

India's invisible farmers: women

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The lives of farmers' wives are the real miracle sustaining the community. Unlike their male counterparts, these women are not listed as the primary owners of the fields they cultivate and have no access to government subsidies.

It is a difficult truth to accept that the images of dishevelled but spirited farmers being shown in endless loops on our TV are somewhat lopsided.

Look closely. The images – mostly of males of all ages marching with weather-beaten faces, talking to the media, driving tractors or carts and scattered in little groups trying to break police cordons – represent the face of India's farming crisis only partially.

The key indicators of the cycle of distress and endless exploitation are actually hordes of invisible women farmers, seldom recognised as equal to male farmers either within homes or out in the fields, as well as in formal meetings between farmers' bodies and representatives of the government.

Each time crucial issues pertaining to their livelihood are being discussed, the women farmers are omitted. Why? Because it is accepted widely that their problems as cultivators can be no different from those brought to the table by their males.

But the problems female cultivators (both small landholders or labourers) face are not triggered by just passing El Niño years, floods or droughts. We have to realise how they are structural and embedded in our farming communities' genderised norms and attitudes.

As per Census norms, a cultivator is a person "engaged in cultivation of land owned or held from government or held from private persons or institutions in payment for money, kind or share."

Most women farmers do not qualify formally as land owners. What land they have is in the name of their males, and many who are widowed or abandoned by their men are forced to sell their holdings and become landless agricultural labourers working in others' fields.

It is no secret that land is scarce. The share of cultivators in the country's total agricultural workers reduced substantially ([72% to 45%](#)) from the fifties till 2011 and the proportion of farm labourers in the same period shot up from [28% to 55%](#).

Cultivation is the largest employer of women in rural areas. Put these together and calculate how much the current debate on farmers' distress is leaving out.

Our official myopia is also mirrored on our TV screens. As the cameras pan the crowd, you see women mostly as part of a mass raising slogans and waving fists in the daytime. Most have their heads covered and when they talk to the media, the older women take the mic.

At the end of the day (spent dodging shells and lathis like their men), all of them turn into faceless cooks rolling out chapatis and ladling out curries for the hungry marchers.

Messy, complex, miserable and happy by turns, from Kerala to Uttarakhand, the lives of farmers' wives are the real miracle sustaining the community. These women are not listed as the primary owners of the fields they cultivate and have no access to government subsidies, unlike males (even those who remain city-based gentleman farmers leasing their lands each year).

Watching the animated discussions in manels among agricultural scientists, agricultural reporters, government officials and retired heads of agricultural institutes and colleges, it is distressing to see that (only occasionally) the anchor is the only female present.

India has produced some fine women agricultural scientists and economists – from Bina Agarwal, Rajshree Agarwal, Vandana Shiva and Inderjit Kaur Borthakur, to name a few – but they are glaringly absent from expert panels and farmers' representative committees. As a result, the particular caste/gender and land ownership-related problems female farmers face remain largely unarticulated and undiscussed.

The total disregard for a whole group qua group is the most debased, irrational and undemocratic of omissions during a crisis of the size our farming community is facing.

Sometimes – only sometimes – someone like Khashthi Devi Koranga says 'to hell with it' one day and takes the first step on her own. How many of us have heard of her?

Khashthi Devi is of a far-flung area named Kapkot in Uttarakhand's Bageshwar district. She travelled a few months ago all the way to Hyderabad in Telangana to receive the 'best farmer' award at the International Conference on System of Crop Intensification for Climate-Smart Livelihood and Nutritional Security.

Khashthi Devi is a master trainer who has trained and organised 2,500 women from 15 villages in her area and helped small-holding female farmers like herself in forming self-help groups. These women now help each other produce as much as they can from their small and often unirrigated land ([only 45% of land in the state is irrigated](#)).

Uttarakhand is by no means a rich agrarian state given the difficult terrain and its mercurial weather patterns having become even more unpredictable of late. The state's women farmers all also tackle major unseen, seldom spoken of problems that affect farming women everywhere: problems of caste, gender and climate change.

Any woman tackling these runs into them as soon as she starts to cast off the age-old ostracisation of her *haq* (rights). Change began in 2017, [Khashthi Devi told a reporter](#): "I remember going from house to house convincing people to try line sowing methods for a better yield. Older men in the village mocked me and discouraged women from departing from traditional farming..."

But there are deeper problems facing the hill farmers' community, tearing families apart and leaving only an ageing population to care for derelict villages where wild animals come foraging more and more frequently with the cutting down of forests.

Pahad ka paani aur pahaad ki jawani yahan ke logon ke kaam nahin aati (our waters and our youth no longer serve the local needs), I have heard countless times.

Young males who can find other jobs have copped out as men do and chosen to work in the plains. Since the land is mostly registered in their names, schemes like the PM Crop Insurance scheme are of no use for female farmers to collect compensation for lost crops.

"Earlier, men went alone; now, they take their young wives and children along. Young girls marry

these days only on the condition that they will not do 'gobar paani ka kaam' [cattle care and fetching water from far-off rivers or springs]," an old mother tells me as she bangs on a cluster of empty cans to chase away monkeys robbing her orchards.

"What can one do? Even if daughters-in-law stay back for a few years, once the boys are five, they take their children and live in a rented room in the city in the name of educating them.

"*Baboo*, how can we the grandparents say no to that? It is the question of the boys' future, no? We can't abandon our ancestors' land, but they have no interest in village life after getting a degree. They want to work in hotels as tourist guides [and] taxi operators. Who wants to stay and fetch the water and feed the cattle?"

The new migrations are increasingly leaving aged women and a few old men behind as caretakers of family houses and orchards. Most are too old for the hard hands-on work the land demands.

Working as labourers is also not an option for them. Payment for planting, winnowing and pounding is anyhow only partially in cash and mostly in kind, for example with grains and hay for the cattle.

Of this rural population of landless females, the Dalit women suffer the most. Dalits are mostly landless and many of them do not have cattle to make manure out of cow dung. Apart from facing frequent pest attacks and droughts, Dalits mostly live on the peripheries of villages, where they are increasingly vulnerable to wild animal attacks.

"This village is inhabited only until the two of us are alive," two elderly women sitting listlessly outside their derelict home in a village in Paudi Gadhwal, told a reporter from the Hindi edition of *Down to Earth*. Uttarakhand is full of such ghost villages, Raju Sajwan, the frequent traveller to these areas, has been reporting.

It is clear that leaving women farmers and their spokespersons out of national debates and decision-making means leaving out a vast area of culture and gender-specific problems.

As an eyewitness, one can only say that what the ageing generation of landless Uttarakhand women are saying at the end of their hard lives is an awful truth we have long been in denial about.

Saakhi is a Sunday column from [Mrinal Pande](#), in which she writes of what she sees and also participates in. That has been her burden to bear ever since she embarked on a life as a journalist, writer, editor, author and as chairperson of Prasar Bharti. Her journey of being a witness-participant continues.

Mrinal Pande

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