

Women Farmers in the Present Times: Perspectives from the Margins

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Abstract: *The paper argues, with the help of statistics from Agriculture Census, material from the People's Archive of Rural India or PARI, and other articles that not only are the women farmers lives difficult and challenging, the documentation of their lives and livelihoods are also a difficult and challenging task. The identification of the woman agricultural worker, however, is important and the paper discusses as to how bearing all the travails, women farmers survive and even organize to bargain for a better future and to live better lives.*

Keywords: *Farmers, Women Farmers, Agriculture, Agricultural laborers, laborers*

Introduction

It is a challenging task to document women farmer's lives and livelihoods. More so, if it has to be documented in the specific social, economic, cultural, and environmental contexts that fundamentally and decisively shape the farmers', (both women and men), rights towards dignified lives. There are many questions that arise here and primary amongst them is how does one 'identify' women farmers, at the first place, a point that is one of the research requirements of this paper too.

| Sl. No. | State/UT | Number of Mahila Kisans or Women Farmers ¹ |
|---------|-----------------------------|---|
| 1 | Andaman and Nicobar Islands | 489 |
| 2 | Andhra Pradesh | 1540808 |
| 3 | Arunachal Pradesh | 2997 |
| 4 | Assam | 659622 |
| 5 | Bihar | 500028 |
| 6 | Chhattisgarh | 605975 |
| 7 | Gujarat | 376541 |

| | | |
|--------------|-------------------|-----------------|
| 8 | Goa | 0 |
| 9 | Haryana | 29600 |
| 10 | Himachal Pradesh | 32256 |
| 11 | Jammu and Kashmir | 28810 |
| 12 | Jharkhand | 1451421 |
| 13 | Karnataka | 48930 |
| 14 | Kerala | 437598 |
| 15 | Maharashtra | 2287893 |
| 16 | Manipur | 5071 |
| 17 | Meghalaya | 20138 |
| 18 | Mizoram | 35700 |
| 19 | Madhya Pradesh | 1129008 |
| 20 | Nagaland | 17438 |
| 21 | Odisha | 931303 |
| 22 | Punjab | 32510 |
| 23 | Rajasthan | 486863 |
| 24 | Sikkim | 7307 |
| 25 | Tamil Nadu | 317570 |
| 26 | Telangana | 1049146 |
| 27 | Tripura | 40646 |
| 28 | Uttar Pradesh | 926855 |
| 29 | Uttarakhand | 45712 |
| 30 | West Bengal | 894289 |
| 31 | Puducherry | 4863 |
| Total | Total | 13947387 |

The aspect of identification is linked with the agrarian situation in the country, especially in the present post-neoliberal context. P. Sainath in his article 'Agriculture in the Age of Inequality' published in People's Archives of Rural India (PARI), Mumbai, Maharashtra, March 4th, 2025, strongly argues that neo-liberalization implied corporatization of agriculture has allowed private companies to lower the prices of farm produces through the "market-based pricing" that have affected farm products like milk and cotton quite intensely. Moreover, the minimum support price or the MSP is also never earned by the farmer. Sainath further argues that the decline and the transformations of the farming sector triggered by the economic policies including the withdrawal of the state from the sectors and programs that mattered to the poor have affected many other classes too, not only in India, but also in most nations in the world since 1991.

Secondly, there was a rapid diversion of agricultural credit towards agribusiness that Sainath argues was a massive transfer of resources from the poor to the rich. This led to a huge rise in farmer indebtedness and the unprecedented rise of corporate power resulting in the privatization of many

public resources, including a 19 km stretch of river in Chhattisgarh. An exponential rise in inequality, the continuous undermining of the state regulated mandis and the planned destruction of the public sector badly damaged farming and the farmers, with a terrible impact on food output and availability. There was also the transformation of agricultural universities from the community centered institutions to the laboratories of corporate agribusiness and a systematic diversion of formal credit away from the farmers. This forced many millions of farmers to turn to the old and the new saukars or the moneylenders leading to the collapse of prices for the farmers even as the prices exploded at the consumer level. Giving an example from Vidarbha, Sainath argued that the cultivation costs of cotton in Vidarbha between 2003 and 2013 showed that input prices and the overall cost of cultivation of an acre of cotton rose by 250 to 300 percent and, in some cases, even more. The farmer's incomes moved, if at all, at a fraction of the crippling cultivation cost increases, particularly that of seeds. The 77th round of National Sample Survey (further, NSS) figures have shown that the average monthly income of farm households is around INR 10,218. Income from cultivation, Sainath argues, saw a decline of 10 percent between 2012-13 and 2018-19. Also, by 2024, almost 4,00,000, (much underestimated) farmers had taken their own lives, in what Sainath calls policy-driven distress. In fact, according to a recent newspaper report, eight districts of Maharashtra's Marathwada region registered 520 farmer suicides between January and June 2025 that was up 20% from 430 such cases reported in the same period last year, according to a state revenue department report. Beed district where 126 farmers committed suicide in the first half of 2025, topped the list in the central Maharashtra region.²

