Feed Women First

A deeper look into the intersection of
Indian Women, Food and Culture

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EATING WOMEN TELLING TALES

Bulbul Sharma

The first day Nanni had to cook was when she was a

three-day old bride with henna still dark and fragrant on

her palms.

Bhabi[1]: Aunt

Dada[2]: Brother

The first day Nanni had to cook was when she was a three-day old bride with henna still dark and fragrant. She was sitting on the bridal bed, her head aching with the scent of rose petals which lay scattered all over the bed sheets, the pillows and the floor. A few stray petals, curling at the edges like pink claws, clung to her hair and when she tried to remove them her heavy gold pins – the ones her mother had tied her hair with – pierced her head and she began to cry. Home suddenly seemed so far away yet she could hear her mother's voice as she shouted at the servants to get the food ready for the wedding feast as she put the golden pins in her hair one by one, grumbling about how much they had cost. "But let them see we are not paupers like them," she had hissed, the pins clenched between her teeth. In this house where her mother said she would have to live till she died, there was just one old servant.

She was still brushing off the rose petals when he had come into the corridor outside her room and coughed. "What is it?" She had asked finally after he had coughed and cleared his throat many times, because she was not sure whether she was supposed to speak at all and that too to a male servant. "Bhabhi[1] has fallen ill. Dada[2] is asking if you can cook something or should he ask someone to come from the village." Nanni, her head dizzy with the perfume of stale roses, took the decision that was to ruin her life for ever.

She got up, tripped over her heavy bridal sari, and said in a clear 16-year old voice. "I will make the food today. Tell Bhabhi to rest." Then she took off her sari, folding it carefully like her mother had shown her. Most of her jewelry had already been taken off by Bhabhi and locked up in a tin trunk, with a curt "I am keeping them safe for you, tell your mother." She took

off the remaining chains and two heavy bangles and hid them under the mattress. She knew she had to keep her mangalsutra[3] necklace, her nose ring and six toe rings on as her husband was alive. Then she quickly dressed in a plain Then she quickly dressed in a plain cotton sari, a pink one with yellow flowers, pulled the palla over her face and opened the door. There was no one outside so she uncovered her face fully and looked around. There were two doors on either side of her room but both were locked with big padlocks. She could hear someone snoring, the sound was coming at regular intervals through a half open door at the end of the corridor. She decided to go towards it.

The kitchen was a dark hollow with a tiny window covered with a red curtain that made everything look darker that it was. The mustard oil jars lined up on the shelf gleamed like blood, the onions had a strange pink colour and the white marble chakla too looked as if they had pounded meat on it. A brick stove stood in one corner, the embers were just about to die out. Nanni pulled out a few pieces of wood from a pile next to the window and as she fed the dying fire she saw through tear-filled eyes her mother's kitchen at home. The gleaming floor which was polished with coconut fibers every morning, the brass vessels that shone like gold and the line of 30 glass jars each filled with a special pickle. Her father refused to eat the same pickle everyday so her mother gave him a new one, every day for thirty days and then repeated the cycle because he had forgotten what he had by then.

"We were never good enough for them,"her husband said as he chewed the bones with his eyes shut. She hated the way he talked and ate at the same time, his words always slurring with curry and malice against her family. His hatred for her, crushing, mingling with his saliva, poured into the food she had cooked for him. She had not minded at first because her mother had told her to be quiet and well behaved all the time, however aggravating the situation may be. "Remember you are our daughter. Raja Dinkar's granddaughter. Do not bring shame on us." She had sat silently through hundreds of meals, listening to her husband berating her family, each meal would bring out a new dislike, a fresh grudge he held against her father, her mother or her brothers.

So many years had passed, both her parents were dead, her brother had renounced the world and become a sadhu yet Harish would not let go. Like a rabid dog he kept yapping at them, chasing their memory, recalling each word they had said to him, digging out hidden insults. When his mother had been alive, she would join in too and together they would eat and spit venom at her. She had a sharper tongue and sharper memory and could even say. On which date at what hour her father had let them down. "Remember," she would say, wagging a finger stained with food, "remember the day your uncle got married, it was when the wheat crop had failed on our farm, the day you got chicken pox. It was at lunchtime that the great sahib arrived. Just a box of sweets, plain burfee[4]. No money, no clothes, nothing. The mean goat .What was he going to do with all his money, I asked him. Has he taken it with him? Has he? Has he?" She would say, jutting her chin out at Nanni and pointing for another serving of dal[5].

