

<https://scroll.in/article/1047112/a-new-book-offers-in-depth-analyses-of-changing-gender-roles-in-agriculture-in-west-bengal>

BOOK EXCERPT

A new book offers in-depth analyses of changing gender roles in agriculture in West Bengal

An excerpt from 'Becoming a Farmer: Women in Rural West Bengal, India', by Raktima Mukhopadhyay, Itishree Pattnaik, and Kuntala Lahiri-Dutt.

Raktima Mukhopadhyay, Itishree Pattnaik & Kuntala Lahiri-Dutt

Yesterday · 11:30 am



Women farmers in Raiganj. | Tathagata Bhowmik

Our study found that in Bankura, virtually all the women surveyed had taken up some new activities since male outmigration began, with around half of them taking up

more than five new farming activities. In Dakshin Dinajpur, around one-third of the respondents had taken up more than five new activities.

These new activities include labour procurement and management, purchasing farm inputs, arranging for irrigation, administering fertilisers and pesticides, planting, sowing, weeding, harvesting, post-harvest management, marketing, and accessing various services from the government, and in nearly 20 per cent of families, women were involved in land preparation. Generally, however, husbands returned to prepare the land, or women hired labour or a tractor to prepare it. Ploughing is a social taboo for women, and this is the only activity in the agricultural value chain which restricts the participation of women.

For many women interviewed, though, acquiring the money to pay for a tractor was not possible, and they had to prepare the land with a hoe themselves, which delayed the very preparation of the land and planting activities. Additional labour especially overburdened young women.

We came across Shraboni Kisku in Bankura during our survey. She had a small child and faced great difficulty carrying harvested grain from the field, during which time she had to leave her baby with the neighbours, adding to her stress. Significant changes have taken place in land use in Bankura and Dakshin Dinajpur following men's outmigration. Further, in both districts, a significant proportion of women – 78 per cent in Bankura and 55 per cent in Dakshin Dinajpur – shared that there has been an increase in the frequency of crop damage after their husbands' outmigration.

About 25 per cent of the women in Bankura and 32 per cent in Dakshin Dinajpur face crop damage in each season. Lack of assured irrigation, delays in arranging inputs, and lack of proper knowledge of crop management practices are the main causes of crop damage during the growing phase in Bankura, where women of smallholding farms are directly engaged in planting, sowing, and harvesting activities, and have control over their own time. In contrast, the risk of crop damage is greater during planting and harvesting in Dakshin Dinajpur, where mostly Muslim women manage their farmlands through hired labour. They face difficulties procuring labour in a timely manner because of a lack of bargaining capacity.

The situation becomes worse with a higher number of depressions (cyclones), coupled with showers in the post-monsoon phase of harvesting. The vulnerability of the

women in Bankura is greater, as 66 per cent of them have shared that production is decreasing. This corresponds with the fact that the likelihood of crop damage is much higher in the district during the growing phase. The lack of mobility of women and their dependence on other male members or male neighbours for procuring fertilisers and pesticides increases the risk of crop damage.

Although double-cropped areas of farmland have increased, there has also been a reduction in multiple crop rotations and an increase in land left fallow in both districts. Difficulties in procuring labour and accessing timely inputs are the main reasons for fallow land. In our study area, too, there has been an increasing trend among the farmers to shift toward vegetables and cash crops. However, in many cases, families that grew vegetables earlier have stopped growing them now. Vegetables are perishable and have to be taken to the local market within a couple of days of their harvest. Men would carry these products on bicycles to the markets, but in their absence, women cannot carry out this additional task because they are too time-poor. Hence, they prefer to grow grains and oilseeds that can be stored and sold at their convenience.

One respondent, Meyo Soren of Dakshin Dinajpur, has witnessed how her neighbours have introduced wheat and mustard in their fields. She also wants to raise these crops, but her husband doubts her ability to take care of them and fears damage. Hence, Meyo has to maintain the existing cropping pattern and mirror her husband's decisions.

The Green Revolution in India, a period of vast improvement of agronomic practices, replaced traditional varieties of seeds with HYV seeds and ushered in a dependence on chemical fertilisers and pesticides, outmoding organic practices. A consequence has been the “externalisation of knowledge” related to agricultural practices.

Age-old practices and traditional knowledge used in agriculture were “common property resources”, passed down through generations by both men and women. By contrast, new technologies, such as farm machinery, fertilisers and pesticides, and irrigation pumps, have become “private property”, usually held and controlled by men who have access to information, training, and the outer world. These inputs, in a package of HYV seeds, fertilisers, and pesticides, are supplied to farmers in the form of mini-kits and through various government subsidy programmes, piggybacking on a well-organised dealer network with retail outlets, on which farmers (male and female) rely for product-use information.

