

Conditions of Women Agricultural Workers in Telangana (1900-1945) - An Observation¹

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ABSTRACT

This research paper critically examines the socio-economic status of women agricultural labourers in Telangana from the beginning of the 20th century to the late 1940s. The study highlights how gendered labour divisions, patriarchal norms, and feudal land relations shaped the lives and work conditions of women. Drawing from census data, gazetteers, and historical research, it is evident that women were not only integral to agricultural production but also subject to systemic discrimination in terms of wages, labour intensity, and social status. Female agricultural workers often worked longer hours for lower pay and were frequently denied basic rights, mobility, and recognition. The rise of commercial crops and changes in landholding patterns due to repeated droughts further marginalized these women. Additionally, oppressive systems like Vettiba, akin to bonded labour, and exploitative customs such as using women as collateral in debt repayment, underline the severe gender-based inequalities prevalent at the time. This paper also explores the interplay of caste, class, and gender that institutionalized second-class citizenship for women in agrarian settings. Through historical analysis, the paper attempts to foreground the invisible yet crucial contributions of women in Telangana's rural economy and the long-standing struggles they endured under feudalistic and patriarchal oppression.

INTRODUCTION

The history of agrarian societies in Telangana reveals a deeply entrenched system of patriarchal and feudal exploitation, especially affecting women agricultural labourers. From the early 20th century, women played a vital role in rural production yet remained socio-economically marginalized and invisible in public records and discourse. This research seeks to investigate the living and working conditions of women in Telangana's agricultural sector from 1900 to the mid-20th century. Census data from 1911 to 1941 reveals rising numbers of female agricultural labourers, indicating their increasing involvement in the workforce, often under exploitative conditions. Despite contributing equally, women received lower wages than men and were subjected to intense physical labour with minimal rights or recognition. Furthermore, systems like the Vettiba and the use of debt to bind women into servitude reflect the oppressive structures that governed rural life. This study aims to understand these dynamics and the implications they had on gender and class in Telangana's agrarian society.

Since the emergence of the sacred family system which presumed that nearly half of the women in society were engaged in agriculture the ruling class has been structured as an object of pleasure, while the ruled class has not only taken part in household chores but also in agricultural production, as reflected in the class system seen today. Although the roles of women in these two classes differ, both have been positioned as second-class citizens within the patriarchal family system. The primary purpose of this article is to study the status of women agricultural workers in Telangana from the beginning of the 20th century to the latter half of the century.

When the 1911 Census is compared with the 1891 Census, it is found that the number of farm servants and field labourers increased by 172 percent. The 1921 Census shows a decrease in their numbers due to recent droughts, which severely affected the poor. Moreover, the number of self-employed farmers also declined as a result of these droughts. Consequently, the number of tenants increased compared to the previous census. That is, owners of small landholdings sold their land due to the droughts, leading to a greater concentration of land in the hands of a few individuals. However, the 1931 Census reveals that the number of agricultural labourers increased by 28 percent during the

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previous decade. Similarly, the 1941 Census indicates a further increase of 29 percent in the number of agricultural workers over the preceding decade.

In 1911, out of the total population of 76,19,505 in Hyderabad State, 10.36 percent of the males were agricultural labourers, while 11.75 percent of the females were engaged in agricultural labour. In the population of Atrafi district, 10.55 percent of males and 16.4 percent of females were agricultural labourers. In Warangal district, 11.07 percent of males and 15.38 percent of females were agricultural labourers. In Karimnagar district, 1.01 percent of the male population were agricultural labourers. In Adilabad district, 31.6 percent of males and 10.92 percent of females were engaged in agricultural labour. In Medak district, 11.4 percent of males and 12 percent of females were agricultural labourers. In Nizamabad district, 10.85 percent of males and 15.9 percent of females were engaged in agricultural labour. Similarly, in Mahbubnagar district, 10.85 percent of males and 15.9 percent of females were agricultural labourers.

While 10.21 percent of the population of Sagar district were male agricultural labourers and 20.10 percent were female agricultural labourers, in Nalgonda district, 10.43 percent of the population were male agricultural labourers and 14.7 percent were female agricultural labourers.

Based on the Imperial Gazetteer of Hyderabad published in 1909, there is no clear information about the wage rates that existed in Hyderabad prior to that time. However, it is noted that the prevailing custom was to pay wages in cash during the sowing season and in kind during the harvest, especially for crops like pulses, chillies, and other food grains. Even today, in the Telangana region, some agricultural labourers continue to receive wages in kind—locally known as *vaitavu*—for harvesting food crops.

