

[home](#)[features](#)[news and events](#)[contributors](#)[about](#)

Subscribe

Your email:

Countries

[Afghanistan](#)[Bangladesh](#)[Bhutan](#)[India](#)[Maldives](#)[Nepal](#)[Pakistan](#)[South Asia - General](#)[Sri Lanka](#)

Tags

[Afghanistan](#)[Australia](#) [Bangladesh](#)[BJP](#) [China](#) [China](#) [India](#)[relations](#) [Commonwealth](#)[Games](#) [Congress](#)[corruption](#) [cricket](#)[democracy](#)[economy](#) [education](#)[elections](#) [foreign](#)[policy](#)[government](#)[history](#) [human rights](#)[India](#) [India](#) [economy](#)[Indian Ocean](#)[international](#)[relations](#) [Islam](#) [language](#)[LTTE](#) [Manmohan Singh](#)[Maoists](#) [mining](#) [Narendra](#)[Modi](#) [Nepal](#) [nuclear](#)

FEATURE ARTICLE: Notes from the field: feminisation of agriculture in the eastern Gangetic plains

August 14, 2012

Posted by southasiamasala in : [Features](#), [India](#), [Lahiri-Dutt](#), [Kuntala](#) , [trackback](#)

Kuntala Lahiri-Dutt

... if women enjoyed the same access to productive resources as men in the world, farm yield could be raised by 20-30%...

The driver of the Tata Sumo I was travelling in not only stopped and honked several times, but, on at least two occasions, left the vehicle to physically push off the cows who were lazing on the road and relishing the midday heat of summer. More reluctant than the cows, however, were the black, white and brown goats on our path that were just lazily hanging around without a specific destination in mind. The road had lost its smooth tar cover and the large potholes of unascertainable depth meant that we were driving at not much more than walking speed. Whilst the bovine behaviour of acting as speed bumps is not unfamiliar to those who have travelled in rural India, the number and variety of goats and their goatish behaviour were noticeable at once. They were busier than the cows, chomping away on the leaves of the jute stalks that had just been cut and piled on the roadside before being dumped into the water for retting, or, on one occasion, a single goat was lying on its side, with its head on the tar, like a dead body. The goat had deliberately adopted the posture – actually to scratch its ear.

In an extremely poor area in the eastern Gangetic plains, running roughly from Champaran in North Bihar in the west to Cooch Behar near the Bangladesh border in the east and including the narrow flat stretch of Terai in Nepal, goats have become the new ‘feminine asset’.

Pakistan

politics security

South Asia

Masala Sri Lanka

students Taliban Tamil

Tigers terrorism trade

United States Uranium

US women

Organisations

Australia India Council

Australia South Asia

Research Centre (ASARC),

Australian National

University

Australia-India Institute

Future Directions

International (FDI)

India Research Centre,

Macquarie University

Indian Ocean & South Asia

Research Network

South Asia Research Institute

South Asian Studies

Association

Publications

Indian Herald

Pragati

Strategic Weekly Analysis

(Future Directions

International)

Events

ANU South Asia Seminar
series

Indian Ocean & South Asia
Research Network

Tiffin Talks (Australia-India
Institute, University of
Melbourne)

Blogroll

East Asia Forum

New Mandala

Thuppahi's Blog

WordPress.com

WordPress.org

Meta

Log in



Called 'rural women's banks', they are now being raised in very large numbers, generally by women who have been left behind in the villages to look after the children and care for the elderly. Throughout this region, men have traditionally migrated out to earn cash incomes; the 'money-order' economy is not new. These are the men who pull rickshaws in Calcutta or Delhi streets, work as domestic servants or plough land in the fields of Punjab and Haryana, or labour in the factories. This tradition of outmigration has evolved over many generations as one of the key livelihood strategies; many families send out at least one, if not more sons, keeping one son at home to look after the farm. In the past, these men usually returned home during the transplanting or harvesting seasons: the farming being primarily subsistence in nature with a combination of monsoon-fed rice and winter wheat or jute belt. But the goats have made their appearance in a somewhat different context; the region's social fabric is now under threat from *en masse* outmigration of men, leaving women to cope with the daily realities of working in an agriculture that is dependent on uncertain rainfall, rising input costs and the vagaries of the market in an increasingly globalised economy.