| Sl. No. | State/UT | Number of Suicides ³ |
|---------|-------------------|---------------------------------|
| 1 | Andhra Pradesh | 365 |
| 2 | Arunachal Pradesh | 0 |
| 3 | Assam | 5 |
| 4 | Bihar | 0 |
| 5 | Chhattisgarh | 182 |
| 6 | Goa | 0 |
| 7 | Gujarat | 21 |
| 8 | Haryana | 0 |
| 9 | Himachal Pradesh | 5 |
| 10 | Jammu & Kashmir | 5 |
| 11 | Jharkhand | 0 |
| 12 | Karnataka | 1365 |
| 13 | Kerala | 25 |
| 14 | Madhya Pradesh | 303 |
| 15 | Maharashtra | 2239 |
| 16 | Manipur | 2 |

| | | |
|--------------------|--------------------------|-------------|
| 17 | Meghalaya | 0 |
| 18 | Mizoram | 17 |
| 19 | Nagaland | 0 |
| 20 | Odisha | 0 |
| 21 | Punjab | 229 |
| 22 | Rajasthan | 2 |
| 23 | Sikkim | 1 |
| 24 | Tamil Nadu | 6 |
| 25 | Telangana | 900 |
| 26 | Tripura | 0 |
| 27 | Uttar Pradesh | 80 |
| 28 | Uttarakhand | 0 |
| 29 | West Bengal | 0 |
| 30 | A & N Islands | 4 |
| 31 | Chandigarh | NA |
| 32 | D & N Haveli | 7 |
| 33 | Daman & Diu | 0 |
| 34 | Delhi (UT) | 0 |
| 35 | Lakshadweep | 0 |
| 36 | Puducherry | 0 |
| Total | | |
| (All India) | Total (All India) | 5763 |

Further, between Censuses 2001 and 2011, there were some biggest ever migrations in India. As the farming and the larger agrarian economy collapsed, millions of people left their villages for cities and small towns. However, the representation in the media, Sainath argues, was that millions of people could be liberated from the scenario of the rural backwardness and agriculture. These representations were problematic because what they did not take in to cognizance were the viewpoints of the millions of people who migrated from the rural areas under enforced circumstances. The rural migrations were so severe that the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee scheme or the MNREGA had to be introduced by the government under huge pressure although the scheme has been undermined completely financially and otherwise in the present situation. As far as the women farmer participation is concerned, the MNREGA statistics over the years is as per the data below :⁴

| Financial year | 2018-2019 | 2019-2020 | 2020-2021 | 2021-22 |
|------------------------------|------------------|------------------|------------------|----------------|
| Women participation rate (%) | 54.59 | 54.78 | 53.19 | 54.54 |
| Computed women persons days | 125.12 | 145.36 | 206.96 | 187.38 |

The population of farmers in India had gone up in every Census after Independence including 1991. However, Census of 2001 and 2011 have

witnessed a fall in the number of full time or “main cultivator” farmers of 7.2 million. The Census of 2011 recorded a further fall in their numbers of 7.7 million. Thus, in the first twenty years after India embraced the “new” economic policies, India’s farmer population fell by almost 15 million. Further, according to the National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB), at least 30 farmer suicides happen every day equivalent to more than one every hour. This was higher than the 10,881 suicides recorded in 2021, 10,677 in 2020 and 10,281 in 2019. Such immense levels of distress have led to the rise of major farmer protests since the last few years. The first one was when around 40000 of some of the poorest, mainly Adivasi, farmers marched from Nashik to Mumbai in March 2018. Second, at the time of the massive kisan andolan on the borders of Delhi in 2020-21. The farmer’s protest in Delhi lasted 54 weeks and ended with the repeal of the three farm laws. The women farmers, central to farming in India, were at the forefront of these farmer protest sites on the borders of Delhi. So, where can we place the women farmers within this context and the larger context of agrarian situation in India today?

The Woman Farmer: A Discussion

The objective of this section is to analyze the various aspects through which the being of the women farmer is experienced. It is difficult, almost impossible, to define or to answer the question as to ‘who is a women farmer?’. The answer probably lies in the deprivations and the marginalization that the women farmers go through all over India in all kinds of agrarian situations. One of the major yardsticks of their marginalized and deprived status is their lack of ownership of land as well as other factors required for cultivation, primary amongst them being the capital to invest in farming like buying seeds, fertilizers or the implements. More importantly, the woman farmer is not a homogenous category. The woman farmer’s identity is enmeshed within the intersection of identities like caste, class and community. The following discussion regarding the Agriculture Census statistics very clearly exhibits the deprived status of the woman farmer through the intersection of at least two identities, that is, caste and class.

The All India Report on Agriculture Census 2010-11 has provided some important data as far as female holdings amongst the general, the Scheduled Castes, and Scheduled Tribes are concerned.

1. The All India Report on Agriculture Census 2010-11, Table 1, suggests that as far as the ‘Number & Area Of Operational Holdings By Size Group, All Social Groups, All Size Classes, Female Gender’ at the all India level was concerned, there were 159806 Individual (female) Holdings with an area of 143126 hectares, 17021 units of joint (female) holdings with an area of 21970 hectares, and total holdings (females) of 176828 units and 165096 hectares of area.⁵
2. Further, ‘Number & Area of Operational Holdings by Size Group, for

Scheduled Castes, All Size Classes, Gender Female' at the all India level had 19071 units of 12783 hectares individual holdings, 1918 joint holdings of 1522 hectares, total holdings 20989 units with 14304 hectares.⁶

