

IMMEDIATE EFFECTS OF COVID-19 PANDEMIC SITUATION ON LIVELIHOOD OF WOMEN CULTIVATORS IN THE COASTAL AREAS OF WEST BENGAL AND ODISHA

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ABSTRACT

India is known for its dependence on agriculture and allied sectors as the major pillar of its economy. Being one of the major emerging nation in the world's economic and political power scenario the country has been expected to stand in good position in terms reduction of poverty and livelihood development of the people particularly of the rural area. The spread of Covid-19 virus has attributed to huge economic squander worldwide and India is no more any exception, rather the economy is such badly affected due to this situation that the GDP growth has brought down to only 23.9% over the same quarter last fiscal. Due to the current pandemic situation a large portion of global population is in a deadly juncture for its livelihood options due to sudden unemployment and related poverty along with. High risk of getting infected by this deadly virus and it's after effects. Specifically, the poor rural community who are largely dependent on agriculture and labour work are the worst hit ones due to this present situation. In this perplexing time being the vulnerable section women are again the most affected ones.

This paper aims to understand the current situation and its immediate effect on the women cultivators of coastal parts of West Bengal and Odisha; the study also aims to find major facts towards their attitude of alternation of livelihood strategies. The study has been done exclusively on primary data.

Key Words: Livelihood, Corona Virus, Women Cultivators, Alternative Livelihood

Introduction

Vulnerability is one of the most associated terms with the livelihood concept. The extent of vulnerability varies with gravity of its context. The extent of pandemic situation occurred due to

Covid-19 is one of the deadliest and is proving to be one of the worst that can change the global economic system altogether. After being declared Covid-19 as pandemic by WHO on March 11th 2020, a large number of the world population is now in peril of disaster. The pandemic situation immediately shows two deadly threats to the human civilization, the first one is a high risk of getting infected by this deadly virus as specific medical intervention is not ascertained and secondly, effects of the pandemic on the livelihood to almost all section of people resulting in poverty and unemployment for poorer section. Specifically, the poor community who are dependent on daily wage earning and the rural poor have suffered with the sudden shock for stranded farming activity and labour work associated with different phases of lockdown are the worst hit ones due to the situation. In this perplexing time women are again the most affected ones who suffered a bit more in any types of disaster. Long standing obstacles faced by rural women in terms of limited access to productive resources (Land, Credit, Inputs, Transport, Extension Services, Storage, Technical Assistance, scope of work and overall Social Prejudices) makes them one of the worst affected community in the agriculture sector after the pandemic. Women, being the most vulnerable community of the society have limited access to the livelihood resources and assets which makes them more vulnerable to shocks and disasters.

Government have started acting against the virus pretty early in India, a 21-day across the country lockdown for its population of 1.3 billion people beginning from March 25. Guidelines were given by the Ministry of Home Affairs, Government of India on 15 April 2020 after the expansion of lockdown till 31st May 2020, excluding agribusiness, poultry, creature farming, agriculture and fishery from lockdown limitations; as the time for ranchers gather the *Rabi* and *Boro* yield and start arrangements for the *Kharif* season starts. These expedients may help in limiting the emergency situation but the total shutdown of every financial interaction from basic administrations will make a huge monetary unstable and wretchedness for poor people, with enormous occupation setback and livelihood misfortune.

Lack of planning and preparation while imposing the lockdown by the government has dealt a massive blow to India's economy and caused colossal damage to working people of the country. The ones facing the highest damage are the ones engaged with informal rural economy. The lockdown caused an inordinate turmoil which resulted in considerable economic misfortune on farmers because of higher costs, increased debt burden, inability to sell the produce at reasonable prices and crop losses. A large number of farmers have been forced to sell their produce at bargained prices to local traders because of disruptions in functioning of the markets and supply chains. (Rawal, V., Kumar, M., Verma, A., and Pais, J., 2020)

The poorest 40 percent of the world's population, about 2.5 billion people live on less than two dollars a day (UNDP, 2006); India's continental proportions, and poverty is a multidimensional phenomenon. India's agricultural growth, long considered the key driver of poverty reduction

has slowed. It appears that, in its effect on poverty reduction, the acceleration of non-agricultural growth has only been able to offset the reduction in agricultural growth. In the developing world the livelihoods of the poor are highly dependent on natural resources (Barbier, 2005). In developing countries, the institutional and policy environment for managing natural resources is generally weak (UNDP, 2006). Coastal areas are among the poorest of the poor, particularly in developing countries.