The deepening agrarian crisis in India, therefore, has a feminine face; only a few of the innumerable women who till these lands actually own them or have financial resources to lease the lands. Married at an early age with little or no education, they have no access to the various schemes that the state government ministries come out with for the improvement of agriculture. Patriarchal culture still dictates behavioural norms and the division of labour on the farm remains sexually-based; for example, women still do not plough the land or cut the jute stalks, although they spend long hours transplanting rice seedlings, threshing the harvested rice and standing in waist-deep, dark-coloured and stinking water, soaking jute stems. They also collect the fodder, feed and care for the cattle, which are generally owned by the absentee household head. It is in this context that the goats have appeared as beacons of hope for women in feminised agriculture in the eastern Gangetic plains. Conceptually, these endearing brown and black specked animals challenge the classical theoretical position of Marxist feminists who had suggested that reproductive work in the private sphere of home is different from, and in opposition to, the productive or wage-work that takes place in the public sphere. These goats show how a woman's productive and reproductive work is linked intricately, and how an assumed separation of

Entries [RSS](#)

Comments [RSS](#)

WordPress.org

these two spheres can be risky in terms of scholarly interpretation of 'field' evidence.

These alluvial plains, rich with sandy soils brought down from the Himalayan mountain slopes by the rivers during the monsoonal rains, are notorious for being flood prone and for the perpetual water-logging experienced in the more low-lying areas. Yet, they were at one time one of the richest agricultural areas, supporting a rich feudal rural society as evidenced by the relics of the palaces of the Dwarbhanga and Cooch Behar maharajas. The royal glory long gone, the region, today, comprises one of the poorest rural areas of the world. The poverty is not only expressed in the remoteness of villages, in the lack of roads and other services, and in general ill-being associated with intense poverty, but also in a patriarchal system that relentlessly uses and exploits women to serve itself. In twenty-first century India aspiring for high economic growth rates, caste continues to remain the dominating marker of a rural person's identity in the region, making women subject to the triple burden of sexually-based oppression, poverty and caste oppression. Certain castes cannot keep poultry, and only the women of the malo caste can use the water bodies to catch fish to supplement family diet.



Women have always performed important roles in agriculture; but their roles have changed in comparison to what Ester Boserup described as the 'feminine sector' of subsistence farm production, which is also separate from the male-dominated cash-crop sector. Women comprise, on average, 43% of the agricultural workforce in developing countries, ranging from 20% in Latin America to 50% in East Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa and more than 70% of farm labour in China. These proportions vary according to the social, ecological and economic context as well as the definition of what constitutes productive farm work (as compared to the supposedly voluntary and unpaid contribution in family farms). A conservative estimate by UNHRC in 2010 suggests that in the present day, women farmers produce 50% of all foodcrops. The general pattern in Asia suggests that the poorer the area, the higher is women's contribution, and that women generally farm small pieces of land. In South Asia, women have been estimated to account for, on an average, about 39 per cent of the agricultural workforce. Throughout India, women are more likely to be engaged in agricultural work than men, but,

since much of this work is informally done as part of a family's subsistence, official statistics continue to grossly underestimate the female workforce in the region. Women comprise close to 33% of 'cultivators' (a census category, implying farmers with land) and nearly 47% of agricultural labourers in India.

