

## CHAPTER SIX

### FEMALE AGRICULTURAL LABOURER

As stated in the previous chapter in an agricultural labourer family men, women and children have to work and pool their income to meet their subsistence needs. This means that women are not exclusive house wives dependent on the income of their husbands. The social identity of a woman is that of a worker rather than that of a house wife. This becomes evident from the fact that during most hours of the day the huts are locked, the women work outside in the fields or in other places and return home at sunset. Of course all "house work" such as cleaning, fetching water, cooking etc. are done by the women, but this fact does not seem to constitute their basic social identity. They do not conceive themselves mainly as "women sitting in the house", that is as house wives, but as workers. Most of the work of women is for subsistence or survival, whether it is wage work or non-wage work, work in the fields, or work in an urban centre.

#### Work participation

A comparison of the work participation rates of men and women as agricultural labourer in the two censuses shows that the work participation among the females is higher than the males in all the three districts. But the number of female cultivators is lower than that of male cultivators.

Table - 29

Percentage of main workers in agriculture, household industry and other work to total workers in the three districts

Working category		Name of the districts					
		West Dinajpur		Cooch Behar		Darjeeling	
		1971	1981	1971	1981	1971	1981
Cultivators	Persons	57.05	47.18	67.95	52.28	30.47	26.93
	Males	58.90	50.39	69.10	54.53	29.98	25.51
	Females	19.83	15.00	29.87	13.69	31.71	30.74
Agricultural labourers	Persons	28.23	34.26	15.59	26.97	9.13	8.78
	Males	26.73	31.72	15.28	26.31	9.08	9.21
	Females	58.46	56.65	26.07	38.26	9.26	7.62
Household industry	Persons	1.35	2.08	2.08	2.36	1.74	2.05
	Males	1.15	1.39	1.78	1.74	1.81	2.23
	Females	5.31	9.00	12.34	12.93	1.57	1.56
Other workers	Persons	13.37	16.48	14.38	18.39	58.66	62.24
	Males	13.22	16.50	13.84	17.42	59.13	63.05
	Females	16.40	16.35	31.72	35.12	57.48	60.08

Source: Census of India, 1981

It is expected that the percentage of working population among the agricultural labourer families will be high. The reason is obvious. In a household which entirely subsists on wage labour, as soon as a boy or a girl attains the working age they try to seek employment. They do not need to complete any professional training course for this sort of employment. Though the work participation in agriculture is very high for the women vis-a-vis the men our data shows predominance of the male agricultural labourers over the female agricultural labourers in all the three villages.

Table - 30

Agricultural labourers in the sample households  
in the three villages

	Name of the villages					
	Bamangram		Batla-Bhita		Alokjhora	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
Total sample population	190	100.00	77	100.00	198	100.00
Male	95	50.00	42	54.55	110	55.56
Female	95	50.00	35	45.45	88	44.44
Total agricultural labourer	84	44.21	36	46.75	94	47.47
Male	49	51.58	24	57.14	63	57.27
Female	35	36.85	12	33.29	31	35.22

The above figures show that the percentage of male agricultural labourer is higher than the female agricultural labourer in all the three villages. There are many reasons why the number of male agricultural labourer is higher than the female agricultural labourer. The most important are:

(1) Women belonging to the first generation agricultural labourer families hesitate to work as agricultural labourer.

(2) Many recently married women are not working as wage labourer. In such cases husband generally prohibits his wife to go for work outside the home.

(3) The family composition is partly responsible for the low turnover of female labourers. For example, in a family where there is more than one male labourer, generally women of such families do not go out for employment elsewhere.

(4) Although the women labourers are available at lower wages still the employers prefer to hire male labourers. The employers say that the skill and capacity of work of a female agricultural labourer is less than that of a male agricultural labourer.

(5) The women do not get work as easily as men. On the one hand, many first generation agricultural labourers are not experienced in various agricultural operations, and on the other hand they are to compete with skilled female labourers and surplus male labourers to secure an employment. Even those female labourers who work as wage labourer very casually do not consider them as a wage labourer.