3. For Scheduled Tribes Female, the Individual Holdings were 12234 with 15640 hectares, 1353 units with 2618 hectares and total holdings were 13587 units and 18258 hectares.⁷
4. The total number of operational holdings in the country increased from 129.22 million in 2005-06 excluding Jharkhand to 138.35 million in 2010-11, showing an increase of 7.06 percent. Male operational holdings (excluding Institutional) constituted about 87.2 percent while female holdings were 12.8 percent in 2010-11 against 88.3 percent and 11.7 percent respectively in 2005-06. The Census interprets this as an indication towards rising participation of females in management and/or operation of agricultural holdings.⁸
5. The proportion of operated area managed by female operational holders (excluding Institutional) stood at 10.5 percent in 2010-11 against 9.4 percent in 2005-06.⁹ The average size relating to male and female operational holdings in 2010-11 was 1.18 hectares and 0.93 hectare against 1.25 hectares and 0.98 hectares respectively in 2005-06.¹⁰
6. In a total of 17.10 million holdings belonging to Scheduled Caste in 2010-11, male operational holdings accounted for 87.73 percent while female's 12.27 percent against 89.14 percent and 10.86 percent respectively in 2005-06.

Thus, the shares of holdings operated by females were quite low as compared to that of male operational holdings. It is noteworthy, however, that representation of holdings belonging to females has increased from 10.86 percent in 2005-06 to 12.27 percent in 2010-11. For instance,

7. Area operated by female holders accounted for 10.42 percent in 2010-11 against 9.08 percent in 2005-06.
8. The average operated area by Scheduled Caste holders in Agriculture Census 2010-11 was 0.80 hectare against 0.83 hectare in 2005-06.
9. The average operated area for male and female operational holdings in 2010-11 was 0.82 hectare and 0.68 hectare respectively as compared to 0.84 hectare and 0.69 hectare in 2005-06.¹¹
10. Out of 12.01 million Scheduled Tribes operational holdings in 2010-11, males accounted for 88.7 percent and females constituted 11.3 percent. Thus, the percentage of female operational holdings was very low as compared to male operational holdings for Scheduled Tribes. However, the representation of holdings belonging to females increased from 9.6 percent in 2005-06 to 11.3 percent in 2010-11.¹²
11. The area operated by Scheduled Tribes which was 16.93 million hectares in 2005-06 rose to 18.22 million hectares in 2010-11, showing an increase of 7.63 percent because of participation of Jharkhand State in Agriculture

Census operation in 2010-11 for the first time since its creation in the year 2000. The area operated by females accounted for 10.0 percent in 2010-11 while the same was 90.0 percent for male holders against the corresponding figures of 8.5 percent and 91.5 percent in 2005-06.¹³ The average operated area in 2010-11 was 1.52 hectares against 1.64 hectares in 2005-06 while for male and female operational holdings, it was 1.54 hectares and 1.34 hectares as compared to 1.66 hectares and 1.45 hectares respectively in 2005-06, indicating a decline in average operated area of both male and female operational holdings in 2010-11 as compared to 2005-06.¹⁴

12. In a total of 17.68 million female operational holdings, Andhra Pradesh accounted for the highest proportion of 18.9 percent followed by Bihar (12.9 percent), Maharashtra (11.6 percent), Uttar Pradesh (9.2 percent), Tamil Nadu (8.8 percent), Karnataka (8.4 percent), Kerala (7.6 percent), Madhya Pradesh (4.8 percent), Gujarat (3.9 percent), Rajasthan (3.1 percent) and Chhattisgarh (2.7 percent), thus, these 11 States together (about 1/3rd of total number of States) constituted 92.0 percent of total number of female operational holdings in the country. The variations in 2010-11 over 2005-06 (excluding Jharkhand) relating to male and female operational holdings at all India level were 5.8 percent and 17.0 percent, respectively.¹⁵
13. Andhra Pradesh had highest proportion of female operational holdings (18.3 percent) in the country followed by Bihar (15.6 percent), Uttar Pradesh (13.5 percent), Maharashtra (8.2 percent), Karnataka (8.1 percent), Tamil Nadu (8.0 percent), Kerala (6.5 percent) and Madhya Pradesh (5.0 percent). These eight States together constituted about 83.0 percent of total female operational holdings belonging to Scheduled Castes in 2010-11 in the country.¹⁶
14. In a total of 1.43 million hectares of operated area of female Scheduled Castes operational holdings in 2010-11 in the country, Andhra Pradesh had the highest share of 18.3 percent followed by Maharashtra (14.1 percent), Karnataka (12.6 percent), Rajasthan (11.7 percent), Uttar Pradesh (8.5 percent), Madhya Pradesh (7.8 percent), Bihar (7.1 percent) and Tamil Nadu (6.3 percent). Thus, these eight States together accounted for about 86.4 percent of operated area of female holdings in the country.¹⁷
15. Out of a total of 1.4 million female operational holdings belonging to Scheduled Tribes, Andhra Pradesh had the highest proportion of 18.0 percent followed by Madhya Pradesh (13.0 percent), Chhattisgarh (10.8 percent), Maharashtra (10.3 percent), Karnataka (6.3 percent), Jharkhand (6.2 percent), Gujarat (5.7 percent), Meghalaya (5.3 percent) and Odisha & Rajasthan (5.0 percent each), accounting for about 86.0 percent of female Scheduled Tribes operational holdings in the country. While male holdings increased by 13.9 percent, female holdings rose by 36.1 percent resulting in an overall increase of 16.1 percent in Scheduled Tribes holdings in 2010-11 over 2005-06 in the country.

