

Changing Perspectives of Women's Work and Decline in Female Labour Force Participation Rate in Rural India: A Case of Odisha*

1. Introduction

Falling employment opportunities of women, especially in rural areas continue to remain as a conundrum for the Indian economy, in a period when the economy is witnessing accelerating economic growth, rising education levels among women, and falling fertility rates. Recent evidence from national statistics indicates that there has been huge decline in female labour force participation rates in rural India. A large literature has also examined recent trends in rural female labour force participation, mostly based on secondary data. In contrast, the present study based on secondary and primary survey (household information gathered from 448 household in nine villages chosen from three districts of Odisha) revisits various aspects of women's work and the phenomenon of declining female labour force participation rate. This study explores various factors such as the social, economic, demographic and cultural that are affecting the labour force participation rate of women in rural areas. This study expects to obtain some interesting results which have important policy implications. The analysis also intends to open up a rich research agenda, including further investigation of various issues regarding women's work, who remain voiceless and confined to the marginal spaces of the formal and informal sectors of both the economy and society.

India being a large and diverse country, it is important to study in detail the different regional economies. The levels of economic development and the structures of state economies in India vary widely as also their historical experiences. In view of this, state specific studies assume prime significance. Odisha continues to be a “development challenged” region and the severity of development constraints is huge and has persisted since long. The state features on the bottom, in terms of many standard economic and social development indicators. It forms an area with low per capita income and huge deficit of human capital, employment and livelihood avenues. This region is also characterized of concentration of tribal population, diverse religious, cultural and social

***Dr P.P.Sahu, Associate Professor, Centre for Entrepreneurship Development, NIRD&PR, Hyderabad.**

ethos, extreme climatic changes such as floods and cyclones and conflict, insurgencies and social-political turbulence. This region not only continues to grapple with the problem of limited employment opportunities, a set of other crucial issues such as rise in earning inequality, low paid jobs, increasing out migration, youth unemployment (& youth idleness), and huge skill deficit to improve employability remain largely unaddressed and unexplored.

2. Objectives of the study

The main objectives of the study are as follows:

1. To analyse the trend and structure of women labour force participation rural areas of Odisha, especially during post 2004-05 years;
2. To assess the employment challenges in rural Odisha in its both quantitative and qualitative dimensions;
3. To analyse the progress and performance of the largest national employment guarantee scheme, i.e. MGNREGA in Odisha;
4. To review policies, programmes and schemes related to women's work;
5. To understand and analyse the factors contributing to the change in women's labour participation rates;
6. To examine the labour market characteristics and time disposition of women in their daily activities in the surveyed districts;
7. To study the role of social and cultural norms and social differentiation of attitudes towards women's work;

3. Data sources, methodology and study area

The study is based on a mix of secondary and primary data. Secondary data were drawn from NSSO surveys on employment and unemployment, population census. Besides these information on population, state GDP, education, health, infrastructure etc have been sourced from various government reports and publications.

The primary survey was carried out in 3 districts of Odisha, i.e. Kendrapara, Koraput and Sambalpur. Villages have been chosen based on a number of criteria such as overall

development, percentage of population engaged in agriculture/industry, health care facilities, infrastructure and presence of industry. Attempts have also been made to consider local/village level factors such as infrastructure, health care facilities, and labour market characteristics, distance from the main road, distance from the market area, presence of any factory or cottage industries so on and so forth. Based on house list, available from the village panchayat, attempt was made to select/survey 50 households from each village, so there will be representation from each social groups. Total of 448 households were surveyed from 9 villages, 3 villages from each of the three districts. Primary data have been collected through a set of structured household schedule. Both quantitative and qualitative information have been collected from the sample households and the study villages.

4. Key findings and conclusion

Based on a mix of secondary data from NSSO and primary data from rural segments of three districts of Odisha, the study shows that the overall rural employment growth in Odisha has been declining. This is especially true of sectors like farming that employ majority of rural population. On the contrary, the faster growing sectors are those with relatively low employment share and thus cannot make benefits of faster growth to trickle down to many. The state has lived with this asymmetry between SGDP and employment for years, which has overtime increased rapidly. This has taken a further deeper toll on the women workers, who generally face huge quantity and quality deficit in employment. This is because of their disproportionately low share in total workforce and employment mainly concentrated in low-paid, low productivity, low earning and irregular jobs. The share of female employment in rural Odisha has registered varying degrees of decline in many sectors, including agriculture. The level of labour productivity in agriculture is very low and the per worker earning differential between agriculture and non-agriculture sectors has widened in recent years.