(6) Caste factor also contributes to the low percentage of female labourer. Many Kayastha respondents who have recently migrated from Bangladesh possessed agricultural land there. The male respondents belonging to this caste are reluctant to let their wives and other female members to work as wage labourer.

In the preceding chapter we have discussed about the amount and intensity of women's work in the field as wage labourer. Here we shall discuss other kinds of work the women have to perform like domestic service, house work and child care, gathering activities, rearing domestic animals, petty trade etc.

#### Domestic service

In contrast to an urban area, in the village opportunity to work as a maid servant is very limited. A decade or so ago work for the females was available in the houses of the rich peasants to boil and husk paddy, prepare chira and muri (parched and fried grains) etc. which are now done at the husking mills often located in the village itself. In the studied villages only few young girls work as maid servant in the houses of the rich peasants.

One such maid servant is Anjali. She is 10 years old. She lives in her employer's house. Her father is an agricultural labourer. Anjali has to work from early morning to late evening. She does all kinds of domestic work like cleaning rooms and courtyard, washing utensils and clothes, fetching water, caring the child, preparing tea and assisting in cooking.

In almost all the cases girl child work without any cash payment. They receive only food and clothing.

Domestic servant has not emerged as a type of female wage labourer in these villages. This is mainly due to the fact that the life style even in rich peasant families is rather simple. The women in the rich peasant families do all types of domestic work themselves. Those families which can afford domestic servants prefer to employ a male labourer as a permanent farm servant, not only for working in the field but also for all types of odd jobs in and around the house.

#### Gathering activities

Almost all women in a labourer's family are involved in different kinds of gathering activities. Gathering is done mainly by women, little boys and girls. One important gathering activity is the cutting grass for the cattle. They collect grass from the fallow lands, edges of the fields and road sides. They collect grass hardly for their own cows but mainly for selling as only few of them own any cattle. They make huge bundles of grass and carry them as headloads to sell them in the nearby urban areas. By selling one bundle of grass they are able to earn Rs. 1 to Rs. 2.

Collecting firewood is another activity. This is important because the landless labourers cannot afford to buy kerosene or firewood. On the non-working day the women go out with a large bag, a sweeping-mop and a sickle to collect dry leaves and twigs. They also collect cow dung to prepare dung-cakes which is used

as fuel. It is often seen in the villages that the women, little boys and girls are collecting cow dung. Sometimes they have to walk for miles in order to collect firewood. Gathering makes a necessary contribution to the family requirement of fuel. Sometimes they are able to earn Rs. 4 to Rs. 6 by selling the dung-cakes. But they have to collect the cow dung for a number of days.

Apart from the gathering activities, a few other forms of non-wage works are carried out by the women in the three villages, mainly raising of chickens and goats, and maintaining a small kitchen gardening.

The women in the studied villages are not unfamiliar with kitchen gardening. The most common practice is that they transplant some varieties of gourds in the outside corner of their huts. The creeper often spreads on the roof of the hut. A few of the gourds may be sold but most of them are consumed at home.

#### Petty trade

In recent years some of the women have tried to engage in petty trade. With the help of a bank credit one woman in Alokjhora has started the business of muri (fried rice). In this business at least a husking pedal, a hand winnowing fan, a boiling pot and a big polythene bag are needed. Her husband helps in purchasing the paddy from the market. The grain is then cleaned by a winnowing fan. She then very carefully boils the paddy because the quality of muri depends largely upon the boiling. The boiled grain is then kept in the open air for drying. The grain is again cleaned before husking with a husking pedal. She

does this work mainly with the help of her 10 years old daughter. The grain is further winnowed to separate the chaff from the grain. The clean and husked rice is then considered ready for making muri. She makes huge quantity of muri in a polythene bag and carry them as head-loads to sell in the urban area.