16. The area operated by Scheduled Tribes females in Madhya Pradesh and Chhattisgarh constituted together 27.8 percent of operated area of this category of holdings in the country. The other dominating States were Andhra Pradesh (13.9 percent), Maharashtra (12.4 percent), Gujarat (8.1 percent), Karnataka (6.4 percent), Meghalaya (5.3 percent), Nagaland (5.1 percent), Jharkhand (5.0 percent) and Rajasthan (4.5 percent). The above mentioned ten States, thus, taken together accounted for about 89.0 percent of operated area of female operational holdings belonging to Scheduled Tribes in the country in 2010-11.¹⁸
17. The area operated by Scheduled Tribes females and males increased by 26.5 percent and 5.9 percent respectively with an overall increase of 7.6 percent in 2010-11 as compared to the previous Agriculture Census 2005-06 at all India level.¹⁹

Apart from these above important points as highlighted by the All India Report on Agriculture Census 2010-11 there are many publications which suggest that the women farmers are marginalized at all levels within the agricultural production. The next section provides a critical analysis about some of the aspects of this phenomenon beginning with their involvement with agri-business and their experiences as agri-entrepreneurs.

Agri-business, Kisan Credit Cards and their Accessibility:

A report by Harmanpreet Singh published on the Bayer India website and titled, *A New Dawn for Women Smallholders in India*, suggests that the work of the female farmer begins well before dawn, and continues well after dusk and yet in terms of empowerment, agency and ownership, many women farmers were still in the dark. The report further stated that almost 85% of rural women were engaged in agriculture, yet only about 13% owned land. And, therefore, Singh suggested, overcoming the gender gap with support and empowerment measures for India's female farmers was crucial for improving livelihoods and food security as well as for the progress of sustainable agriculture. Interestingly, Singh writes to advocate Better Life Farming (BLF), a global, multi-stakeholder alliance which works with partners across the agri-value chains to empower women smallholder farmers in India in unique ways by providing solutions which are more flexible, approachable, and equitable. At the nucleus of the Better Life Farming program lay the Better Life Farming Center located in, and near, farming communities that serve as a one-stop shop of agricultural inputs for smallholders. The BLF partners with International Finance Corporation, part of the World Bank, to create gender sensitization workshops as a part of a thought leadership effort to initiate conversations with male farmers in the community. The plan of the BLF is to create women agri-entrepreneurs, writes Singh.²⁰

There are some other interesting reports too that talk about similar solutions through organizations like the BLF. Rajeev Ranjan in his article 'How women

can be given 'farmer' status in Indian agricultural eco-system' writing for Businessline argues that there is a 'feminization' of agriculture sector with the number of women increasing in multiple roles as cultivators, entrepreneurs and laborers. He quotes from the Annual Periodic Labour Force Survey, 2021-2022, that agriculture has the highest estimated female labour force participation of 62.9 per cent. The rural women in India are contributing to this sector for many years, but mostly as labourers in their own farms and not as "farmers". Quoting 'The Economic Survey 2017-18' reports, Ranjan argues, that with the growing rural-to-urban migration by men, there is feminization of the agriculture sector, with an increasing number of women in multiple roles as cultivators, entrepreneurs and labourers. With the participation of women in agriculture and the allied activities becoming more significant, it becomes essential, writes Ranjan, to keep women at the center of India's policy initiative. The rural women were responsible for the integrated management and use of diverse natural resources to meet the daily household needs. However, Ranjan stresses, that these activities would require enhanced access to resources like land, water, credit, technology and training that warranted critical analysis in the context of India. The solution provided by Ranjan is that the NGOs, CSOs, civil society organizations, government and self-help groups should come together and work with women and make systematic interventions addressing end-to-end production challenges. Ranjan talks about Agriculture Production Cluster (APC) during 2008-9 which was adopted as an approach inside PRADAN, based on market demand and mapping the critical gaps in the market, as well as production system advantages to engage with the markets in fairer terms. He further writes that a large number of women from marginalized tribal communities started participating in agriculture with a focus on enhancing income rather than only enhancing food production for consumption. This approach, if is conducted by public and private sectors across the country, then women over time can feel empowered and get a sense of ownership for the land that they are farming in, believes Ranjan. APC approach has proved to be one of the most innovative ways to bring women as a "Farmer" by organizing them into Producer Groups (PGs) and further to FPO promotion. There are some other steps also that Ranjan recommends. For example, there should be equitable engagement of women and men in adapting regenerative practices, a farming systems approach and integrated natural resources management that would enhance environmental outcomes, soil and water conservation, productivity, creating a vibrant circular local economy that can fulfill the aspirations of the rural population including women, youth and future generations. The solution that Ranjan offers is that the government, the private sector and the NGOs should work together to remove the inherent gender bias in the economic system. This would improve a woman's access to resources, for instance, credit. Women farmers could receive adequate funds for capital investments, use farm input, and practice sustainable agricultural practices, and other advanced

farming tools and techniques that increase crop yields and ensure market linkage. It is important to make women gain recognition as farmers, conduct programs that make them empowered, create more female FPOs and federate these FPOs so that women can voice out their concerns. Empowering women and giving them 'farmer' status is not a matter of a fortnight; it will take a long time. However, the process needs to be activated as soon as possible, argued Ranjan.²¹