That first day when she had cooked, twenty years ago, she should have poisoned them all. His mother, father, brother-in-law, uncle, and him. But she had been young and foolish and wanted so much to please them all. Her mother had been a great cook and she

Burfee[4]: dense milk-based sweet

Dal[5]: curry made with dried, split pulse

wanted to show them how well she had been taught by her. She wanted to manage the house, look after the old people and most of all she wanted her husband to love her. That first meal she had cooked, her eyes blind with tears from the smoke, her hands shaking with fear, had stunned them. "You little sparrow. How did you cook so much?" Her husband said later when they were alone. The rose petals now suddenly seemed fragrant as they lay together sharing the Same pillow. They had been so pleased with her cooking that day that for the next twenty years she was sent to the kitchen to do all the cooking.

"A wife's first duty is to feed her husband well," they said to her as the entire family, thirteen of them, sat down to eat. She got up at dawn, coaxed the kitchen fire into life, ground the spices and began the first meal of the day. The old servant felt sorry for her and tried to help but her mother-in-law would not let him touch the food. "I have been cooking for the family for thirty years and now it is your turn. Do not think you are a princess just because your father claims to be so rich. All lies. We have yet to see the colour of his money in this house."

The old lady had died five years ago, keeling over at a wedding feast after eating three bowls of kheer[6]. "She went straight to her maker, a short, sweet death," said the neighbour in whose house the feast had been held. Harish did not seem as distraught as she thought he would be without his beloved mother, who had never left his side from the day he had been born –a breech baby with a head full of black hair. She slept next to them all throughout their married life and the only time they had been alone had been a few days after her wedding. Then after that the old lady had moved her bed into their room, thrust her bundle of saris into Nanni's dowry chest. Her father-in-law had been alive then but he stayed out most nights. Nanni had heard the aunts whispering about another wife somewhere in a village beyond the hills. When Harish wanted to make love to her, he would touch her with a pillow and they would tip-toe to the other room. She had loved the secrecy and Harish had seemed so romantic during their stealthy, hurried but urgent lovemaking. Later during the day he would come and stand near the kitchen door and watch her as she cooked. They spoke in whispers and laughed with their hands on their mouths. But that was such a long time ago. Harish was a different man then with another face, another voice. Now she hated his touch and even wished his mother were alive for then he would not spend hours smothering her in their bed, his weak helpless body trying and failing to make love to her. Trying and failing to make love to her.

Though now they had two servants, Harish would not eat if she did not cook the food. "You cannot let them touch the food. I will die if I have to eat food cooked by those two dirty scoundrels. I would throw them out if I could walk to the door," he screamed each time Nanni let one of the servants into the kitchen. "I am shackled and bound to the kitchen. He will not even have tea made by anyone else. He seems to know at once. He sniffs the food like a dog and then if I have not cooked it he will throw the plate away. He has broken so many plates and glasses. Now I use steel plates for him," she told her mother one day, breaking years of silence about her life. "I wish you had made me a bad cook then maybe they would let me be," she whispered stroking her mother's hair as she lay on her death bed. "Feed him, child, feed him all the richness, all the sweetness that he has not given you till the gods see it fit to take him away," her mother said and turned her face to the door to meet the spirit of death who had been waiting for her.

khoya[7]: khowa or mawa is a dairy food
Lassi[8]: milk-based drink in the India
badams[9]: Almonds
ghee[10]: clarified butter

Nanni sang softly, her hands gleaming as she churned the yogurt for the lassi Harish would have for his breakfast. Butter and cream, sugar and khoya[7], almonds and pistachios – there were so many rich things one there were so many rich things one could put in a glass of milk. So many wonderful and delicious things that would slowly and gently choke the life out of him. He would not even feel the hands of death gripping him till it was too late and his arteries were clogged with all the sweetness and richness she had poured into his greedy mouth. "I have told you a hundred times not to put whole black pepper into lassi[8], you bitch can you not hear me? Or have you gone deaf like the rest of your family, the miserable cripples?" He said and threw the glass at her. For the last two days he had been lying in bed with a toothache. One side of his face was swollen. Could the butter and ghee be working their magic already? No, it was too soon. He would die slowly after many years but he would die by her hands, by her cooking. Nanni sliced the almonds finely along with the black pepper in the new glass of lassi which she poured into another tall glass to make it froth. As her bangles tinkled she remembered how he had loved to see her doing this. "You move like a swan rustling its wings. I want to crush you in my arms," he had whispered. His mother was outside supervising the servant as he cleaned the wheat and they had quietly gone up to the attic and made love.

