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‘Resilient’ Women, ‘Resilient’ Agriculture*

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I

INTRODUCTION

Indian agriculture remains the mainstay of India’s economic trajectory both in terms of growth rates as well as an increasingly residual provider of employment especially for those who are being thrown off the main pages of this non-inclusive growth path. This is so not only historically but also very much today particularly in the aftermath of a disastrous and uncaring pandemic response policy that has long-term gendered impacts. The concept of ‘resilience’ consequently has to be viewed in the context of whether this ‘resilience’ is voluntary or forced, whether those who are ‘resilient’ have a choice at all, and what cost to gendered well-being and development does this ‘resilience’ entail. This keynote address focuses on the multiple forms that this flexibility has mutated into in the prevailing agricultural scenario and the manner in which the tenets of gender equality are being subverted. The result is – and this needs to be stated at the outset – the reinforcement of patriarchal divides and rigidities at numerous levels.

Using the lens of what I term as Feminist Finance (Dewan, 2019) to analyse the policies of the macro-patriarchal State in the specific context of demystifying and demythifying prevailing gendered ‘resilience’, this paper is divided into several sections, moving logically from economic fundamentals to the unrecognised and increasingly devisibilised forms of ‘resilience’ that especially women in rural India are being increasingly condemned to undergo and endure.

II

LAND AND LAND RIGHTS

The most fundamental issue impacting gender equality is that of control over resources. This struggle over the means of production generally centres on the access to, ownership of, and control over the chief means of livelihood – that of land. India has been a signatory to all international covenants, resolutions, and commissions with the period after the Eighth Five Year Plan witnessing heartening policy support to gender equality, especially the guideline issued in 1995 (see Dewan, 2016). This process of enhancing gender equality via land rights continued right through up to the Twelfth Plan, linked particularly to the burgeoning of women’s movements. The share

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of women landholders rose from 10.9 per cent as per the Agricultural Census of 2000-01 to 11.7 per cent in 2005-06 to 12.78 per cent in 2010-11 to merely 13.96 per cent in 2015-16. However, as is known, there is no data available for land ownership in India, it being restricted to 'operational' holdings, defined in the Agricultural Census as 'All land which is used wholly or partly for agricultural production and is operated as one technical unit by one person alone or with others without regard to the title, legal form, size or location'.

III

AGRICULTURAL GROWTH AND EMPLOYMENT

Contrary to the traditional path of growth, the share of agriculture in gross domestic product (GDP) has actually risen in the past few years, up from 17.8 per cent in 2019-20 to 19.9 per cent in 2020-21, and combined with allied sectors accounted for 20.2 per cent in total gross value added (GVA). For three consecutive years, this is the only sector that is resilient, the GVA growth rates of agriculture, industry, and services being 3.63 per cent, -6.96 per cent, and -8.36 per cent respectively at 2011-12 prices in 2020-21, and 6.56 per cent, -5.61 per cent and -4.86 per cent at current prices (www.dea.gov.in; www.indiabudget.gov.in; Economic Survey 2021-22).

Concomitantly, an increasing proportion of particularly women and of course men find their primary source of livelihood in this sector: 58 per cent of India's population and 70 per cent of rural households. In terms of employment, CMIE data from the consumer pyramid household survey shows that the share of agriculture in total employment has gone up from 35.3 per cent in 2017-18, to 36.1 per cent in 2018-19, to 38 per cent in 2019-20 and 39.4 per cent in 2021-22 (www.cmie.com). The latest PLFS report presents an even sharper increase from 42.5 per cent in 2018-19 to 45.6 per cent in 2019-20.

Even though not recognised as farmers, agriculture employs 80 per cent of rural women as of March 2022, with nearly three-fourth of the full-time workers being women. Female farmers produce 60 per cent to 80 per cent of India's food. In a given crop season, when fields are sown and harvested, women farmers work about 3,300 hours, double the 1,860 hours of their male counterparts put into farming (<https://www.niti.gov.in/rural-women-key-new-indias-agrarian-revolution>). The share of women contributing to the rural economy has witnessed rather dramatic changes in the last few years, whether in terms of Work Participation Rate (WPR) or Labour Force Participation Rate (LFPR). This percentage distribution of women in agriculture in the three PLFS of 2017-18, 2018-19, and 2019-20 – even though not strictly comparable to earlier surveys – is 73.2 per cent, 71.1 per cent and 75.7 per cent respectively in terms of WPR All Ages, and 17.5 per cent, 19 per cent and 24 per cent in terms of LFPR All Ages.