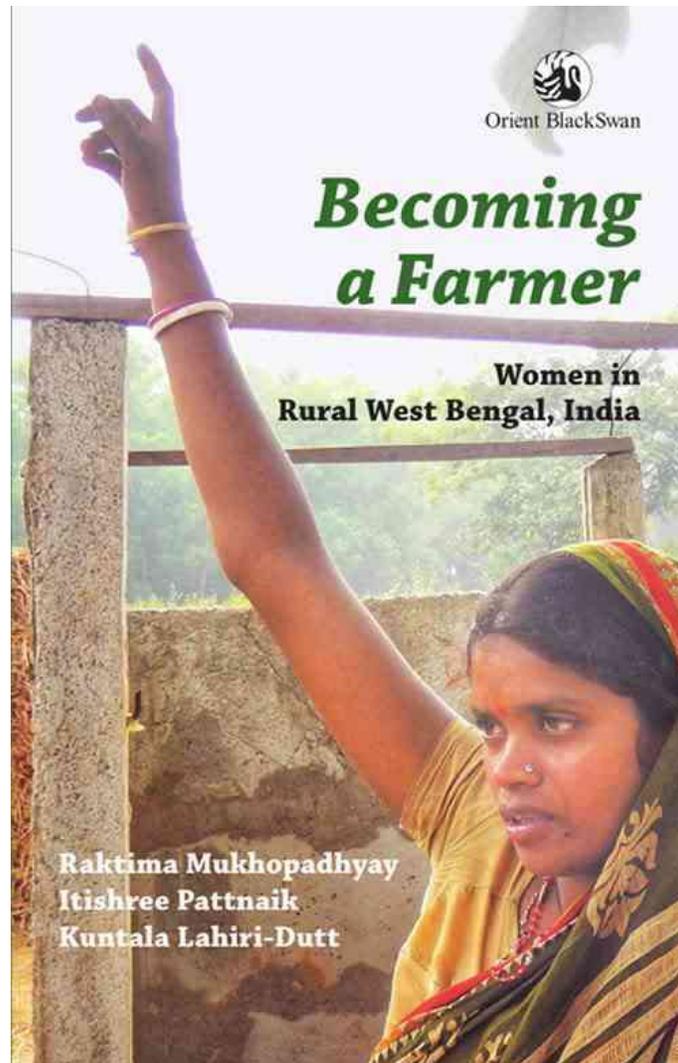
In Dakshin Dinajpur, 97 per cent of survey respondents reported that dealers influenced their use of purchased inputs, while in Bankura, 37 per cent of respondents indicated the same. A second layer of influence over women's decisions about when and how to use inputs comprises husbands, villagers, and relatives, who control the decisions of women in 37 per cent of cases. Our study, however, revealed that men were equally likely to follow dealers' advice as compared to women. Thus, due to a lack of proper knowledge, all farmers are often guided by these dealers to overuse these products, especially fertilisers and pesticides, which leads to an increased input cost, reduction in soil fertility, soil compaction, loss of beneficial pests, and decrease in food safety. Women are, therefore, in the untenable position of an increased financial burden arising from purchasing undesired amounts of chemical fertilisers and pesticides, paying more labour costs to administer pesticides as they do not possess sprayers and/or do not know how to sprinkle pesticides, and ultimately suffering crop damage and loss regardless of these efforts.

Government extension and support services for agriculture focus mostly on providing subsidies for inputs like seeds, fertilisers, pesticides, and irrigation, or for purchasing agricultural implements. Most support has been in the form of subsidies, and a few families have received materials, such as sal leaf plate-making machines and threshers. In our study, we found that where ten families in Bankura had received some kind of input from the government before the migration of the men, that number increased to 39 after migration, although nearly 47 per cent of families were not receiving any inputs. Only two families in Dakshin Dinajpur had received any support, before or after the migration of the men.

Significantly, in both districts, those who were receiving support did so mostly through the names of their husbands or in-laws. In three cases, support was received in the name of the women, in 23 cases in the name of the husband, and in 13 cases in the wife's in-laws' names, and all materials/machinery inputs were provided in the name of the in-laws. This is because most state policies provide inputs and training in the name of, or solely to, land titleholders. Our study showed that in 70.3 per cent of cases in Bankura, land belonged to the wife's father-in-law, and in the rest of the cases in the name of the husband. Similarly, in Dakshin Dinajpur, in 61.3 per cent of cases the land belonged to the father-in-law and the rest was in the name of the husband.

In most cases, even though the land is inherited and used by the son, legal transfer does not take place. As a result, women are further marginalised, unable to claim even joint ownership and eliminating their access to public services. Women resort to exercising political links to claim support. In the past 15 years, Bimala of Dakshin Dinajpur received a subsidy of Rs 700 (US\$ 8.75) only once, after lobbying with local

political leaders. With the money and patronage of political leaders, she opened a bank account in the local cooperative bank, but it was closed due to inactivity. While there has been some increase in the provision of input to women farmers in Bankura, half of them still do not receive any agricultural support, and few receive any training. Many women find it exceedingly difficult to make farmland as productive as it was before their husbands had outmigrated. As a result, many take to applying their limited seeds as sharecroppers, whereby they receive three-quarters of the harvested crop.



Excerpted with permission from Becoming a Farmer: Women in Rural West Bengal, India, Raktima Mukhopadhyay, Itishree Pattnaik, and Kuntala Lahiri-Dutt, Orient Black Swan.