Background of the study and analytical framework

Women first domesticated cropping plants and thereby initiated the art and science of farming, while men went out hunting in search of food. (Swaminathan, 2006). It has been recognized that agriculture is an engine of growth and poverty reduction in countries where it is the main occupation of the poor but the agricultural sector in many developing countries is underperforming, in part because women, who represent a crucial human resource in agriculture and the rural economy through their roles as farmers, labourers and entrepreneurs, almost everywhere face more severe constraints than men in access to productive resources. (SOFA team and Cheryl Doss, FAO, March 2011). Long standing obstacles faced by rural women in terms of limited access to productive resources (Land, Credit, Inputs, Transport, Extension Services, Storage and Technical Assistance) prevent them from adopting new technologies. (Lal, R., and Khurana, A., 2011). Social status and prejudices continuously enact as a barrier for women to be considered as an agriculturist; these factors mostly keep the women as wives, mothers and homemakers. Recent studies on women in agriculture conducted in India and other developing and under developed countries all point to the conclusion that women contribute far more towards agricultural production than has generally been acknowledged. Recognition of their crucial role in agriculture should not obscure the fact that farm women continue to be concerned with their primary functions as wives, mothers and homemakers. (Lal, R., and Khurana, A., 2011).

In India the financial setback will probably be more extreme, for mainly two factors. Primarily, in the pre-Covid-19 phase the economy was already in volatile state with aggravating existing issues like joblessness, low wages, provincial trouble, ailing health, and far-reaching disparity. (Arumugam, D., Kanagavalli, G., and Manida, M., 2020) Second, the huge casual segment with a range of unorganized sector has very little space for domain expansion in terms of benefits. Out of the national aggregate of 465 million specialist workers, around 91% (422 million) were casual laborers in 2017-18. Lacking meagre pay rates or salaries, vagrant and other casual labourers would be hardest-hit during the lockdown time frame. (Arumugam, D., Kanagavalli, G., and Manida, M., 2020).

It was just in nick of the pick of *Rabi* harvesting season when the outbreak of the disease has

caused a serious shortage on overall yield in spite of huge production. Acute labour shortage due to restrictions on mobility during harvesting season of Rabi crop has been faced both by the cultivators themselves as well as agricultural laborers. Due to the lockdown the free movement of people, like seasonal workers, have a large-scale impact on food production, which is inducing market price to rise locally as well as globally. (ICAR, 2020)

It is true that the risk is much more in city areas due to high population density but, it can spread to seventy percent of the India's population who live in rural areas. Some migrant laborers have already gone back to their own rural areas. The risk of Covid-19 dispersion is growing due to the homecoming of them. The wrap up material used for agricultural merchandise can also carry the virus. The cultivation and rural inhabitants have to be sheltered as societal aloofness will be experienced comparatively less in rural areas. (Mahendra Dev, S., and Sengupta, R., 2020).

The present study has been conducted on these backdrops and was aimed to understand the various types of alterations involved and parallel livelihood modifications. The study has been done in a systematic way and is mainly based on the qualitative assessment of the present scenario. The framework for the study was mainly two dimensional. One being with structured interview schedule prior to Covid-19 and Secondly with telephonic discussion with the same group after lockdown.

The coastal areas of Purba Midnapur district of West Bengal and Baleswar district of Odisha were selected for the study due to their close proximity and homogeneity of natural conditions in the east coast of India. The entire eastern coastal region is affected by the problem of salinity to varying extent and it also varies not only on the level of salinity but also spatial coverage. These tendencies lead to a certain change in the livelihood pattern for the people living in the edge now it has been studied that major changes it has on the livelihood of the marginalized women.

From Purba Medinipur and Baleswar the neighbouring blocks were selected for the study namely Ramnagar I and Bhograi. Total of four Panchayats were incorporated in the study two from each state. From Ramnagar I, Padima I and Padima II panchayats were selected and from Bhograi, Huguli and Sahabajipur Panchayats were selected for the study. The selection of the women cultivators was purposefully done for the study, later snowball sampling method was used to gather all the women engaged with cultivation in the said study area. Focus Group Discussions were also held with women who were previously engaged with cultivation. For the present paper a longitudinal study has also conducted after the initial survey with same respondents.

