



INTRODUCTION

In Focus: Features of Women's Work: Perspectives from Eastern India

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The three papers in the In Focus section of this issue are concerned with aspects of women's work in rural areas of eastern India.

Yoshifumi Usami and his collaborators Subhajit Patra and Abhinav Kapoor present a detailed study of the definition of employment in official statistics, specifically, in the Employment and Unemployment Surveys of the National Sample Survey Office as well as more recently in the survey conducted by the Labour Bureau. They argue that an "augmented worker-population ratio," that is, one in which participation in specified activities such as animal rearing is included, gives a more accurate picture of women's work in rural areas than the standard concept of participation in principal and subsidiary status work. They explore this proposition using data on the role of women in animal rearing in three villages in West Bengal. These are panel data from the surveys conducted by the Foundation for Agrarian Studies in 2010 and 2015. The village-level evidence presents a fascinating picture of how women perceive "housework" to be their main or primary work activity although they are regularly engaged in animal rearing or other economic activities.

Jeta Sankrityayana provides an insightful and perceptive account of long-term changes in the tea industry of the Dooars of Assam and North Bengal, and examines the implications of these changes for women tea pluckers, the quintessential tea garden workers. He situates the concerns of women workers in the historical development of the tea sector, first, by colonial or plantation capital and, more recently, by Indian conglomerates. Women came with their families to the tea gardens to work on large tea estates. Women were assigned tasks of plucking leaves on account of their "nimble fingers," while men worked in the factories. This division of labour persists today, and is associated with large differentials between men and women not only in wage rates but also in the forms of contracts into which they enter and a host of

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associated social security benefits. The most recent change in the industry is the growth of smallholder tea cultivators, where women's remuneration and conditions of work are made "invisible" by the fact of their being unpaid family workers.

The paper by Srijana Rai and Sanchari Roy Mukherjee examines correlates of women's work participation in Darjeeling district, north Bengal. The most important finding of this study, which substantiates the paper by Usami, is that most women engaged in unpaid family labour on family farms and only a small proportion engaged in paid work. Those who received paid work were likely to be women from nuclear families or from households with small holdings of land.

Together these three papers point to the urgent need to reconceptualise and redefine work and employment so as to recognise the constraints faced by rural women with respect to labour market participation and to address problems of their working conditions and uncertain remuneration as unpaid family workers.