

The Impact of New Economic Policy on Women's Livelihoods - A Case Study From Indian Scenario

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ABSTRACT In developed countries while policies have been formulated to integrate women into the mainstream of development on equal terms with men both as agents and beneficiaries, in the developing countries the policies on women are yet to be formulated. As a result economic adjustment programmes have failed to solve the problem of poverty in third world countries making women suffer the most particularly in rural and in tribal areas where the response of macro policies to environmental degradation is very diverse in turn creating a negative impact on women. Moreover in India economic adjustment programmes adversely affect women as the Indian society being largely patriarchal, the property rights are vested in men and do not accommodate women as owners of land. This has resulted in invisibility of the labour made by women which in turn creates a negative impact on other aspects of their lives for example, their access to education, new skill and technology, health and health related services etc. Policy makers, planners and particularly the economists have ignored the social and family structures that is, the social context in which the development is to take place. This has a greater impact on those households particularly headed by females both in rural, tribal and in urban areas. Moreover development planning whether national or international has traditionally been gender blind and this as a backdrop, a study is being undertaken to analyse how the macropolicies formulated on the basis of changing global economic environment are having an impact on the women and on their livelihoods among the Malayali, a tribe practising subsistence agriculture in Kolli hills, in Tamil Nadu.

INTRODUCTION

While India had begun a process of 'adjustment' quietly since the beginning of 1980s encouraging multinational corporations to invest by the then ruling governments during that time (Congress government under the leadership of Indira Gandhi, Rajiv Gandhi and Narasimha Rao and Janata government) all the ruling parties at that time continued huge foreign borrowings, deficit financing and indirect taxation resulting in the failure of economic crisis. Keeping in view the prevailing economic crisis of the In-

dian economy, the then ruling government of India initiated IMF (International Monetary Fund) - World Bank prescribed New Economic Policy in July 1991 in the hope of correcting the central government's fiscal imbalances and also attaining the most immediate stabilisation goals-goals of monetary and price stability. Though the major thrust of the policy was on economic liberalisation the emphasis was on the greater role for the private sector including or incorporating deregulation withdrawal of subsidies or state support to public sector enterprises, liberalisation of external trade by removing restrictions on export particularly on agricultural produce or goods, easing of conditions for foreign capital inflow, especially direct foreign investment by foreign agents in Indian securities, domestic deregulation and foreign controls including those on prices of essential commodities and restrictions on their movements, cuts in overt and covert subsidies, essentially on exports, fertiliser and food to bring domestic prices in line with international prices, gradual privatisation and most important of all liberalising domestic financial markets etc. In order to increase the flexibility of the economy so as to make it less vulnerable to further shocks and to promote higher rates of growth, the above current economic strategy includes the two main components that is, the Stabilisation Policy and Structural Adjustment Programmes under the broad rubric of the term liberalisation.

While stabilisation policy are short term introduced to manage or avert the crisis by reducing fiscal deficits, curtailing demand and lowering the rate of inflation (Joy R. Ranadive, 1994). Structural adjustment programme are long term in that, over time they seek to reduce market rigidities and open the doors of internal and external markets to competition. Thus the major thrust of the structural adjustment

programmes lies in the globalisation of Indian economy. While the stabilisation measures themselves are far from either complete or successful during the last few years, structural adjustment measures depend for their success on the crucial supply responses anticipated from the private sector which are so far nowhere in evidence; as even today the rates of investment stagnate, there is a decline in savings rate and no indication as yet of positive economic restructuring which actually generates more employment. The only apparent sign of success is to be seen in the external sector where the stock of foreign exchange reserves had touched an all time high of \$ 115.3 billion by the first week of April 1994, but the increase to a sizeable extent is based on the further accumulation of external sector driven growth with imports liberalisation, export-orientation and globalisation which are unlikely to contribute to a strengthening of the country's domestic economic structure. All this indicates that the success of this strategy in its own terms is still by no means certain, but even if it is presumed (which is most unlikely) that it could bring about both stabilisation and a certain type of restructuring that integrates India more closely with the global economy, there are implications that are disturbing not only for domestic distribution but also for the position of women.

It is in this context the implications for women and their livelihoods particularly belonging to vulnerable groups in terms of the following variables like drudgery of work, access to basic needs, such as food, clothing and shelter and to the provisioning of common property resources; access to education, health and skill formation which would allow women to move out of low skill low productivity jobs; access to the health care, nurture of the young (child care) and other social services, access to productive employment outside the home and recognition of household work, control over allocation of resources both within households and society will be considered. Each of the above variables are typically affected not only by the reduction in government expenditure that came as part of the stabilisation measures, but also by the general withdrawal of state from various aspects of provisioning of goods and

services and the greater reliance on markets which are the desired form of restructuring of the then government. Cuts in social infrastructural spending have even more direct effects on living and working conditions of women who continue to bear the primary responsibility for household health and nutrition as well as nurture the young.

