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# Changing Nature of Women's Work in Rice-Based Agriculture: Evidence from Indian Villages

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## Abstract

A decline of 30 per cent in the rural women workforce engaged in agriculture in India raises interesting questions regarding the debate on the feminisation of agricultural workforce. The magnitude of decline is regionally differentiated. Nonetheless, a steep decline can be noted in the total number of women workers who depend on agriculture for their livelihood. However, it does not imply a shift to productive and remunerative non-farm employment. The reduction in the demand for productive work intensifies the work of women in the spheres of the social reproduction of labour.

The paper is based on the estimates from official data sources on employment in India, and insights from field-based case-studies. The villages selected for the study are located in prominent rice-cultivating regions of India; Punjab (Northern region), Andhra Pradesh (Southern region), and West Bengal (Eastern region). The paper analyses the changing nature of female labour use in rice cultivation in India. Rice cultivation has provided livelihood and productive employment to rural women in India. They participated as family labour, and wage workers in transplanting, weeding, and harvesting of rice. Rice crop had witnessed the technological changes associated with high-yielding variety seeds during the late 1960s. In the period between 1970 and 1980, the labour demand in rice cultivation rose significantly, and studies conducted in that period highlighted this aspect. However, with the advent of neo-liberal reforms in India in the 1990s, the public investments in agriculture shrunk. As a result, improvements in irrigation technologies, and other productive changes stagnated. It also resulted in increased use of labour-displacing technological changes that adversely impacted the productive employment generation for women in rural India. Further, with men migrating to the cities in search of non-farm work, women who stay back spent time in the collection of fodder, fuel, tasks related to animal farming etc., mainly in the reproductive sphere of work.

The paper discusses the trajectory of economic development in the post-reform period (the 1990s) in the study regions of India and the impact of the different types of farming practices, diversification of economic activities and growth of productive forces on the patterns and levels of women's labour absorption in rural India.

The paper finds an absolute decline in the total labour days required for the cultivation of labour-intensive crop like rice. The main reasons to explain the decline that emerge from the data analysis are; the mechanisation of crop operations, new labour arrangements (like the piece-rate contracts), changing production relations in the countryside (socio-economic class configuration), and the social norms and practices.

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**Keywords:** Defeminisation of Agriculture, Changes in Traditional Jobs, Reproductive Labour Crisis, New Labour Institutions