Another women in Bamangram has set up a little tea stall in the village market. She keeps the stall open from 5 a.m. to 11 a.m. and 4 p.m. to 8 p.m. She herself does all kinds of work in and around the stall. This form of petty trade do not go beyond the sphere of petty business. The sale proceeds of a day has to be spent to a large extent to buy raw materials for the next day. The profit they earn from these ventures is very small and is spent to meet the subsistence needs of the family. It is thus that only by combining the earnings from various types of work by all the members of the family, the families are able to make the two ends meet.

Two illustrations will help us to get a graphic picture of the work a woman has to perform both in and outside the house.

a) Saloka Singh, 30, Married, Batla-Bhita, Hindu, Rajbanshi, agricultural as well as construction labourer

Family: Husband: Charan Singh, 37, agricultural labourer, four daughters, the eldest Jyotsna, 12 is a maid servant; the remaining three daughters, the youngest of whom is only 7 stay at home.

Education: All are illiterate. Never felt the necessity of education, never thought of sending their children to school.

Property : Absolutely landless, not even a homestead land; they live in a small thatched hut constructed on the land owned by husband's parental uncle. They have, besides, only two goats and two calves.

Work: Saloka knows some of the thikadars based at Sivmandir and approach them for work. The thikadar then take her to the work site with many other labourers from the surrounding villages. They have to report to work before 8 a.m. and have to work till 5 in the evening. Saloka gets only Rs. 10 a day. She gets half-an-hour lunch break at noon. However, there is a gradation of payment on the basis of age and sex. The male workers normally get Rs. 12 per day and the girls get only Rs. 6 or Rs. 8. Until last year saloka used to get only Rs. 6 or Rs. 8.

Before marriage Saloka had no experience of working outside home. But after marriage two things happened. First, when she had her second daughter (after five years of her marriage) her husband fell seriously ill. He lost his eye sight and health and in the process lost his power to work. At that time they were living with the family of their parental uncle. Finding their miseries the uncle insisted that they should set up their own separate household. Family quarrels finally led to the break up of the joint family. Charan Singh, who was working as an agricultural labourer, found it very difficult to find work. Poverty thus forced Saloka to go out of the house to find work. Initially she started as an agricultural labourer. But this is an area which is agriculturally backward. Therefore, it was never possible to find work throughout the year. Having been informed of the

construction works in the University and in the Sivmandir region she decided to go for it. Saloka now works in the agricultural sector particularly during the harvest season when the demand of agricultural labourer goes up, and the wage rate also goes up. But on the whole she prefers the construction work more than the agricultural work. Because, according to her, (1) since they have to depend more on the construction work she does not want to anger the thikadar, and (2) the agricultural work is much more demanding since they have to work defying the scorching suns or heavy rain. In the construction work, on the other hand, they can take rest when it's raining or work in a relaxed mood when the thikadar is not around.

The wage paid to the labourers working in Siliguri is relatively higher Rs. 12 at present. The thikadars also insist her to work in Siliguri. But she generally does not like to work in Siliguri because, (1) it requires to pay the bus-fare which would be about Rs. 2 per day, (2) it needs more time to reach the work place and to come back home, and (3) they may have to take tea at least once which will cost the Rs. 1 more. Therefore, on the whole Saloka prefers to work within a range of 2 to 3 kilometres.

When work is easily available the thikadars insist that Saloka and others should work every day and without any leave. But Saloka takes leave for a day (of course without pay) to take rest and to spend the whole day freely according to her own plan. She takes herself off usually on Tuesday, which is the hat day. On this day she rises early in the morning, makes tea, takes breakfast with tea and bread, finishes domestic works, bathe her daughters, take the cattle to the field, takes bath at noon,

cooks her food, take food and then go to the hat. This is a special day for Saloka and the other members of her family. Because, Saloka usually buy many things from the hat, especially food items. She told me with usual interest that she normally brings fish on this day. She cooks the fish herself, which they take in the night and also on the next day. The next morning, as usual she leaves for work. Fish is the only special and nutritious item they consume occasionally. Normally however, they take rice, dal and a little vegetables.