They can also affect women's ability to enter the labour market at all, or may mean that forced entry because of poverty means an even greater double burden of domestic and outside work (Ghosh, 1994). Thus during structural adjustment it is the poor that suffer the most (Ranadive, 1994). Numerous studies on the effect of structural adjustment programmes in developing countries have revealed that whatever be the specificities or details that operate in any particular the brunt of the transition period and within the household it is the women who suffer the most.

INTERFACE BETWEEN HOUSEHOLD AND NEW ECONOMY POLICY

The interface between macro policies such as APP (Adjustment Policy Programme) and the micro unit of the household, lies in the latter acting as a buffer that absorbs shocks released by the former. In the event of any change in the economy the households prime concern is to survive. This is particularly true of poor households within which one-third of the population lives. It has been found across countries and cultures that the responsibility of the survival of the household rests on the shoulders of the women - That the family is fed, clothed and cared for is women's concern since it ties up with her share of work as per the sexual division of labour. This she does irrespective of her contribution to outside world by providing goods and services and also irrespective of her contribution to outside world by providing goods and services and also irrespective of her direct access to resources or income. While in male headed households it may be carried out on the basis of partial control of resources, whereas the responsibility is explicit in female headed households (Ranadive, 1994).

Thus the inequitable world order poses a

serious challenge to the claims of human development and basic rights which are threatened by the destruction of many third world economies under pressure of international debt and SAP. And in India the macro-economic strategies (global and national) are affecting both people, particularly women and environment. Under the concept of global strategies the homogenising thrust of the process of growth and development with its uni-dimensional meaning of 'development' has played a central role in destroying diverse yet unique people's response to diverse eco-systems. The famous Brundtland Commission report of 1987 which argued for a 'new era of growth' has in the process been responsible for making millions of people at the grass root level struggle to protect their life support systems and livelihoods as there is always a possible divergence between economic growth and environmental sustainability.

It is at this juncture that I would like to restrict my analysis to the impact of macro-economic policies of women's livelihoods particularly among the tribals.

As the major concern of this paper is to focus on the interface between NEP and Women's Livelihoods among the tribals of Kolli hills, the emphasis is on the framework that increasingly determines the operation of transformation of women's lives but also of food system.

LOCALE OF THE STUDY - KOLLI HILLS

The Kolli hills, an area of about 282.93 sq km lies in Namakkal and Rasipuram taluks of Salem districts. They are situated around 300 kms to the south east to Chennai in Salem districts. The Kolli hills are one of the large inselberg complexes of the south east Indian Talaghat plains (Bohle, 1992). The mountain tract extends over an area of around 20 × 30 km, elevating with very steep slopes to a height more than a 1000 meters above the plains. The interior of the Kolli hills consists of an undulated open plain interior of South India the Kolli hills represent a specific resource system with characteristic features of resource management and a specific food system.

The Kolli hills are inhabited by around 33888 members (Census of India, 1991), of

which majority of them belong to a tribe commonly known as Malayalis who live in small clusters of 247 hamlets.

MALAYALI - A BRIEF BACKGROUND

Malayali is one of the most prominent Scheduled Tribe (ST) of Tamil Nadu and form more than 85 per cent (Census of India, 1991) (32130) of ST populations in Tamil Nadu.

The Malayali of Kolli hills represent a section of the Malayali of Tamil Nadu who inhabit the hills ranges of Salem, North Arcot, South Arcot, Dharmapuri and Tiruchirapalli districts. A large majority of the tribe is found in the hilly areas of Salem districts, particularly in Salem, Attur, Rasipuram and Namakkal taluks, Harur taluks of Dharmapuri and Thuraiyur taluk of Tiruchirapalli district have a few thousands of this tribe (Census of India, 1991).

Out of the nine taluks falling in the high ration range of 5-10 per cent scheduled tribes to total population of the taluks, seven are Malayali preponderant taluks found in this hilly tract. Salem ranks first in terms of high proportion of ST population to the total ST population in the state which is followed by North Arcot, South Arcot, Tiruchirapalli and Dharmapuri districts which have sizeable proportion of Malayali population.