Harish drank the lassi noisily, gulping it down, his throat bobbing like a frog. He had not been always like this. When he was young Every night she would crush badams[9] in his milk and he would caress her fingers when he drank, not taking his eyes off her face. Even when his mother was in the room, he tried to touch her under the quilt, making her giggle. Now she wished him dead. Every night she saw his body lying on the floor, his thin, unshaven face buried in marigold flowers. When he died she would cry with real grief, her heart would break for the Harish she had known many years ago.

"Butter, fried things, ghee[10], milk, cream, all banned," he said, slapping his forehead. "The doctor said I have a very high cholesterol and it is all your fault, woman." Harish could eat only boiled food, porridge and dry toast from now on. But that was not possible. "A wife's duty is to cook for her husband," they had told her over and over again for so many years. She must cook his favorite food. He was her husband was he not? She had to look after him or what would people say? Doctors know nothing, just greedy for their fees. "Feed him, feed him all the richness all the sweetness," she could hear her mother singing to her at night. Ghee will make his heart so strong it will burst out of his chest, butter – golden yellow butter she would churn herself – would make his blood so warm and rich that his body would not be able to tolerate its weight. All her cooking skills would now finally be put to test, she would make one rich dish a week to suck the strength out of his veins, one dish to poison his blood, one to clog his veins which run with so much hate for her and her family, I will cook for him one death dish a week, slowly and slowly he will die, not by my hand but because it is the will of the gods. I will look after him like a good wife.

The oil floated on top of the curry as she put the spoon in. She stirred it and then spread a big spoonful on the rice. Then she added a pinch of salt – extra salt was good for him, a bit of ghee and then began mixing the curry and the rice with her hands. Once the proportion was right she made seven equal sized balls and placed them on the steel plate It was easy for him to eat if she

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mixed the rice for him. His hands shook a lot these days and he dropped all the food down his clothes. She made gentle cooing sounds as he ate, coaxing him to eat more and sometimes he looked at her with fear and love as if she was his mother. She fed him with her hands because he was too frail to lift the spoon to his mouth. The richer the food, the more she loved feeding him. Each mouthful she gave with her loving hands she hoped would send him closer to his death. "The spirit of death waits for you, I can hear her footsteps down the corridor," she whispered in his ears each night before he fell asleep, his body exhausted by rich greasy curries garnished with burning hot garam[11] masala, sweets floating in cream, fried oily potatoes and a pan filled with coconut, betel nuts, aniseed and thin slivers of dates wrapped in silver foil. The fragrant zarda[12] lulled him to sleep and the lethal curries churned in his stomach to give him nightmares.

Harish slept with his eyes open, his mouth slack as if waiting for more food to be poured into it. He left the room, taking care that Nanni could not see him floating out of the window into the sky. He loved her still but when she sat before him, her breasts soft against his arms his body shook with a terrible desire which frightened him. Her gaping mouth looked at him as if she wanted to devour him like a witch he had once seen hiding in the forest many summers ago. The woman had stood still watching him and then touched his face with her long fingers He ran home, crying silently all the way and when he looked at his face in the mirror, there were blue scars where she had touched him though he had felt no pain. Nanni was a gentle girl once and her eyes looked upon him with love. Then slowly she began to grow. At first her eyes grew large and then her hands reached to the floor. He had to control her by shouting and beating her or else she would kill him once day. Her breasts were huge now, almost as big as her body. When