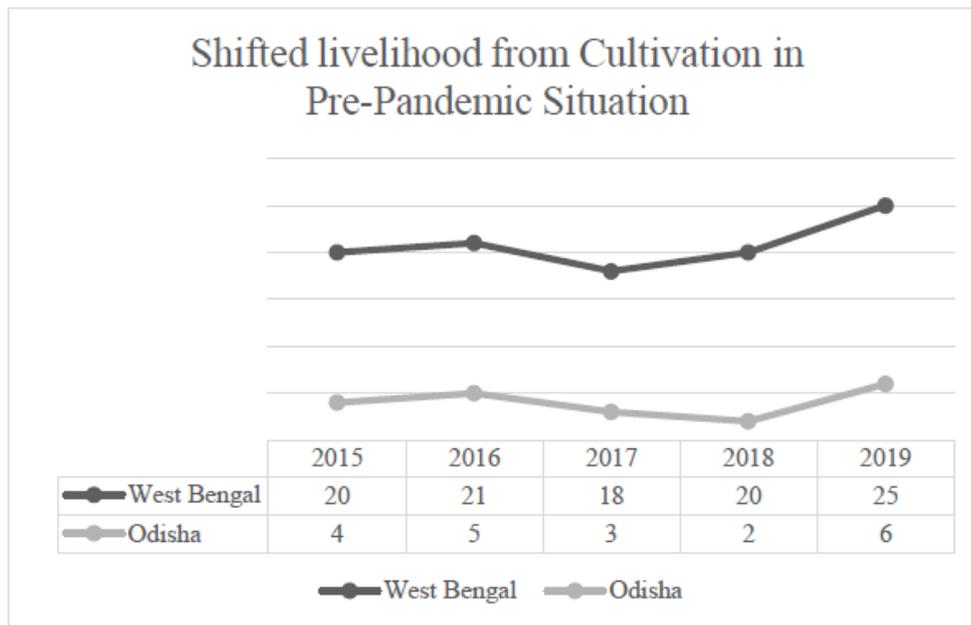
Objectives

- **To find the different livelihood strategies of the women engaged in cultivation before the pandemic and pattern of livelihood shift over past five years**

- To find the change of the livelihood scenario due to Covid-19

Results and Discussion

Table: 1: Number of Women shifted livelihood from Cultivation in last five years



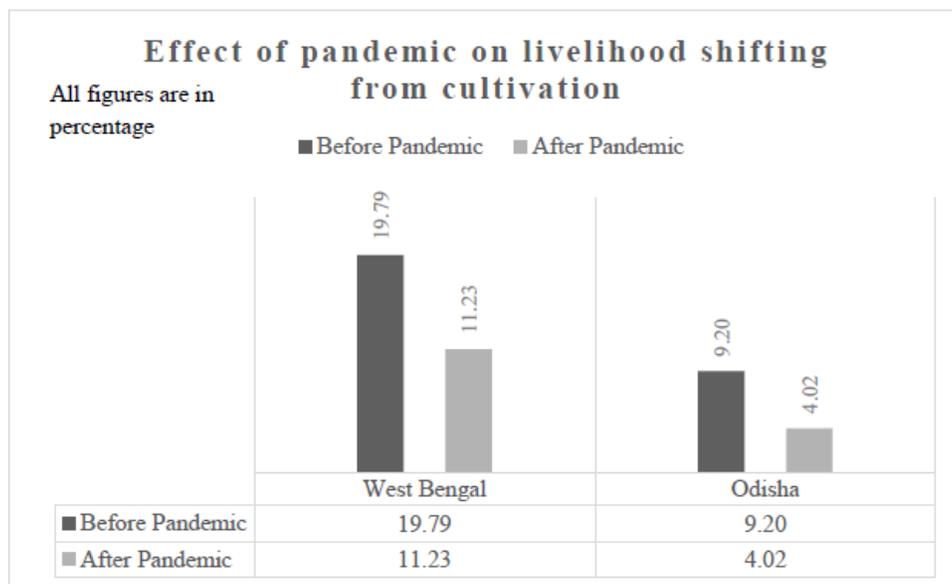
Source: Primary Data

Altogether 361 women cultivators have been consulted about their livelihood and their alternation strategies in the study area in two separate phases i.e. before and after pandemic situation. In the first phase of the study it has been found that apart from cultivation, certain other livelihood opportunities are prevalent in the study area such as working in Livestock Rearing and production of cow milk, Tourism Industry, Preparation of Handicrafts works of Shells and its selling, Fishing, Working in local Shops, Preparing Flower Beads and Ornament Preparation with Shells etc. From table 1 it can be found that there is a trend for shifting from their major livelihood activity from cultivation towards other alternative livelihood opportunities. From the several Focus Group Discussions it has been clearly found that majority of the women became involved in the hotel industry of the locality over the time. Even from the year 2019 majority of the women had started their own shops in the tourist areas of Digha and Udaypur keeping the agricultural activities to the secondary list as their livelihood option. It is also visible that in West Bengal the trend of changing their livelihood is far more prominent than of Odisha. One of the main possible reason as per the respondents' view for this is Digha which is still more popular tourist destination than Udaypur, Talsari and Bichitrapur of Odisha. The infrastructural

development as tourism station in Digha is much higher than of Udaypur and adjacent tourist spots of Odisha. Proper hotel and market facility for tourists is yet to be developed at Udaypur, Talsari and adjacent places which are mostly serving as the satellite destinations or sightseeing spots of Digha. Majority of the people living at Huguli and Sahabajipur tend to come to Digha for their alternatives; also, some of them give illegal temporary stalls at the Udaypur sea beach and tend to sell alcoholic beverages to the tourists.

