore necessary, that rural women must be given training on the technological skill to maximize production. Laxmi Raju *et al* (1997) reported that, out of 25 areas of sericultural activities, 14 areas were found to be very vital for farm women. But, in spite of the inevitable role played by rural women specific efforts to educate them through non-formal education is negligible. This results in waste of labour, time, energy and other related inputs/resources, thus affecting the efficient production process in agriculture and allied activities.

Problems of Women Labourers

Discrimination of wages: The low rates of wage

for the women farm labour are due to unorganized nature of employment, most of the time hired women labour are substituted by family members in the small and marginal farms. The seasonal nature of demand for labour in agriculture and non-enforcement of laws to reduce wage discrimination also leads to discrimination of wages.

Unemployment and underemployment: Agriculture sector is seasonal oriented. During the off-season women were unemployed or under employed. The decline of village and cottage industries and the consequent loss of alternative employment as well as skills have resulted in unemployment of women. There is no continuous and steady employment in rural area.

Occupational immobility/women restricted only on farm activities: Rural women are not easily mobile and cannot search alternative occupations like male. They prefer to search employment in their own village or within a short distance from home, because of socio-cultural restrictions in the rural society and family responsibilities.

Emerging male-dominance in agriculture: Introduction of modern agriculture techniques of cultivation, resulted in a gradual displacement of women labour and shrinking of their activities. This is due to male extension agents who communicate only to male, not female. Because of this biased approach, rural women are handicapped with recent technological knowledge and skill, which reduces the job opportunities in agriculture. Large female illiteracy is also one of reasons for lack of recent knowledge.

Lack of resources to take up self-employed schemes: Rural women labour is mostly unemployed or under-employed in off-season. Even though, they have confidence and time to take up self-employment schemes, the lack of resources presents insurmountable problems to them.

Household drudgery: Women play the dual role as house wives and agricultural labourer. Collection of fuel wood, drinking water, cleaning of house and using traditional chulha add drudgery to their work.

Empowerment of Farm Women Labourer

The Minimum Wages Act should be enforced adequately: Wage fixing machinery and monitoring wing should be established region wise and wages for women labourers monitored and common wages strictly enforced in each state. Farm labourer should be educated about the Minimum Wages Acts. Awareness should be created through mass media like TV, Radio. Violation of minimum wages by landowners should be penalized.

Off-season employment programmes initiated in rural areas, exclusively for women labourers: Programmes like DW CRA, TRYSEM, IRDP should be targeted more on rural women labour. Wage employment schemes should particularly implement in the off seasons.

Village and cottage industries promotion: This will facilitate women to get more employment in rural area.

Women labourer focused extension services: Women agriculture labourers should be imparted new technologies through direct contact of extension workers and through TV and Radio (Saravanan and Resmy, 2001). More emphasis on provision of training for women agriculture labourers through various training schemes and other extension methods, such as method demonstration, field visits, field day, group discussion, etc. Training should be imparted through Farmers Training Centres (FICs), Krishi Vigyana Kendras (KVKs), etc.

Institutional support for self-employment: Loans made available through co-operatives, commercial banks and other financial institutions. To get the loan, cumbersome procedures, security need should be eliminated. Needed and interested farm women labourer identified and soft loan should be advanced.

Introduction of technologies to mitigate drudgery of farm women labourer: Recent science and technologies should be applied in rural area to reduce drudgery of rural women. Introduction of smokeless chulha, solar cooker, etc., and drinking water facilities at village level should be introduced individually or on community basis.

Conclusion

In spite of farm women labourers significant contribution to agricultural production system, those who are formulating and executing the policies tended to neglect the productive role of women and their problems. There is an urgent need for women empowerment through various development, non-formal educational strategies and men's enlightenment have to become concurrent events, if we are to witness real progress in agriculture and ensure gender justice.

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