Experts think that feminisation of agriculture is a process in which different combinations of a multitude of economic, social and political factors intensify women's contributions to farm labour. Increased male outmigration from villages, such as the ones described above, is only one, but a significant, facet of agrarian change under neoliberal economic policies being pursued by India. As households desperately innovate to cope with the shifted economic priorities of states, patriarchal families burden women left back at home to take care of the dependents, the livestock *and* the land. Travelling through the eastern Gangetic plains in India, feminisation of agriculture appeared to be linked with a multitude of factors such as distress outmigration of rural men in favour of 'non-agriculture sectors', leaving women to undertake the production of labour-intensive cash crops, and the growing number of women-headed households. Some of the consequences are disastrous for women; there is an increased 'casualisation' of work and unprofitable crop production within the stagnating agricultural economy.

The changes also appear to be undermining women's roles in gendered farm work; indeed, women from very poor families in the eastern Gangetic plains are accepting jobs at lower wages – jobs that were formerly done only by men, such as land preparation, cultivation of crops, spraying pesticides, harvesting, post-harvest processing and marketing of the products. At the same time, it is not yet clear how much control women have over the remittances; the jury is still out and I wonder if one can ever resolve the enigma of how cash incomes flow within poor households and whether or not the incomes from absentee males empower women. It is true that such feminisation has blurred, at least to some extent, the traditional gender-based division of labour; women's adoption of not only more wage-based work in agricultural processing but also the investment of more time in cash-crop production is part of the evidence.

Despite the substantial amount of time allocated to domestic work, when I spoke with them in my native Bangla, or a Maithili Hindi, some rural women said that they feel somewhat empowered in that they can now manage small budgets and make household decisions—in the absence of men. Goats being smaller are also cheaper than cows and allow women that critical little economic space within which to manoeuvre their tiny financial resources and make independent household decisions. However, in the case of bigger animals such as cows, they tend to rely on the older male relatives. Further, women's mobility is increased as they go to the local market to sell their products.

It is well known that poor rural women in India have less access than men to agriculture-related assets, inputs and services, as well as water, which are critical inputs in productivity. Ownership of assets is the key link in women's empowerment; land rights serve multiple functions in rural women's lives. For example, a sample survey conducted in 2000 in seven states of India found that of the 470 women with land-owning fathers, only 13% of daughters inherited land, and half the widows with legal claims did not inherit any land. Of those women who did inherit some land, the shares are generally not recorded formally in village land records. Interestingly, the

issue of women and land, even today, remains a marginal concern of development policy, revealing the disjunction between public policy formulation and women's rights encased in personal law in India. Women's roles in agriculture are also connected to the broader issues of rural women's access to other productive resources such as land, common property resources, credit, extension service delivery and technology. Lastly, food security is closely connected to gender equity in rural production.

The Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) considers that feminisation has serious implications for the producers' economic agency and productivity and farm income. Indeed, if women enjoyed the same access to productive resources as men in the world, farm yield could be raised by 20–30%, thereby increasing the overall agricultural output in developing countries by 2.5 to 4%. Besides increasing women's income, this gain in production could lessen hunger in the world by 12–17%. However, without autonomy, such improvements of agriculture through rural women's empowerment remain a distant dream in the Indian context. As far as one can tell, the minimal accumulation has resulted in the ability of women to buy a goat independently or on a profit–shared basis with one or more women from similar contexts, rear it and take the decision to sell the kids on their own. The goat thus becomes a symbol, as well as the conceptual peg, of rural women's empowerment in eastern Gangetic plain.

Coming back to the important question of how to explain the empirical evidence gathered from the field, one can say that what rural farm women are producing at home is not simply use-values but the commodity of labour power that the male member of the family, the husband, can then sell as a free wage-labourer in the labour market. The productivity of the women, expressed in tending goats in the villages, therefore, can be seen as the precondition for the productivity of the men. It is not impossible to connect these women's roles with the global political economy of development, in particular with the neoliberal economic policies that cause much of the farm and food crises in the contemporary world. Major scholarly contributions in the field have come from various scholarly works in Africa and Latin America. This growing body of work acknowledges that as farmers, agricultural workers and entrepreneurs, women form the backbone of agricultural rural economy in developing countries, and yet, together with children, remain one of the most vulnerable groups.