The implication is obvious: that post the year of demonetisation, and in the context of especially an erratic growth strategy as well as a rather arbitrary and inequitable pandemic response policy, both devoid of a people-centric approach,

reverse migration to agriculture continues even today. With a consistently collapsing economy that does not focus either on employment expansion or on demand-side factors, many internal migrants are compelled to return to their villages. Macro data on migrants is virtually non-existent, with no statistical plan to gather such information, women predictably being devisibled even though Census figures have revealed a spurt in female migration for employment, from around 4.1 million in 2001 to 8.5 million in 2011 (Mazumdar and Neetha, 2020). It is of course obvious that those who did find some level of employment face decline in the intensity of work and drop in wages due to increase in formalisation and crowding, migrant women being more severely impacted and often forced to accept exploitative terms for fear of being unemployed (AIDWA, 2020; Mohan *et al.*, 2021).

Additionally, it is essential to note that the shift to agriculture is happening despite the fact that it has the lowest wage rates, with PLFS itself lamenting the low average daily wage of merely Rs. 291 for rural casual labour, with women of course getting much less. Analysis based on Unit-level data from the 61st round NSS (2004-05), the PLFS (2018-19 and 2019-20), as well as All India Debt and Investment Surveys (India Discrimination Report, 2022) report sharp rise in gendered wage discrimination across the board for the most vulnerable and marginalised – Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes and the Muslim community.

Discrimination in income inequality rose sharply by ten percentage points to 79 per cent just in one year in 2019-20 for rural SC and ST casual wage workers. Muslims witnessed the sharpest rise in unemployment at 17 per cent. In terms of agricultural credit, SCs and STs received not even a quarter of what forward castes got. For rural women the situation is even worse, gender discrimination accounting for the entire employment gap at 100 per cent. Rural self-employed males earn twice of what females earn although the income levels themselves are extremely low, while male casual workers earn Rs 3,000 per month more than females, 96 per cent of which is attributed to discrimination. Additionally, rural women are increasingly unable to sell their produce (MAKAAM, 2020) or get jobs under MGNREGS due to increased competition from returning migrants (Centre for Equity Studies *et al.*, 2020; Sharma, 2020). A critical issue for migrants, especially for single women and transgender persons, is that of conditionalities and lack of portability of documents, changes in migration patterns being visible with fewer women migrating out of villages (Jan Sahas, 2021).

IV

DEVISIBLED 'RESILIENCE'

The proportion of persons below the poverty line rose for the first time in 42 years by over five percentage points. India has fallen 28 places within just one year to stand at 140 out of 156 countries in gender parity on the World Economic Forum's Global Gender Gap Index, and an abysmal low of 151 in terms of economic

participation and opportunities. In less than 15 years, India has fallen 39 places on the Economic Gender Gap too, from 110 in 2006 to 149 in 2020. Among its South Asian neighbours, India now has the lowest Female Labor Force Participation, falling behind Pakistan and Afghanistan which had half of India's FLFP in 1990.

A major reason for the massive decline in women's participation in the labour force is the expansion and intensification of the unpaid work burden subsequent to cuts in critical public investment and a development path that prioritises only growth. One of the foremost reasons is alterations in the fundamentals of the fiscal architecture, including withdrawal of subsidies on cooking energy, thereby increasing their hunt for household fuel. The gas subsidy opted for by especially poor women was stopped without notice in April 2020 barely a month after the national lockdown that left the majority of India's citizens unemployed; the free gas cylinder scheme Ujjwala ceased to function on 30 September 2020 although out-of-budget statements assure its extension. Meanwhile the refill price has almost tripled in merely two years, making clean cooking energy unaffordable especially when viewed in the context of the huge fall in income levels. Direct Benefit Transfer Kerosene was withdrawn in February 2020: kerosene used to be earlier sold at subsidised rates through the Public Distribution System to those who did not have a gas connection. This subsidy allocation had already been halved: simultaneously fuel retailers have been permitted to raise the price every single fortnight over the last two years.