The hamlets of Malayali in Kolli hills are found scattered on hill tops dotting the undulating surface. Each hamlet is situated on a more or less level ground. The house plots are owned individually wherein the huts are constructed in the centre with the cultivable land surrounding the dwelling place. Though the Malayali resemble the Tamils of the plains, their dress pattern is different from the latter in that the males among the Malayali generally wear a loin cloth and cover themselves with a thick blanket. The men wear their hair in a traditional style by tying the hair in a knot at the back. The women wear two pieces of cloth. One ties around at the waist and the other around their chest. The Malayalis speak Tamil with a slightly different accent from the plains people.

The Economy of Malayali in Kolli Hills

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centres around agriculture. Agriculture is their primary occupation and all other activities are associated with agriculture and are subsidiary in nature. The important source of income depends on cultivation of variety of cultivars ranging from cereals to millets. Availability of land and water is the crucial factor that determines the production. Since majority of the lands are rainfed they depend entirely on monsoons and cultivation is carried on only during the months from June till the end of January. Cultivation during the monsoon months is intensive. They produce all that is needed for the year around satisfying different needs; from grains and millet for their subsistence to the fiber that is needed for making the rope for their cattle. Compared to the lowlands the resource system of the Kolli hills is thus favourable for plant growth and agriculture. The natural vegetation of the Kolli hills consists of over grown mountain forest, the wood and fruits of which are extensively used by the mountain tract, the forest has been gradually replaced by subsistence agriculture during the last fifty years as favourable conditions for rain fed as well as irrigated land use were prevalent.

Traditional Livelihoods of Malayali Women of Kolli Hills

In all the agricultural operations and other subsidiary activities indigenous women of this tribe were playing an increasingly important role in sustainable agriculture by conserving biodiversity by way of utilising their profound knowledge of not only plants and animals in their living environment but through the multinational approach promoting the preservation of the species of plant and animals (Zubeeda, 1998). Apart from making their livelihood in agriculture, sericulture, bee-keeping, collections of minor produce, cattle herding, pig rearing are other activities that were undertaken by the women to supplement their subsistence or income.

But during 1980s when India had begun a process of adjustment profound changes took place in the production as well as in the distribution sphere of the tribal society which resulted in not only profound transformation of the tribal food system but also in the livelihoods of in-

digenuous women. It can be argued that the transformation of the tribal food system was a major step towards declining food security and increasing vulnerability of the tribal society more so in the case of women.

Indigenous Forms of Food Production Among Malayali of Kolli Hills

The favourable physical and biological potential of the lowlands in Kolli hills constitute the basis for a complex system of resource management and food production. As pointed out by Kumaran (1990) five rather autonomous, but spatially and functionally integrated elements can be distinguished. The first element is referred to as "*Home farm*" which is generally located close to the hamlet settlement, and consists of slightly terraced home gardens where subsistence food such as vegetables, plantain, millet and grams are cultivated without irrigation.

The second element is referred to as "*Slope farms*" and the system of food production is situated slope upwards and consists of terraced fields with dry crops (millet, beans, sweet potatoes) or fruit crops (lemon, orange, guava, papaya). The third element of the food system is known as the "*Forest farms*". These are generally situated on the northern slopes of the mountain tract which are not suitable for agriculture. Here the Malayali use wild forest fruit such as grape fruit and also collect various forest produce such as honey and wild berries. This is the only part of the food system which is meant for the market. The fourth element of food production system is called as "*Brush farms*" and this is now prohibited by the state as slash and burn cultivation was involved in the above type of farming to grow millets. Initially, the last element of the food production system is generally referred to as "*Valley farms*". They consist of terraced irrigated tracts of paddy land with up to two crops per year, situated down the slope along the major streams which serve as sources of irrigation.

Indigenous Forms of Resource Management Among Malayali of Kolli Hills

The hill tribes of the Kolli hills apart from having traditional form of food production also

have developed very sophisticated and complex forms of resource management which according to Warren and Brokshen (1991) can be characterized as "indigenous knowledge system". The particular form of resource management adapted and practised by the Malayalis is characteristic of the mountain tract. The three different forms of resource management being used by the Malayalis is mixed cultivation, crop rotation and soil management. And mixed cultivation practised by Malayalis in Kolli hills according to Bohle (1992) is a highly differentiated form of adaptation to the small-scale agro-climatic and edaphic conditions of the mountain. In mixed cultivation the Malayalis of Kolli hills use combinations of subsistence sector mixed cultivation of rain fed rice, millets and pulses are used and in the market sector mixed cultivation is applied to plantain and pineapple. Malayalis of Kolli hills consider mixed cultivation as risk minimising device as well as a means of seasonal expansion and complementation of peak labour demand. Crop rotation is used by the Malayalis mainly to maintain soil fertility. In this method they follow a three year sequence of paddy, millet and coriander in the first year, beans, millet and coriander in the second year and dry paddy and millet in the third year. Finally, in the third type of resource management the Malayalis use applications of green drug to maintain soil management, small field channels for water management and terracing for slope management.