Another important account by United Nations, India titled 'Expanding access for women farmers on the agenda' reported that the policymakers, experts and farmer representatives from across India had come together to discuss assistance to women farmers to enable them to tackle the unique challenges they faced through the symposium that was held on the 18th of June, 2024, in New Delhi jointly organized by the Royal Embassy of Norway and the UN World Food Program (WFP), that offered recommendations and insights on expanding women farmers' access to land, inputs, training and government schemes. The symposium primarily discussed how the social norms affected women farmers and limited their access and opportunities, despite their significant contribution to farming. The agriculture sector employed 80% of all economically active women; they comprised 33% of the agricultural labor force and 48% of self-employed farmers. Yet, women owned less than 15% of landholdings. The symposium focused upon increasing the access of women to land, government schemes and entitlements and for that the symposium suggested that there was a need to increase the women's access to literacy and awareness about government schemes and enable women's access to them. Interestingly, the symposium included Sakhiben Khengarbhai Ahir a member of the Self-Employed Women's Association (SEWA) who presented her testimony regarding the coming together of women to create water-harvesting structures, start agriculture and process and sell produce through the collective led by SEWA. Ms. Megha Desai, National Coordinator, SEWA, stressed the need for the accessibility to finance and markets for small farmers and women which included the availability of productive resources and technology. Farmers needed to be seen as entrepreneurs and farming as an enterprise. The article also suggests the objective of the Indian government that is dedicated to the doubling of the farmers' incomes by 2030. The significant efforts that were made to include women farmers' in the policies and schemes, to enhance their incomes and create diverse livelihoods included initiatives like the Deendayal Upadhyay National Rural Livelihoods Mission and the Mahila Kisan Sashaktikaran Pariyojana (MKSP) or Women Farmer Empowerment Programme. There were institutions like the ICAR, that is, Central Institute for Women in Agriculture that were focused on developing improved technology and practices that were tailored to the requirements of women farmers. The UN World Food Program and the Embassy of Norway in India had joined forces to organize symposia that would focus upon women farmers' roles in building climate resilience,

with a focus upon farm/off-farm livelihoods.²²

| SERIAL NO. | STATES | WOMEN BENEFICIARIES UNDER PM KISAN SAMMAN NIDHI YOJANA ²³ |
|--------------------|--|---|
| 1 | Andaman and Nicobar Islands | 4412 |
| 2 | Andhra Pradesh | 1421859 |
| 3 | Arunachal Pradesh | 32889 |
| 4 | Assam | 301041 |
| 5 | Bihar | 2313551 |
| 6 | Chandigarh | 43 |
| 7 | Chhattisgarh | 418228 |
| 8 | Delhi | 1547 |
| 9 | Goa | 825 |
| 10 | Gujarat | 1158633 |
| 11 | Haryana | 231263 |
| 12 | Himachal Pradesh | 121629 |
| 13 | Jammu and Kashmir | 78742 |
| 14 | Jharkhand | 418747 |
| 15 | Karnataka | 1079504 |
| 16 | Kerala | 1107106 |
| 17 | Ladakh | 2504 |
| 18 | Lakshadweep | 859 |
| 19 | Madhya Pradesh | 1542845 |
| 20 | Maharashtra | 1637296 |
| 21 | Manipur | 132810 |
| 22 | Meghalaya | 58732 |
| 23 | Mizoram | 30441 |
| 24 | Nagaland | 74397 |
| 25 | Odisha | 645771 |
| 26 | Puducherry | 3168 |
| 27 | Punjab | 2189 |
| 28 | Rajasthan | 1710833 |
| 29 | Sikkim | 3746 |
| 30 | Tamil Nadu | 476785 |
| 31 | Telangana | 835485 |
| 32 | Dadra and Nagar Haveli and Daman and Diu | 2510 |
| 33 | Tripura | 44217 |
| 34 | Uttar Pradesh | 3212836 |
| 35 | Uttarakhand | 118381 |
| 36 | West Bengal | 761845 |
| Grand Total | Grand Total | 19987669 |

Apart from the above initiatives, there are other reports too that highlight the importance of the intervention of the NGOs and how they help women farmers get access to resources like the Kisan Credit Card which in turn helped in getting loans from the bank for agricultural operations.²⁴ However, what is important at this juncture in the present article is to bring forth more experiences of women farmers like Sakhiben Khengarbhai Ahir who are the fulcrum of the present discussion. And, for this, the present article shall focus upon the multiple stories that the People's Archives of Rural India (PARI) present. The following section elucidates more vividly the implications and the varied consequences of the implementation (or the non-implementation) of the incentives or other problems and issues affecting the being of the woman farmer.