Globally India has among the highest and most unequal gender division of unpaid work. India's first Time Use Survey (2019) reveals that women spend on average four hours and fifty-nine minutes per day on unpaid domestic work, men one hour and thirty-nine minutes - that is, women devote nearly three times more time than men on domestic work (Shaik, 2020). During crises, women's unpaid work intensifies sharply in order to ensure the very survival of households and communities, especially when the State defaults on its responsibilities such as provision of food security and public health (Dewan, 2017). Increasing dependency on agriculture as well as reverse migration expands the burden of unpaid work by increasing the number of members present in the house and by shifting the burden of public services such as schools, crèches, *anganwadis*, clinics and hospitals on to households and women (IMPRI, 2021). Women especially amongst low-income groups report a significant increase in time spent on cooking for the family which has expanded due to returning migrants (APU, 2021).

The structural changes in the labour market have translated into collapse of income levels, erosion of savings and ballooning of household debt. The result is a massive rise in especially rural poverty, all the more problematic because of the pre-pandemic scenario of a collapsing economy characterised by unprecedented inequality. The immediate and most direct outcome is the increase in food insecurity. This needs to be viewed in the context of the fact that 76 per cent of the rural households could not afford a nutritious diet even in the pre-pandemic period (NFHS 5, 2019-20): yet allocation to nutrition was reduced by 16 per cent and the Midday Meal Scheme by Rs.

500 crores. The stress of inadequate food falls disproportionately on women because of the 'Last and Least to Eat' syndrome. Gender gaps in access to nutrition are highest among socio-economically vulnerable groups, typically including families with migrants (Puskar and Ram, 2020). The drastic fall in incomes has compelled the poor, especially single women, to cut consumption, draw upon their meagre savings, sell their assets and borrow just to meet their daily consumption needs. Borrowing is mostly from informal institutions and networks such as friends, relatives, self-help groups and local money lenders, with banking institutions and co-operatives providing little credit (APU, 2020; 2021). ActionAid (2020) reports incidence of debt amongst migrants being higher than that for non-migrants.

Increasingly overt forms of 'resilience' include acceptance of de-schooling particularly in a situation where the dropout rates of girls are much higher than that of boys; where extra-economic divides based on caste and religion are exacerbated; where particularly girl child labour has increased; where girls and also boys are being married off in earlier than the average years. And, probably the most understated form of 'resilience' is the even wider acceptance of physical and mental violence of women in the aftermath of the desperation and fury of unemployment with the situation not improving in the immediate future, so much so that a special term has been created for it in the last two years – 'shadow pandemic' (Dewan, 2022).

V

IN LIEU OF A CONCLUSION

It has been almost two decades since the seminal and path-breaking Swaminathan Committee Report was submitted, its recommendations dealing with agricultural resilience in the true sense of the term, including for women who while not even today being recognised as farmers are increasingly upholding the agricultural and now also rural economy. Per capita income in 2021-22 is Rs 91,481, lower than 2018-19: this does not of course reflect the reality of the majority of India's citizens, combining as it does the income of the two richest men in the world along with a country that has been continuously falling in the Global Hunger Index (GHI) from 97 out of 118 nations in 2016 to 101 out of 116 countries in 2021. The GHI is probably the most important in terms of involuntary resilience, based as it is on what are the fundamentals of what I term as economic human rights: proportion of undernourished in a population; proportion of children under the age of five suffering from wasting; proportion of children under five suffering from stunting; mortality rate of children under five. On the Human Development Index too India has slipped three places from 129 in 2018 to 132 in 2022.

In this scenario of deprivation and in fact destitution of an increasingly larger proportion of the citizens of this country especially women who have borne the brunt of the virtual collapse of at least a partially egalitarian economy, it would be expected that gender allocations would have been increased and that the primary sector that has

provided refuge and succour would be strengthened and fortified and given all the monetary and fiscal support that it requires.

The Gender Budget today accounts for merely 0.66 per cent of India's GDP, a sharp reduction from an already low 0.71 per cent in the last fiscal. The share of the Ministry of Women & Child Development to the total budget is the lowest ever, down to 0.51 per cent of the already low of 0.57 per cent in the last budget. Child Budget as a proportion of Total Expenditure is merely 2.35 per cent, the least in eleven years. Other reductions include allocations to Midday Meals, ICDS, Swadhar, Widows, etc.