#### Division of labour and other consequences

At home Saloka cooks the family meal early in the morning, and takes care of her children at night. Besides, she does the marketing. Her husband looks for some minor casual work at the quarters of the University, especially works in their gardens. Two daughters go out to work as maid servants. Only the younger daughters stay home to take care of themselves and also to take care of the cattle. The eldest of the three younger daughters prepare food in the evening and serves food to her father at noon. The eldest of the younger daughters who stay at home takes care of the youngest two daughters.

#### Health

Health of all the family members is abnormally poor. Charan Singh has already lost his eyesight, and his health is also too poor to work hard. Saloka also has a chronic back and knee joint pain which sometimes aggravates to force her to stop work for a day or two. Despite her chronic pain she cannot afford to stop work, because stopping of work means starvation. When at work

the pain goes high and she takes rest for a while to regain her strength. The thikadar and her fellow workers are however kind to her as they allow her to rest.

### Politics

Saloka knows that they are poor, can differentiate her from the rich, the baboos, she knows that the wage she gets is very low, and not adequate to meet the basic needs. She knows that a collective movement may bring them higher wage. But she does not know how to make such a movement. Once she expressed her dissatisfaction over the low wage but was thwarted by the thikadar: if you are not satisfied with the rate then try for job in some other place. And Saloka knows it well that there is hardly anywhere to go. There has not been any effort by any political party to take up their cause in an organized way.

In the village they vote in the Panchayat elections and in the Assembly and Parliamentary elections. She told me that she is a supporter of the CPI(M) which she considers to be party of the poor. But she could not explain why. She also told me that she received no help from the party. But in the last parliamentary election she had voted for the hand symbol being insisted by one of the elderly neighbour. She had seen political procession but never took part in it nor she had ever attended a political meeting. She does not know who is Jyoti Basu or who is Rajib Gandhi, not to speak of the other ministers. She had only heard of Indira Gandhi and also that she had died.

b) Sandhya Barman, 25, Married, Bamangram, Hindu, Rajbanshi, landless agricultural labourer.

Family: Husband : Dulu Barman, 32, primarily agricultural labourer. Three sons and one daughter, the eldest, Sambhu 9. The remaining two sons and one daughters age are 8, 6 and 5 respectively. All the sons and the daughter are without any work and stay at home.

Education : Sandhya is illiterate and her husband was at one time enrolled in the primary school. Their four children hardly go to school.

Property: Besides homestead plot they do not own any land. They live in a small thatched hut. They have, besides, one goat and two chickens.

Work: Sandhya works as a casual labour, she has no permanent employer. She is free to change employer according to her wish and when the situation demands. The working-day generally begins at 8 a.m. and continues till 5 in the evening with an interval of one hour at noon. She told me, sometimes the employers make excessive demand. She generally avoids the extra little jobs demanded by the employer. If she is asked to do the extra work after the scheduled time, she demands for extra wages which is fixed after a bargain.

The wage rates vary from one season to another. There is also a gradation of payment on the basis of age and sex. The female and child labourers generally receive lower wages than the male labourers. Payment generally takes place on daily basis. But in the contractual work, some advances are paid at the beginning and the rest is paid at the end of the work. Sandhya, sometimes, works on contractual basis, mainly during the harvesting and weeding seasons.

Sandhya is normally employed to perform the following works: transplantation, weeding and harvesting. She gets on an average Rs. 8, Rs. 7 and Rs. 8 respectively per day for transplantation, weeding and harvesting work. During the months of Aswin and Pous (September-October and October-November) the wage-rate goes down to Rs. 6 per day. In these months there is hardly any opportunity to get any work of agricultural operations.