Lived Realities of Women Farmers: The People's Archives of Rural India (PARI) Archives:

I. The Halchalit Mahila Kisan Women Producer Company and the intervention of PRADAN: Madhya Pradesh

Women farmers in Dindori district of Madhya Pradesh had come together to form the Halchalit Mahila Kisan Women Producer Company that was encouraging organic and natural methods of farming among its members. Namita Walkar records the testimony of Godawari Maravi who explains that things have changed for the women of Bargagaon, Madhya Pradesh due to their grit and persistence in forming the Halchalit Mahila Kisan Women Producer Company Limited (HMKWPC). The office was located in Samnapur block of Dindori district. It was a large shed-like office cum warehouse, with a tin roof and walls, a chair and table with a computer, a few shelves and an air-cooler that defined the small office on one side of the entrance. The point of discussion was the women farmers' pride in identifying themselves as farmers. Since working with the hal or plough is traditionally considered a man's job, they challenged this belief to refer to themselves as women who use the plough, that is, hal chalit. When Waikar was writing this article, the organization had 1400 registered members who were also shareholders. Godawari Maravi who was the Chairperson narrated to the author how traditionally farmers in their locality did not use chemical inputs that gradually changed from 2010 when the use of chemical fertilizers and pesticides in agriculture became the norm. Since 2022, however, many farmers in Dindori district were trying to shift towards organic and natural farming, or a combination of both and were supported and encouraged by organizations working to promote non-chemical agriculture. Maravi suggests that the organic seeds were given to the farmers. When the field was ploughed along with grass, weeds and harpatwar (stubble), they got mulched in the soil and were the first natural fertilizer. The use of natural fertilizers with cow dung as the main ingredient in the production of kutki or little millet had increased their production by one to one and half quintals.

Likewise, their production of kodo millet and arhar or red gram also increased by using this indigenous method. The women left one half of the field fallow for one season in the reverse order that gave time to the land to revive and rejuvenate, one of the principles of natural farming. And, the natural and organic method of cultivating the land added to the affirmative results of farming. Gradually, the list of the crops grew with the inclusion of oil seeds like alsi (flax), jagni or ramtil (niger seed). The technique of mixed cultivation helped prevent pest attacks because with a variety of different plants in the field, insects would not be able to destroy a single crop. However, chemicals are still used for growing paddy according to Mamta Shyam from Bijapur village and a member of the HMKWPC. There were some other challenges too. Apart from their daily household chores, as part of the producer organization, the women farmers faced challenges of both the drudgery of working on their own farms, that is, the repetitive hard labour of weeding and managing the HMKWPC. There was also the challenge of the decrease in production of kodo and kutki due to the low rates in the market. To counter this problem, they decided to increase the selling rate from Rs. 20-25 to Rs. 37-42 per kilogram. It helped because their competitor producer companies also increased the rates. The women are also trying to grow a value chain on the little millet. However, according to Harshit Chauhan of PRADAN, the organization supporting the HMKWPC, producing paddy through the HMKWPC was a huge challenge because to produce dhaan, there was a minimum investment of 25 lakh rupees and one had to pre-book the seeds in February. Only then the seeds were available in June for sowing. For pre-booking, one needed to give 50 percent advance which was around 12 lakh rupees. Only then, could they do the paddy business. Further, the HMKWPC made a loss due to no rain and lack of sufficient production and the revenue went down from Rs. 70.5 lakh to Rs. 25 lakh which was a huge loss. HMKWPC had to take loans from a non-banking finance company (NBFC) at a high interest rate, that is, 14 percent interest plus one percent transaction charges. They were not able to get government grants due to lack of a proper accounting system and process in place. Various problems in the manual records proved to be difficult to overcome. Thereafter, the HMKWPC appointed an accountant for managing all the basic financial procedures of the HMKWPC. The group also had plans to deal with healthcare facilities and managing homes and fields. PRADAN provided them support and training to deal in business to some extent, as is reported by Godawari. But selling the produce was even more problematic than processing the millets because the farmers had no idea as to how the product is sold in the market. The women farmers were unaware of the fact that product composition was required to be identified on the basis of which the Food Safety and Standards Authority of India (FSSAI) would provide license for selling processed products. Harshit Chauhan from PRADAN explained that they were aware that certain logos that had to be displayed on the product package as per FSSAI requirements. But they were not aware that

the nutrient content on the packaging such as protein, iron, sugar, carbohydrates, etc. also had to be mentioned. To get this information, they had to first get it tested in a laboratory and they would verify this information every six months and only then the product could be sold legally in the market. The HMKWPC got in touch with the Indian Institute of Millets Research (IIMR), Hyderabad, as well as the Department of Agriculture to help reach the FSSAI and to get a mandi or market license without which one could not sell in the market. Gradually, the women understood the ways to do business. Amongst the members of the HMKWPC, there were members from the Other Backward Class and there were members from the Pardhan subgroup of the Gond tribal community. The above experience is a success story about the gains that women from marginalized communities achieve when they politically organize themselves.²⁵