A large number of women engaged in cultivation are also engaged with tourism business in the lean periods. With this multiplicity of livelihood there is always more scope of shock absorption for the lean periods. But through the Focus Group Discussion and personal interview it has been found that majority of the women are not satisfied with the work associated with cultivation. It was more prevalent in West Bengal than Odisha as majority of the women in West Bengal is engaged with rice cultivation where as a large number of women cultivators in Odisha is engaged with production betel leaves (*Paan*) at *Borrojes* which is not at all a seasonal crop and it require continuous engagement of labour.

Table: 2 Change of opinion for livelihood shifting from cultivation in the next season showing effect of pandemic



Source: Primary Data

From table no. 2 it can be found in the first phase of survey and FGD out of 187 women cultivators of West Bengal about 19.79% of them had expressed their plans of shifting entirely from cultivation towards other livelihood activities predominantly based on tourism business but

due to the pandemic the tourism business has shrunk immensely, also the risk of health hazards has made them change their decisions. A large number of women cultivators have invested heavily for their change from cultivation to their own shops with loans taken from various sources during the last few years. Out of the 11.23% of women cultivators of Padima.

I and Padima II were strongly willing to change from cultivation in next season in the year 2019, but after the lockdown when the survey was again conducted 8.02% of them were unable to stay with cultivation as they have invested so heavily in changing their livelihood. In Odisha the scenario is a little different, in the first hand out of 174 women cultivators of Huguli and Sahabajipur only 9.20% of them had intentions of changing their livelihood from the next season and majority of them are Agricultural Laborers. Due to Covid-19 pandemic majority of them have changed their decisions as they have invested less for their livelihood transition. Only 4.02% of the women cultivators are still willing to change from cultivation as they have invested in buying their ice-cream selling vans, rest were planning to work in hotels as maid or chef. The recent pandemic has left these cultivators in a very bad middle ground where they are hesitant to switch due to the economic and health crisis and unable to stay in cultivation due to no or less preparation for agricultural activities. Majority of the women cultivators have very little or no access to their own land; they mainly cultivate as share croppers by taking land lease. Due to the pandemic and the lockdown the women found that altering their livelihood at this particular point of time was risky but staying with cultivation was less risky as it was generating food for their sustenance. Now, it may be said that completely shifting their livelihood strategies may lead to more vulnerability but having two separate alternatives can provide certain shock absorption for the time being. With proper supply chain in from and cooperative societies the multiple livelihood approach may result as a resilient towards the shocks and vulnerabilities.

Conclusion

In conclusion it can be said that there was a surge of women cultivators leaving cultivation for the non-farm sector activities. This trend can be seen in the table no. 1, with this trend going higher year after year suggested that in 2020 the same may have taken place but due to the pandemic things went differently. The lockdown imposed by the Government of India to combat against the virus led to a huge economic crisis in all the sectors including agriculture and its allied ones. The supply chain got broken for agriculture. Women who are predominantly family cultivators faced the same with income shrinking due to their alternative activities came to a halt. The unplanned lockdown created a panic situation within the cultivators of the area resulting a chaos in the study area. Also, it is worth mentioning that cyclone Amphan created another huge loss in agriculture and allied agriculture sectors. Due to Amphan, another chaotic situation was aroused in the coastal areas of West Bengal and Odisha. The people had to give up social distancing to avoid the huge loss created by Amphan. The betel leaf orchards faced the most

damage followed by the fishermen communities who had to stop fishing for days resulting huge economic loss. This double blow had shaken the coastal cultivators. Women cultivators who were planning to shift from the livelihood had to stop due to the pandemic also due to the cyclone the community was left baffled while trying to cultivate. From table 2 it is also evident that majority of the women cultivators feel that cultivation is more sustainable than doing business or working in the tourism industry as it cannot handle the natural disaster and shocks. Certain level of government support is needed to boost up the said problems in the area like providing more man-days to the cultivators and migrants of the said area through MGNREGS, converging multiple schemes to generate more man-days, strengthening the PDS to ensure food security. Furthermore, it is also needed to minimize the panic to strengthen the tourism industry as it is the predominant economic activity of the study area.

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