she sat next to him feeding him like a good wife should, he could not breathe. He tried to push her away but each day his arms grew weaker and weaker. She sucked all the strength out with each mouthful she thrust in his mouth with her long, soft fingers. He had to fly away each night from her terrible power, to look for a safer place where she could not follow him, where she could not feed him with her long witch's fingers. He could hear whispers at night and even when he shut his ears and crawled under the bed, the voices followed him. Nanni spoke to him so gently when he was awake but at night she was the witch who would scar his face with her white nails. He wanted to shout at her, grab her neck and shake her like he used to when his mother was alive to protect him, but his body would not obey. He lay like an animal who had given up hope, swollen and white and the witch's hands made blue marks all over his body. Nanni's face, her glinting eyes grew bigger when he tried to lift his head to look at her. He had to push her away but his speech slurred when he tried to shout at her. If only he could catch hold of her once, break her into pieces, he would be safe. But she towered above him now, weighing him down with her breasts. But she would not harm him. She was a good wife and it was her duty to look after him, to feed him till his dying day.

She was a good wife

and it was her duty to look after him, to feed him till his

dying day.

WHAT HAS THE FEMINIST MOVEMENT GOT TO DO WITH FOOD?

Astha Bamba
June 2017

We have ignored how food and gender politics is often intertwined

Women have been politically involved with food, both as consumers and as producers, historically and even in contemporary times. The goals of feminist movements have often intersected with food politics. Just like how the feminist movement has various intersections of caste, class, race and ethnicity, protests around food have a lot to do with caste, religion, economics and politics.

Owing to gender roles and the dichotomy of the public and the private, women are naturally seen sharing a very domestic relationship with food, while men are supposed to share a very public relationship where male labour brings the produce inside the domestic or the private sphere. As a result, we have ignored how food and gender politics is often intertwined. In October 1789, thousands of French women marched and stormed the Palace of Versailles demanding that all the stocks of bread be released which the monarchy had been hoarding. This women's march is thought to have been the starting point of the French Revolution.

Role of Women in Food Production

Since most of the farmers of the world are women, farming needs to be seen as a feminist issue. Women have always been at the forefront of food production. They have grown, cooked, processed and served food. Their systems of production are based on an ethic of care and are self sustaining systems. Since women majorly contribute to its production, therefore food security has a direct linkage with women's food producing capacity. Feminist food systems have always focused on diversity of crops, indigenous knowledge about farming techniques and preservation as well as nourishment of the seed through unique means.

Unfortunately, the oppressive hegemonic systems of science, technology and economics, especially in neoliberal India have subverted this diversity. Economically, we have invisibilised Indian women's contribution as food providers. Our statisticians and survey methods fail to take into account the humongous work women agriculturists do, both inside and outside the house. Most women producers multitask and a lot of their food production is seen as unpaid care work; hence, it is never measured in wages and our national GDP excludes most of it. Thus, women producers face twin challenges of invisibilisation—by commercial and industrial agriculturists who are tearing down women agriculturists' indigenous knowledge and techniques one by one; and secondly, by economists who do not have the capacity or the inclination to recognize women's labour in food production.

Impact of Globalization on Women as Food Producers

Capitalist patriarchy has completely destroyed feminist food production in a post-globalized world. Corporations have full control over the entire food chain. GMO and hybrid seeds are seen as a replacement for renewable, diverse varieties. The whole food production process has entirely been commercialized by globalization, severely impacting women agriculturalists and their skills, productivity, labour and knowledge.

According to Vandana Shiva (eco-feminist and environmentalist), "The Green Revolution in India resulted in the death of the feminine principle in plant breeding...Green revolution varieties of seeds were clearly not the best alternative for increasing food production from the point of view of nature, women and poor peasants. They were useful for corporations that wanted to find new avenues in seeds and fertilizer sales, by displacing women peasants as custodians of seeds and builders of soil fertility, and they were useful for rich farmers wanting to make profits. The international agencies which financed research on the new seeds also provided the money for their distribution. The impossible task of selling a new variety to millions of small peasants who could not afford to buy the seeds was solved by the World Bank, the UNDP, the FAO, and a host of bilateral aid programs that began to accord high priority to the distribution of HYV seed in their aid programs."

Impact of Food Shortages on Women

As a result of capitalist patriarchy, women and girls become the worst victims of hunger, malnutrition and under-nutrition. These micro-aggressions shouldn't just be seen as women's lack of access to food because of poverty but they also need to be seen as a result of the disappearance of diversity from our farming systems that have completely destroyed nutrition in our food.