II. Resistance from Punjab, Maharashtra: The New Farm Laws and the Denial of Minimum Support Price (MSP), Land Rights

There are other instances of farmers' organization. For instance, across Punjab, women farmers along with their male counterparts were posted at the protest site on the Shambhu border with Haryana protesting against the farm laws and waiting to be heard. For instance, 60-year-old Chiranjit Kaur, resident of Sangrur district in Punjab, who along with her family grows wheat, paddy, and a few vegetables for household consumption on their two acres of land was posted on the Shambhu border in the Patiala district along with Gurmeet Kaur who is her neighbor and friend. The farmers were protesting against the Centre's denial of the guarantee of minimum support price (MSP) as per the recommendations of the Swaminathan Commission, a complete waiver of debts for farmers and farm laborers, justice for the farmers affected in the Lakhimpur-Kheri massacre, arrest of the culprits, a pension scheme for farmers and laborers, and compensation of families of farmers who were martyred in the 2020-21 protest. The farmers were met with tear gas, water cannons, rubber bullets from pellet guns, fired by the Haryana police to stop them from moving further. Another woman farmer Surinder Kaur along with her son from the Khoje Majra village, Fatehgarh Sahib district, arrived on the morning of February 24th, 2024 to participate in the candlelight march for 22-year-old Shubhkaran Singh who had died following a clash between security personnel and protesting farmers at another Haryana-Punjab border in Khanauri. She was 64-year-old accompanied by her daughter-in-law and grandchildren. On their two acres of farm in Fatehgarh Sahib district they cultivate wheat and paddy and is of the opinion that MSP for just five crops was not enough. What about crops like the oilseeds? Devinder Kaur's sons had been at the protest site since the beginning of the protest. She was a resident of the Landran village in Sahibzada Ajit Singh Nagar district of Punjab and had come with her family, that is, daughters-in-law and grandchildren aged 2,7 and 11 respectively. Kaur argues that the government

provides MSP on only two crops, that is, wheat and paddy. And, then, they asked them to diversify to other crops which is not possible for them. The maize that was grown by them was bought at a price of 800 to 900 rupees a quintal, as against the Rs.1,962 per quintal MSP on maize set by the Food Corporation of India for 2022-2023. Parampreet Kaur, aged 44, had also been at the Shambhu border for protest. In fact, tractor trolleys from the villages of Amritsar and Pathankot had four to five women in each one. They stayed for the entire day and the next day as the other groups of women come. One of the reasons that they could not stay at the protest site for long was because of the lack of toilets at the protest site. Parampreet Kaur came for the protest in spite of the fact that her 21-year-old son and her husband were both was ill. The family owned 20 acres of land on which they grew wheat and paddy but since her husband's stroke in 2021 they have not been able to earn anything from the land. No one was interested in cultivating on the land on lease also because the groundwater there had been polluted from the chemical released from a factory nearby. Amandeep Kaur and her family owned 21 acres of farmland in Bhatehri village in Patiala district. They mainly grew wheat and paddy and felt that the value of their crops remained negligible while they were in their fields. However, once they left their possessions, they were sold at a double price in the market. Speaking about the protest, Parampreet Kaur argues that the protestors were unarmed, yet the government was resorting to using weapons against its own citizens. There is little reason to remain in India. It was no wonder that the youth were leaving the country. Not only were the jobs limited here, but when the rights were asserted, the people were met with such treatment.²⁶

Similar voices of protest could be heard from Maharashtra too. Women farmers and farm workers who have been fighting for their land rights, were protesting in Mumbai against the new farm laws so they didn't lose out more from the sale of farm produce below the MSP. Laxmibai Kale, 60-year-old, has been losing a portion of her harvest every year not due to excessive rainfall or drought or poor farming techniques but because the panchayat allowed animals to graze on the land. The five-acre plot in Mohadi village in Nashik district that Laxmibai and her husband, Waman, had been cultivating for three decades is a part of the gairan or government-controlled village commons used as pasture land. They grew tur, bajra, jowar and paddy there. The panchayat members said that they would file a case against them if they did not allow the villagers to graze their cattle on their land. Laxmibai and other farmers from her village in Dindori taluka had been fighting for their land rights since 1992. She and her family were third generation tilling the land but they still didn't own it. In 2002, they did a satyagraha and a jail bhara andolan fo their land rights. At that time, Laxmibai recalled that nearly 1,500 farmers, most of them women, spent 17 days in the Nashik Central Jail. Laxmibai belongs to the Lohar caste listed as an 'Other Backward Class' (OBC) in Maharashtra had no help in dealing with the loss of crop. Since the land was not in their name, they didn't get crop loans or

insurance. Instead, they absorbed the losses by working as agricultural laborer, doing two eight hour shifts in a day sometimes to earn more.²⁷ Vijabai Gangurde, 55, a Bhil Adivasi farmer and a widow, is also in a similar situation. After working 8 hours on her two acres of land, she then worked as a farm laborer for another 8 hours on someone else's land. Vijabai's days were split into two shifts starting at 7 am. However, she never sought loans from a moneylender, she added, as they charged 10 rupees interest on every 100 rupees they loaned, which had to be repaid by the end of the month. Laxmibai also keeps away from the private creditors. There had been cases of widows being harassed by moneylenders from the nearby villages. Laxmibai further argues that the women get Rs. 150 for eight hours of work while men get Rs. 250 for the same work. Women were paid much less than men for working much more. She is of the view that the new farm laws would affect the women farmers more and to protest against the new farm laws both Laxmibai and Vijabai had both come to the Azad Maidan in South Mumbai for the sit-in organized by the Samyukta Shetkari Kamgar Morcha on January 24th to the 26th of 2021. The new laws against which the farmers were protesting against were The Farmer's Produce Trade and Commerce (Promotion and Facilitation) Act, 2020; The Farmers (Empowerment and Protection) Agreement on Price Assurance and Farm Services Act, 2020; The Essential Commodities (Amendment) Act, 2020. They were first passed as ordinances by the central government on June 5th, 2020, then introduced as farm bills in Parliament on September 14th and hastened into Acts on the 20th of that month. The farmers considered these laws as devastating to their livelihoods because they would expand the space for large corporates to have even greater power over farmers and farming. The laws would also undermine the main forms of support to the cultivator, including the minimum support price or the MSP, the agricultural produce marketing committees (APMC), state procurement and more. Laxmibai argues that when private buyers procured produce below the MSP, it affected both farmers and agricultural laborers. With these laws, more private companies will increase in the market and the farmers would not be able to negotiate the price, argues Laxmibai. Women would be amongst the worst affected by the farm laws, argues 38-year-old Suvarna Gagurde from the Korhate village in Dindori taluka because almost 70 to 80 percent of farming was done by women who belonged to the Koli Mahadev Adivasi community. She gave the example of the PM Kisan Yojana that entitled small and marginal farmers to receive Rs. 6000 every year as income support. None of the money was deposited in any woman farmer's bank account in their village. Further, according to Suvarna, out of the 64 Adivasi families in Korhate village only 55 were given 7/12 (record of land rights) in 2012, under the Forest Rights Act, 2006, but the remarks included the remark 'uncultivable land'. Suvarna grew tomatoes, groundnuts, coriander, dill leaves, spinach and other leafy vegetables on the five acres of land that she cultivated. She only owned 2 acres, even though she was entitled to the rest.