In all the above agricultural operations beginning with clearing the land, preparing the soil, digging, sowing, applying manure, weeding to harvesting, winnowing, storing the grains women are involved. Above all, women also play an important role in selecting and preservation of seeds for the next sowing season.

If one takes stock of the traditional food system of the Malayalis, one may notice that cash crops had played a very minor role compared to subsistence crops. But at the same time cultivation of marketable produce such as fruits and collection of honey, berries, (gooseberry), gal nut (kadukkai) and other wild fruits for the market has constituted a major element of the food systems of the Kolli hills. The above produce was sold in the markets known as "Shan-

dies" in exchange for commodities such as salt, tobacco, betel, textiles and other consumer goods. Over a period of time this situation led to a long term debt relations and dependency of the Malayalis towards traders and money lenders which had a negative repercussion on women as the lands on which they practised subsistence agriculture were taken away by the traders and other businessmen from the plains either for non payment of the long due debts or buying the lands for cheaper rate to promote the cash crop in order to meet the demands of the export trade resulting in slow but systematic draining off the resources from the regions. Apart from the above fact the macro economic policy had an impact on the indigenous women and on their indigenous knowledge system as growing of cash crop, mostly a mono crop was encouraged, instead of variety of traditional cultivars, for trading purpose since restrictions on exports of agricultural produce was removed.

Transformation of the Indigenous Food System Under the Impact of New Economic Policy (NEP)

During 1980s when liberalisation measures were introduced towards greater market orientation, they immediately affected not only women's material conditions but also setting in motion longer term tendencies in the economy, and in society which benefited the large multinationals. Thus the changes in macro economic policy or economic reforms that took place in early nineties not only liberalise external trade particularly removing of restrictions on exports of agricultural produce but it also encouraged multinationals to invest in the country consequently resulting in the pressure on cultivators to change from traditional subsistence agriculture to cash crops where the demand for cash crops like coffee, tea, tapioca etc., in countries outside India were in great demand. As a result of the changes in macro-economic policy, traditional subsistence based food production system practised by Malayalis in Kolli hills was slowly replaced by large-scale production of tapioca in the range of the traditional; "home farm" and pineapple in the range of the "old slope farm". Both the cash crops have considerably reduced subsistence cultivation in Kolli

hills. The transformation induced profound changes in the infrastructural, socio-economic and political frame work of the food system of the Malayalis of Kolli hills. Though it can be argued that tapioca was grown much before the NEP of 1991, the cultivation of tapioca was done on a low profile at that time particularly on the foot hills and in the areas on the hills which were easily accessible from the plains. Much of the initiation and prompting came about during late 1980s and early 1990s by private sago factory owners. In 1980 the communication facilities in the form of laying roads in Kolli hills brought a change in the economy of the tribals. And this was more accentuated when in 1991 new economic policy was introduced in India which was more responsible in bringing about a drastic change in the economy affecting most the vulnerable sections of the society and more so, the women in such groups bore the brunt or were most affected.

The Impact of New Economic Policy on Indigenous Women of Kolli Hills

The factory owners who exported starch and other finished products made from tapioca needed the raw materials which can be easily availed at the cheaper rate from the tribals. By way of promoting the cultivation of tapioca the factory owners offered extension services, seeds and credit to the tribals and they also made exclusive and long term arrangements on the supply of tapioca to their factories. As a consequence of this, there was a shift from practising subsistence agriculture to growing of cash crops as tapioca cultivation increased the income of the producers compared to the subsistence agriculturists whose income stagnated. Moreover as most of the bargaining, trading and controlling of income was done by men, the sudden increase in income encouraged the cultivators to switch from subsistence to cash crops even though it had a negative impact on the household, by threatening its food security bringing down the nutrition levels and consequently affecting the health of its members, and particularly on the women belonging to vulnerable groups whose main role it to manage the household and ensure its survival in the event of any change in the economy. As it has been found