According to National Family Health Survey (NFHS), 58.6% of children, 53.2% of non-pregnant women and 50.4% of pregnant women suffered from anemia in 2016, despite having an anemia control program for 50 years. Anemia is not only responsible for increasing maternal and infant mortality rates but it also leads to poor growth and decreased productivity in women and children.

As Dr. Shiva rightly points out, both nutrition and malnutrition are linked to food production and what we grow in our farms. It's not as if enough food isn't being produced in the world; it's just that industrialized agriculture, which has destroyed small farmers, is based on expensive capital and synthetic fertilizers which makes several farmers go into debt leading to the increasing number of farmer suicides.

Conclusion

While all of us need to introspect as to how to ethically consume food, we must not fall into the trap of mainstream capitalist veganism that calls for single crop production in certain areas which have historically been used to multiple crop productions.

Thus, food is very much a feminist issue. It needs to be seen at the intersections of caste and ethnicity in India. Feminist food movements should also address the ostracisation of certain caste communities for eating food that is "impure". The whole myth of 'saatvik' food needs to be debunked which is rooted in the very Brahminical notion purity and pollution.

CONVERSATION OVER CHAI

WITH MY MOTHER AND AUNT

Muma[1] : mother
Bhinidi Bhaji[2]: Okra dish
Chapati[3]: flat bread
Buhrji[4]: Egg dish
Daal[6]: lentil dish
Bhaji[6]: general vegetable dish
Bhaji[7]: vegetables

Yadavi *Muma[1], what was the first thing you learned how to cook?*

Dipti Bhindi Bhaji[2] (Pause) You know the first I learned how to cook chapati because my muma taught me, she would make me flip the chapati

Y What does that mean?

D She would just make me stand and flip it. And then after I would roll the chapati, and after a while, I would just make the chapati and she would do other work. I would tell her, "Muma you're not paying attention to the chapati[3]," and she would respond, "Then you do it".

But my sister would make the rest of the food

Y Was your sister better at cooking than you?

D Yeah. She would make everything. My muma most of the time wouldn't be home because if there were any new babies in the family

D My mom would go and help their family.

Y Oh so she wasn't really home, so when she wasn't home would you cook mostly?

D *"Since then me and my sister got into the habit of cooking."*

Y Your brother wouldn't cook?

D He's the best cook. Chicken and all that.

Y But when you guys were younger would he cook a lot?

D Yeah, he would cook with us. If you eat buhrji[4] from his cooking it's the best. He would cook the best from leftovers. My muma would make everyone cook, my dad would also make really good food. Since she was out, the role of cooking was left for everyone else. She would say she'll cook when she gets back,

D but she would get back late so it wasn't possible.

Y So when she wasn't at home would you cook mostly or your dad?

D (laughs) everyone would try and cook.

Y Oh everyone would cook

D Everyone. One time my grandmother was really sick, then my mother was with her for two months, no one else was able to stay with her for that long. If she needs it my mom was there.

And we were older so everyone assumed me and my sister would do everything.

And next to us was my aunt would live and she would come and help us. She would make Daal[5] and bring us vegetables and after a while, we would just do it ourselves. Since my mom was with our grandma for two months that's basically when

D We started cooking. For the first week, our aunt made us bhajis and we would make chapatis and rice. Then my sister said,

"We should just make it, why put her through all that to make us food"

So we started cooking at that time. We would forget to put the bhaji[6] in water, it would slip our minds that we were supposed to do that before cooking (laughs). On the street there was always a bhaji woman, so we would get vegetables from her and make bhajis with them.

Suchita **That was a great thing, you can find any bhaji from the street markets. If you need something in an emergency you can get it.**

D Yeah, it's not like here.

Y *Yeah, you can just go outside.*

D (talking about her recent trip to India), I would leave my sister's house and on my way to my brother's house, I would just get bhaji[7] from someone sitting on the street and then just ask my sister-in-law if she could cook it. No one really keeps stores like we do here.

Y *(asking my aunt) What was the first thing you learned to cook*

S **Me, I never really had to cook but when my mother went to the US I had to cook more**

D (my mom asks my aunt) Suchi chai?