The entry of female job seekers in the many branches of non-farm sector also seems to have become difficult in recent years. Overall women share in total employment has declined between 2004–05 and 2011–2012- specifically in manufacturing, construction and trade. In terms of types of employment, however, both male and female workers in rural Odisha suffer quality deficit. The share of good quality jobs, i.e. regularsalaried

jobs continue to be less than 10 per cent for male and less than 5 per cent for female workers. More than 90 per cent of employment may be categorized as vulnerable employment. The policies furthered for the state have not been translated into generation of employment and reduction in poverty for the population here, creating a situation of intra-regional disparity and uneven development. Social norms play a deciding role about females and their attitudes in a patriarchal society like India. They easily overpower many other favourable moves that would have made females join the labourforce- thus, keeping them bound in the social boundaries. Thus, female empowerment goes a long way in deciding and formulating the actual course of action pertaining to females and their employability.

About the level of and changes in women empowerment in the state of Odisha, the primary survey shows that there has been a positive change in the attitudes towards female work, which for many is now considered to be an act bringing recognition to the entire family. Further, females in majority of households now enjoy autonomy with respect to decision making and thus are allowed to take decisions independently in case of many household related issues. A large number of females also enjoy freedom in performing as per their choice. A similar trend is also observed in the families belonging to SC/ST community. This is a reflection enough that times are changing and so is the perception towards females and their work.

However, for many households, a working female is still seen to be compromising with the family responsibilities, especially those of children who get neglected. The idea that irrespective of whether the female works or not, but taking care of the household is only her responsibility. Even though they enjoy autonomy, but this is only limited to decisions taken about general day-to-day working of the household. Any matter related to financial needs, employment, on-farm activities or savings and investment is still strictly taken by the males in the family. In face of diminishing opportunities in agricultural sector, providing employment opportunities to females in the non-farm sector that is in close proximity of their houses can go a long way in enabling them to manage their time more effectively. Further, child care facilities and the like also empowers women towards an active female labourforce participation, and thus works towards female empowerment.

Overall, the major reasons for the developmental constraints that Odisha is facing are: slow pace of structural transformation, decline in agriculture and a slow process of industrial deepening. First and foremost requirement would be to strengthen the agricultural base, through reversing the recent trend of down-swing in the rate of growth of public investment on crucial agricultural infrastructure, including water management, rural roads, electrification and cold chains, marketing and processing; expansion of better extension services in the field of irrigation, credit, marketing information, land development, and so on; there is a need for proper co-ordination and Rationalization of agricultural development programs; agricultural policies should be supported and supplemented by a broad-based, inclusive rural development programmes.

The growth of non-farm sector comes next where policies relating to provisioning of technology support, access to credit and marketing needs need to be reinforced. Though rural non farm sector is very small in the surveyed village, there is potential for job creation and policies relating to provisioning of technology support, access to credit and marketing needs will not only be effective for productivity enhancement in non-farm activities, but it will also encourage shift of workers from agriculture to non-agricultural activities. We also observed that inadequate quality of education and skill deficit seems to be the major constraint in these areas. The development of human resources, including upgrading of skills of the workforce, as are relevant to the study areas, need to be emphasized. Redesigning of education and vocational skills will provide enough opportunities for gainful employment, especially to the rural female youth. Thus there is an urgent need to improve the human capital by investing on health, education, skill and training and also to expand economic activities to boost employment opportunities in these study areas.

Special focus is called for employment intensive sectors such as tourism and handicraft. There is a need to understand the network of relations with agents of economic and social change in rural areas. In this direction, there is an urgent need to compile data on every walks of life in a village. If a directory of economic activities can be prepared in rural areas, it will be easy to identify employment potential activities in each villages and village and sector-specific policies could to be formulated. Further, the scope and reach of public work programmes such as Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MGNREGS) need to be expanded to build community infrastructure,

which can increase the productivity of agriculture and the rural non-farm economy. Since self-employment constitutes the major part of the work in surveyed villages, adequate social security measures should be provided.

Increasing the share of public expenditure on women development/programmes, greater access to credit to women, measures to promote women entrepreneurship will be crucial to increase the participation of women in mainstream economic activities. Self help groups, micro finance institutions can also make significant contribution towards promoting women's employment. There are number of government policies and schemes aimed at enhancing women's capacity, but there are still concerns regarding their inaccessibility to productive assets, rising demand on their time towards domestic/unpaid work, binding social norms and narrow mindset. Equality of treatment still remains a distant dream in our society.

Needless to say that, while above issues are critical to achieve the goal of high growth of income and employment, effective implementation and monitoring of these policy changes will be of utmost importance. Sadly, Odisha economy has failed to gain from its potential of rich mineral resources, stable government and high growth rates achieved during last decade. Thus to put Odisha state economy on an accelerated and inclusive growth path a balanced blend of investment, infrastructure and commercial policies need to be formulated.