across countries and cultures that the responsibility of the survival of the household rests on the shoulders of the women, among Malayalis of Kolli hills, that the family is fed, clothed and cared for is the women's concern since it ties up with her share of work as per the sexual division of labour. This she does irrespective of her contribution by producing goods and as well as offering services for the outside world (by working as wage labourer in tapioca fields and in sago factories) and also irrespective of her direct access to resources or income. As in most third world societies women's rights in lands are use rights rather than outright ownership rights, her access to credit and other extension facilities are restricted. Even women's access to use rights are to secured as her rights are determined by the relationship with the kinsmen. Among Malayalis the women enjoyed use rights at least when subsistence agriculture was practised but she lost even those rights when a shift in cropping pattern took place since men controlled the land and income and also took decisions. As a result of shift in cropping pattern women not only lost use rights but also could not participate in the decision making process as men traded and controlled the income that came from the sale of tapioca. Moreover poor communities face constraints in having access to credit and the situation is worse in the case of women. Along with the shift in cash crops among Malayalis a systematic gender-bias against women and female children in the intra-household distribution of food and access to health care took place.

Among Malayalis though both women and men control resources women are noted to spend their incomes mainly on the family's basic needs and men in greater part on their personal needs. With the increase in income among Malayali men it cannot be assured that Malayali women and children will be benefited and thus women's direct access to economic resources assumed importance and the link between direct resource access and physical well-being needs no emphasis.

All these and more resulted in reducing the status of women to a subordinate position as they were relegated to managing the "traditional" sector (growing of subsistence crops), while the

men moved to "modern" sector (growing of cash crops, in this case, cultivating of tapioca) and consequently dealing with the market. Thus in majority of the cases women ended up doing redundant task like working as wage labourer or family labourer in the fields of tapioca by doing transplanting and weeding and digging the tapioca during harvesting. Unlike in subsistence agriculture where both men and women had equal access right to the land (at least women had use rights) with the transformation of the food production system the rights of women (access to land that is, use rights) were slowly eroded and significant inequalities in access to private property resources came to stay thus leading to women's much greater dependence on common property resources. With the introduction of cash crop the agricultural land and associated production technology among Malayalis is now largely concentrated among males. And consequently women are systematically disadvantaged in the labour market with fewer employment opportunities lesser occupational mobility, lower levels of training and lower payments for the work done by men. Due to greater task specificity of their agricultural work in the case of tapioca cultivation women are now mostly concentrated in transplanting, weeding and harvesting unlike in subsistence agriculture wherein they were involved in a range of agricultural operations which involved women's equal participation and application of their indigenous knowledge in the work. As a result, the women face sharper seasonal fluctuations in employment and earnings than do men and have less chance of finding work in lean season. Moreover, among Malayalis with the introduction of cash crops the burden of work also increased for women as there is now shortage of fuel and fodder. As women are responsible for grazing the cattle and bringing the fuel, the task now falls upon the girl child since women had to work longer hours in the fields in adverse conditions to manager sufficient amount to buy the food for the family from the public distribution shops or from the market at the exorbitant prices. As a chain reaction to this, the household in general is affected because of the decline in food security and lower levels of nutrition intake coupled together resulting in

various diseases. In the intra-household and as well as at the inter-household level women and girl child are most hard hit in distribution of resources due to social, cultural and religious norms. These norms existing both at the familial and societal level ascertain that a male in the household requires more food and nutrition than a female and all the more if the woman's contribution is exclusively in terms of domestic work or family labour then the assessment of her contribution is marginalised since it does not fetch an income from the market. As a result of the introduction of cash crop and integration of cash economy into the tribal economy the economic parameter of monetary gain has started determining the assessment of contribution and to that extent the rule of the economic regime enters valuation within the household which has a negative impact on the woman and their livelihoods. Thus with the introduction of New Economic Policy the pressure for the women increased as the women not only have to balance between producing goods and offering services for the outside world but also has to produce goods and offer services for own consumption in order to manage the household and ensure its survival. As a result of the increased pressure on women, either producing goods and offering services for the outside world may suffer or the goods and services produced by the women for the household may suffer a set back. If it is required that the women contributes more to outside sector then this often rebounds on the girl children in the household since they have to take over producing goods and offering services for the household. The transfer occurs across women since the existing sexual division of labour does not alter This could be further reflected in a fall in school attendance, school drop-outs and falling levels of health and nutrition of girl children. The observed transformation of an indigenous food system from a rather independent, subsistence-oriented into a relatively dependent, market oriented type of economy has undoubtedly brought along an inherent male bias in the formulation of the seemingly gender-neutral macro policy in that it does not account for the cost and investment of time and effort on the part of women in the production and maintenance of human

resources but also the effects of fiscal and monetary policies on women is determined by the social matrix and gendered patterns of resource use and control in tribal and rural households thus leading to a negative impact on the women's livelihoods. Apart from the above fact there is a considerable risk for the further development of the tribal economy and the society at large.

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