S **No I'm ok for now.**

(My mom continues to make chai for herself)

S **I really like cooking, I would make anything. But when my mother came to the US because Gautai was born (my cousin) my dad stayed in India. And since he was there he would always say,**

"you cook, cook anyway, I just want food from your hand"

Our relatives would come and give us food but we didn't want to burden them. At the time there was also our maid.

D Oh, I saw her recently when I went to India. She would always help your grandmother

S **Yeah, so she was there so she would knead the dough (for chapatis) and rice for me. I knew how to cook, but I never really had to cook.**

Khichdi[8]: type of dish made with rice

S **I didn't know how to do the extra things for the food, I could just make basic bhajis at that time. At that time I started making all the food. We would both get the vegetables and just cook whatever. At that time she wouldn't go anywhere, she would just stay with us. So she said, "We should just make our own food"**

So we just made food for our family. When I first made Bhindi Bhaji I didn't know, I never made it before, So i put water in with the Bhaji, (laughs). It was bad so I told our maid, "Just throw it out" and she said,

"It doesn't matter, let's just eat it"

Y *Did ajoba (my grandfather) eat it?*

S **No, so he wasn't there in the afternoons because he would work. He would come back and eat dinner**

S **so then we would make daal and rice or other bhajis for him.**

Ajoba would just ask that I make it, he didn't really care what it was. Mostly, he would make his own breakfast, eggs, chicken whatever at that time since Ajji was in the US.

Y *Was it just you and Ajoba at that time?*

S **Yes-**

Y *Cause Sanju Kaka (my uncle) was in the US was-*

S **Your dad was also in the US.**

Y *So it was just you and Ajoba?*

S **Yeah, so it was just me and Ajoba, and bahrti, the three or four of us.**

Y *(my mom trying to feed me Khichdi[8]) What is it? Is it hot?*

S **But it was a lot of fun**

Kheer[9]: Sweet pudding

Sheera[10]: Sweet dish

D (talking about the Khichdi she just made) you should put butter on it

S **Yeah it would taste good with butter, or even oil**

Y *I don't like it, it's squishy*

S **(to my mom) Are you supposed to just eat it like that, or are you supposed to eat it with something? Do they make it thinner?**

Y *It tastes like raw dough like it's not cooked*

S **I still remember, it was just me and Ajoba and it was a holiday. I didn't make anything sweet and he looks at me and says,**

"You didn't make any sweets, you have to make some sweets"

So me and Barhti and just looking at each other like "what are we going to make?" So we just made kheer[9]or maybe it was sheera[10]. No one would tell me how to make sweets. I ran to my aunt's house and she said, "Why are you concerned about making sweets I'll make you some" and I'm looking at her like "I'm trying to make them". Bharti would tell me, "Let's just make them ourselves"

D During that time after Bahrti would work Yadavi-

Y *Who's Bahrti?*

D I met her after so long when I recently went to India

S **She was someone who worked with our family at that time. She was young, I was in college and she was probably like 15 or something at that time. I was probably a few years older than her. She was always around me though, she would also sleep in my room. She would just do everything, we didn't really treat her like a maid. She would just help Ajji.**

Ajji showed her how to cook and then she started to cook as well.

Geeta Kaki (my aunt) taught her how to wear a Gol Saree (traditional way of wearing a saree)

Y *Aw*

S **During my wedding Geeta Kaki took her everywhere, she told her for the wedding she should wear a different type of saree. Bharti would wear it in a different way because she was from a different region. They had a different style, she was really shy, so some of the women in our family encouraged her to wear it in a different way.**

So we just made food for our family. When I first made Bhindi Bhaji I didn't know, I never made it before, So i put water in with the Bhaji, (laughs). It was bad so I told our maid, "Just throw it out" and she said,

Y *Would Ajoba cook a lot?*

S **Ajoba would cook on Sundays and Saturdays-**

Y *Oh so on the weekends*

S **Yeah mostly when Ajji didn't make breakfast he would quickly make himself something and leave. Ajji would really just make him chai and he would just make himself burji or have leftovers. Ajoba wouldn't wait, he would just cook.**

He loved cooking and he was really good at it too.