Further, instead of strengthening the agriculture and allied sector, a series of policy changes have been initiated that is consistently weakening its resilience: the un-debated Farm Acts; MSPs below promised amount, the last decadal increase in wheat MSP averaging merely 5.5 per cent as compared to 12.2 per cent per annum in the earlier decade; the recent announcement that only those who have an irrevocable Letter of Credit can export wheat, thereby excluding all farmers and farmers organisations except corporate; the proposal of September 6, 2022 to privatise fertiliser-producing Public Sector Units; schemes and allocations that support the organised dairy segment rather than the unorganised segment which is where the majority of dairy farmers are employed, women representing 70 per cent of the workforce in India's dairy sector as per the Prime Minister's speech of September 12, 2022 at the International Dairy Federation World Dairy Summit, where he also announced the issuance of Aadhar Cards for cattle; the drastic fall in beef production from 1511 (thousand metric tonnes(tmt)) in 2018 to 1397 tmt in 2021.

Budget allocations also do not hold out much promise: fall from 5.1 per cent to 4.3 per cent of share of budget for agriculture and allied activities; withdrawal of import subsidies; 13 per cent reduction for PM Kisan Saman Nidhi. At a time when the single major issue confronting people is poverty and livelihood opportunities, allocation to the largest employment guarantee scheme in India in which women constitute almost 60 per cent of beneficiaries – MGNREGS – was reduced by Rs.38,500 crores in 2020-21 from the previous year, thus supporting only 2.7 to 2.8 million individual workdays compared to 3.4 million in the earlier year. This is not taking into account payment of back wage arrears. In the current fiscal too MGNREGA has been allocated the meagre amount of Rs 73,000 crore, even though the allocation was enhanced to Rs 98,000 crore in the Revised Estimates of FY-2022. In fact, in 2020-21, the actual expenditure on MGNREGS was Rs 1,11,170 crore.

Yet another crucial area of resilience that women have historically relied on and which is being increasingly encroached upon is their rights over Common Property Resources, the produce of which ensures un-priced nutrition for their families as well as income earned by sale of commodities. The draft Environment Impact Assessment policy issued in 2020 significantly waters down the 2006 rules, making it easier to implement projects without any environmental scrutiny whatsoever. The dilution of The Forest Rights Act (2006), coupled with the latest dilution of powers of the State in forest matters under The Forest Conservation Act (1980), as well as recent mining

reforms including privatisation of coal violates and undermines the provisions of the 1996 Panchayats (Extension to Scheduled Areas) Act: the result is the denial of the historical and constitutional rights guaranteed to protect tribal communities and natural resources.

In this context it is crucial to point out that when the growth trajectory needs to urgently prioritise gender-sensitive sustainable and sustained livelihood opportunities, India, with the lowest ever overall score of 18.9, now ranks at the bottom of the global Environment Performance Index calculated for 180 countries. There are several other global rankings on which India has fallen – Inequality; Gender Wage Gap; Healthcare; Education; Water; Air – the list unfortunately quite long, including the downgrading from a democracy to a 'flawed democracy' and from 'free' to 'partly free'.

It is pertinent to note here that the freedom of workers and their rights are additionally being constrained by the introduction of the four Labour Codes. Daily working hours are increased from the internationally accepted 8 hours to 10 and in some cases even 12 hours, thus making redundant an entire shift of workers, and this in a situation where the unemployment rate is the highest in 45 years. The negation of labour rights include restrictions of definition of employee/worker to establishment/industry; de-recognition of home based workers, domestic workers and apprentices by precluding work in private households; delinking of sexual harassment from safe conditions of work; reinforcement and creation of new gender stereotypes; invisibilisation of female- and child-headed households; self-certification of compliance by employer; reduction of women's representation on Boards and Committees; extension of ban on strikes and other forms of democratic protest to each and every sector whether primary, secondary or tertiary, and all sub-sectors in including agriculture, forestry, fishery, construction, health, education etc. (Dewan, 2020).

The very concept of 'resilience' in relation to both agriculture and gender has to be viewed in the context of the intensification of the process of appropriation of the absolute as well as relative surplus value of workers and their contribution to upholding particularly the agricultural and also rural economy. This process is characterised by the de-equalisation of whatever level of gender equality had hitherto existed, the intensification of precarity for both men and women, the deepening of extra-economic divides between social groups and communities, and the reinforcement of patriarchal inequalities. Resilience consequently comes at the expense of those who are being increasingly marginalised in this stage of 'development', not only the present but also the future workforce.

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