There is substantial variation in her monthly incomes mainly because of two reasons. Firstly, the wage-rates vary from one month to another, and secondly, she does not get work throughout the months in some seasons. She earns on an average Rs. 240 per month in the months of Asar (June-July), Bhadra (August-September), Kartik (October-November), Agrahan (November-December) and Magh (January-February). Her monthly income is around Rs. 200 to Rs. 219 in the months of Baisakh (April-May), Falgun (February-March) and Chaitra (March-April). Her monthly income goes down between Rs. 120 to Rs. 140 during the months of Jaistha (May-June) and Sravan (July-August), in the months of Aswin (September-October) and Pous (December-January) her monthly income generally does not exceed Rs. 50 to Rs. 60. A rough calculation in this way puts her yearly income around Rs. 2000.

Sandhya never goes to the town for employment. When there is no work in the village her husband goes to the town for employment.

Sandhya told me that most of her earnings are spent on food items. Only in acute necessity she spends a little to purchase clothes. She never seems it feasible to buy toilet articles with her meagre income.

She generally spends the working day in the following manner. On this day she wakes up at around 5 a.m., finishes domestic works, prepares breakfast and lunch, gives necessary direction to her children, serves and takes breakfast mainly with bread and leave for work. At lunch break, which generally continue from 12 to 1 p.m., she comes back home, bathe her children and herself, takes food and then leaves for work. At the end of the day's work she goes straight to the employer's house for payment. In most of the days, after receiving the payment she has to go to the grocery shops for purchasing the necessary food items like rice, wheat, salt, oil etc. After making the purchases she comes back home at around 6 p.m. After taking rest for a while she has to hurry to prepare the night meal. Only around 8 p.m. she can complete her cooking and serving food to the household members. Normally they take rice, dal and a little bit of vegetables.

On the day when she does not find any work she spends the day in the following manner. On this day she wakes up at 5 a.m., finishes domestic chores, prepares breakfast and serve, takes breakfast and then goes out for collecting fire-wood and grass. At noon, she cooks food and serves to the family members. Afterwards, she spends the day idling and gossiping. At night also, she has to cook food and serve. Normally, she goes to the bed at about 8 p.m.

#### Division of labour and other consequences

Besides cooking and serving food to the household members, Sandhya does the following works: fetching drinking water, washing of clothes, collecting firewood etc. She sometimes goes to the

weekly market mainly for purchasing food items. Generally, Sandhya and her husband go out for work and remain there throughout the day. In such cases her four children stay at home without any guardian. The eldest son takes care of the two younger brothers and sister. The eldest son also looks after the cattle.

### Health

Health of all the family members is very poor. Sandhya gave three reasons for their poor health. Firstly, she has to work under brazen heat to heavy showers without an umbrella and also in the winter season without sufficient warm clothing. Secondly, the wages she receives are not adequate to purchase the necessary nutritious foods. Thirdly, due to the lack of money they have to go without proper medical treatment throughout the year.

### Politics

She know that they are poor, can differentiate her from the employers, the wage she gets is very low, and not adequate to meet the basic needs. She does believe that a collective movement may bring them higher wage. But she does not know how to start such a movement. Along with many others she is also not prepared to go for any conflict with the employers. Because the employers help her in crisis. Sometimes, the employers advance small amount of loan, especially when there is no work in agricultural operations. Moreover, she knows it well that there is hardly anywhere to go. There has not been any effort by any political party to take up their cause.

She told me that she is a supporter of the CPI(M), because, her husband supports this party. She could not differentiate between the Central and the State Government. She does not know the name of the Prime Minister and the Chief Minister. She could remember only the name of some local political leaders.

The case of Saloka or Sandhya are not isolated ones. This is the general plight of female agricultural labourers in this part of the country. Being illiterate, burdened with poverty and hungry mouths to feed they are more or less forced to work as unskilled workers. They contribute substantially to the family income and are in addition largely responsible for the material and non-material needs of their children, husbands and other kinflok. All major household jobs such as cooking, cleaning and child-care are the primary responsibilities of women. The wages they receive is hardly sufficient to meet their very basic needs. There is no guarantee of their employment, nor any guarantee of getting the minimum wages as set down by the Government. These working women seems to be always hard pressed between their roles as wage earner and as mothers and house wives, none of which, perhaps, they can discharge very satisfactorily.