According to research conducted by Keshav Iyengar in Warangal district during 1929–30, the typical wage rate was 2 or 3 sers [1 ser equal to 1.25 Kg] of grain. In Nizamabad district, daily wages for labourers ranged from 5 to 8 annas. In Mahabubnagar district, wages were reported as 5 sers of paddy and 3 sers of jowar. Research conducted in 12 villages of Warangal district further revealed that wage rates varied from one village to another, depending on local customs and economic conditions.

According to the Medak District Gazetteer published in 1940, the daily wage for male agricultural labourers in Adilabad district was 0-4-9 annas, while the maximum wage for women was 0-3-6 annas. The minimum wage for men was 0-2-10 annas, and in Karimnagar district, the minimum wage for women was 0-3-4 annas.

For weeding operations in Medak district, men received 4 annas per day, while women were paid 0-3-4 annas. During the harvest season in the same district, men were paid 0-5-2 annas per day and women 0-3-9 annas. In Karimnagar district, male harvest workers were paid 0-2-2 annas, while female workers received 0-1-5 annas per day.

For general agricultural labour, the highest daily wage for men was 0-4-2 annas. In contrast, Mahabubnagar district reported the lowest male wage at 0-2-7 annas and the lowest female wage at 0-1-6 annas.

According to the 19300 Hyderabad census, women were paid 0-2-4 for planting saplings and 0-3-9 for men. In the case of cattle herding, men were paid 0-3-6 per head of cattle and women were paid 0-2-2. According to the 1945 Hyderabad census, men who ploughed the plough were paid 0-3-6 or 4 annas per day, while women were paid 0-2-2 annas.

For sowing activities, men were paid 3 annas per day, while women received 0-2-6 annas. For weeding, men earned 4 annas per day, and women were paid 2 annas. Cattle herders received 3 annas per month, whereas women performing the same work were paid only 0-2-2 annas.

The above statistics indicate that the wages of agricultural labourers—regardless of gender—declined between 1935 and 1939. Furthermore, data from 1942–44 reveals that, compared to the 1935–39 period, the wages of agricultural labourers (except for ploughmen) fell drastically—by as much as tenfold during the six-year period from 1939 to 1944. This reflects a significant decline in earnings for agricultural labourers in Telangana.

Additionally, it is evident that the prevailing feudal-commercial system in Telangana further worsened the living conditions of agricultural labourers, having a deep and lasting impact on their daily lives and economic well-being. The people of the Telangana region, especially agricultural labourers, considered it a blessing to live in huts—or in some cases, even in the cattle sheds of landowners. Evidence of the exploitation they faced, particularly women, can be seen in the incident involving Rapaka Ram Chandra Reddy, who exercised his power with Isnur as his base. He forced women to work in his fields for nearly 14 hours a day without rest, even preventing them from breastfeeding their infants and pouring out the milk.

When nobles arrived for fieldwork, women from the Palita community—regardless of age or health—were compelled to work, even if they were ill. In addition to field labour, village women were required to milk the nobles' cattle and perform other domestic chores. Yet, despite their hard work, they often had to live half of the year in hunger.

It was not easy for such agricultural labourers to obtain loans. During periods when there was no agricultural work, they would often agree to work for less than the prevailing wage rate in return for borrowed grain. Even during periods of agricultural activity, they were forced to accept wages lower than the standard rate. These low rates were inhumane.

In addition to this, they had to pay interest ranging from 24 to 35 percent on loans as small as 15 rupees. Borrowers were also expected to offer a lamb, a goat, or at least a chicken as a gift—or sometimes even four animals—for free to the lender. These loans had to be repaid in the form of grain during the harvest season, but at a rate much lower than the prevailing market price.

If they failed to repay the debt, the lender would treat them as bonded labourers, and they were unable to escape the cycle of debt. These labourers worked without expecting any reward. In some cases, the lenders would forcibly take girls from the borrowers' homes and send them to the lender's household as domestic workers. These girls were referred to as maidservants. For example, if the daughter of a lender was getting married, the girl who had been taken as a domestic worker would be sent as a maidservant to the son-in-law's house. These maidservants had no freedom and were required to obey every command of their masters.

Due to the changes brought about by the rise of commercial crops, The Vetti system in Telangana developed into a more intensified and oppressive form when compared to the Bagela system in Maharashtra and the Karvi system in Europe. Under the Vetti system, landlords not only received free agricultural and household labour but also control over cattle, land, other assets, and even women. In every aspect of this system, the subjugation was deep-rooted. Until recently, it was a common custom across the Telangana region for every newly married couple from the labouring class to enter the gadi (residence of the landlord) and fall at the feet of the landlord as a mark of submission.

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