Despite seeking land rights in their name, Korhate's Adivasi farmers were given a joint 7/12. However, because of the 'uncultivable land' remark, they would neither get crop loans nor were able to dig a well or borewell in their farms which stopped them from storing rain water. They couldn't even dig a farm pond. Out of the 50 farmers and agricultural laborers who came to Mumbai to join the protests, 35 were women.²⁸

Sarbjeet Kaur used her family's white tractor nearly two months ago and drove for roughly 480 kilometers from Jasraur village in Punjab to Singhu on the Haryana-Delhi border. She said that she came on her own while she added that the others in her village came to the protest site on trolleys arranged by their farm union. 40-year-old Sarbjeet had been talking and protesting about the farm laws passed in Parliament in September, 2020. She had gone campaigning door to door against the laws in her village of 2,169 people in Ajnala tehsil of Amritsar district. Then on 25th November, she left in a convoy of 14 tractor trolleys travelling from Jasraur and surrounding villages, organized by the Jamhoori Kisan Sabha (affiliated to the All India Kisan Sangharsh Coordination Committee, the pan-Indian umbrella platform comprising over 200 farmers organisations). They left early in the morning and reached Singhu on 27th November. Sarbjit also took part in the tractor parade on the 26th of January, Republic Day starting at the Kundli border some three kilometers north of the Singhu, near Sonipat in Haryana. Singhu and Tikri in Haryana and Ghazipur in Uttar Pradesh were among the major sites where lakhs of farmers and numerous farm unions had been engaged in protests since 26th November, 2020, demanding the withdrawal of the three new farm laws.²⁹

Krishnabai Karle, a farmer from Khed tahsil of Pune district demanded the unconditional withdrawal of the three farm laws, at a meeting on 11th December, 2020 in Pune district. Farmers, farm laborers and activists from across the district, all women, had gathered in Pune city to highlight the impact of the new legislation on farmers and especially on women in agriculture. One of the demands of these women farmers was that the union government must recognize women as farmers rather than impose laws that further threaten their livelihood. Women not only work, says Asha Aatole, a farmer from the Daund tahsil, they worked longer hours than men. The 11th December meeting that was held on the 16th day of the nationwide farmers' protests came together as 'Kisan Baug', a forum launched on 8th December to demand repeal of the new laws. The meeting was organized by the Stree Mukti Aandolan Sampark Samiti, a 41-year-old collective of women's organizations in Maharashtra. Expressing their solidarity with the protests, the farmers reiterated their long pending demands such as lack of access to credit and marketing facilities. They demanded that the government implement the recommendations of the National Commission on Farmers (or the Swaminathan Commission) of a minimum support price (MSP) for crops and decentralized purchase facilities.³⁰

Conclusion

The issues concerning women farmers are many and it is difficult to include all of them in this article. For instance, the grave consequences for women farmers after the suicide of their farmer husbands is one such issue.³¹ However, there are many stories of resilience like the Women Farmer's Cooperative and the intervention of the NGO PRADAN in Madhya Pradesh,³² the struggle of the marginalized women farmers from Maharashtra to reclaim traditional foods,³³ or the determination of the women farmers to outstrip natural devastations in Kerala through the program of Kudumbashree. With 4.5 million members, including 3.23 lakh women farmers, Kudumbashree, Sainath argues, was the greatest gender justice and poverty reduction program in the world. On 11th September in New Delhi, Kudumbashree was awarded the National Rural Livelihoods Mission (NRLM) prize for 'outstanding Performance in Farm Livelihoods'. This was the first time that NRLM was giving out such an award. It was set up as part of a government initiative in 1998 but today they require the support of banks and other institutions.³⁴

This research paper makes a very basic and preliminary attempt to discuss a few aspects affecting the women agricultural workers of rural India. Considering the various accounts and case studies from the PARI archives to highlight the varied roles and situations in which women participate in the rural agrarian economy in India, it has attempted to weave a picture of struggle and survival for the women farmers. While the resilience of the women farmers is commendable in the face of atrocities and challenges, there are many aspects that remain to be considered for further research.

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