THE INDIAN WOMEN EATING WITH THEIR FAMILIES FOR THE FIRST TIME

Geeta Pandey
September 11, 2017

Meals have a way of bringing families together. As food is laid out, everyone gathers round the table, conversation flows and families bond. But traditionally, eating together has not been encouraged in India. Men and children are fed first and only then can women sit down to eat. But in millions of poor homes, this practice has had an unintended consequence - malnutrition among women.

Now, however, campaigners are urging women to eat with their families instead of after them. And, they say, the results have been very encouraging. No-one knows when or where or how the practice started, but like every other symbol of patriarchy, it is deeply entrenched in people's psyche. As a child, in my home too, my mother, grandmother, aunts and cousin's wives would cook and serve, but they would always be the last to eat.

In the pecking order, gods came first - once food was prepared, a small portion of all the dishes would be offered to them.

In my Brahmin home, even the resident cow was fed before humans "when my grandfather sat down to eat, he would set aside bits of food from every dish onto a small thick round piece of bread that was placed on a leaf. He would eat only after one of us had fed that to the cow."

This staggered eating sometimes caused minor friction at home - if men delayed mealtimes, it just meant that the women's wait to eat got longer. It didn't matter how hungry they were, they just had to wait.

Our family was not an exception - this is how my neighbours ate, as did those living across the length and breadth of the country.

In many families, a rather unhygienic practice involved women eating from the unwashed plates of their husbands.

Anyone who sought an explanation for why this happened was told that it was the norm, that it had happened for centuries, that it was the traditional way.

In cities though, it is becoming increasingly common for educated and employed women to eat as and when they want to, but the tradition of women eating last continues to be in homes like ours, it has no serious impact because there is enough food to go around. But in poor rural homes, it often leaves women and children hungry.

"This tradition of prioritizing men's needs means sometimes when women sit down to eat, there isn't enough left for them," says Vandana Mishra of Rajasthan Nutrition Project (RNP), executed by charities Freedom from Hunger India Trust and Grameen Foundation. A survey of 403 poor tribal women in the state's Banswara and Sirohi districts in March 2015 showed "food secure and food insecure people in the same household", Ms Mishra said "Men always said, 'I go to work first and children go to school, so we need to eat first'," Rohit Samariya, RNP project manager in Banswara, told the BBC.

"We created plates to demonstrate what a man's plate looked like and what a woman's plate looked like to drive the point home that women were literally scraping the bottom of the barrel," he says. enough food isn't being produced in the world; it's just that industrialized agriculture, which has destroyed small farmers, is based on expensive capital

This tradition of prioritizing men's needs means sometimes when women sit down to eat, there isn't enough left for them

and synthetic fertilizers which makes several farmers go into debt leading to the increasing number of farmer suicides. To break this pattern, the group came up with a very simple but unusual strategy - to encourage families to eat their meals together. Their two-year project concluded recently and to gauge its impact on rural communities, I traveled last month to the tribal-dominated Ambapara village in Banswara.

As I arrive at Manshu Damor's house, I find him chopping a type of locally grown leafy vegetable while his wife and daughter-in-law cook in the kitchen behind him. The family's lunch menu includes vegetable, lentil soup and handmade bread. Ambapara is among India's poorest villages where 89% still defecate in the open, child marriages are rampant, literacy levels are low and women still cover their faces in the presence of men. So when the RNP campaigners suggested that people eat their meals together as a family, it was nothing less than revolutionary. Until then, Mr Damor tells me, he had never shared a meal with Barju, his wife of 35 years. The idea that his daughter-in-law Karma could sit alongside him was unthinkable. "People said how could a woman eat in front of her father-in-law? It had always been against our tradition, so in the beginning I also resisted. I too found it a bit odd," he said.

Mr Samariya says by asking men to eat together with the women, "we were asking them to change their behavior". "In our patriarchal society, men are not brought up to care for their wives. So we have to sensitive them to gender issues."Widely followed to this day, especially in rural areas.

It was not just men - women also believed in the same tradition. But after some persuasion, the villagers agreed to give it a try. And, it's made a world of difference to women's well-being. "I was the one always cooking, but by the time I would sit down to eat, there would be little food left. Men would finish all the vegetables, so I'd have to contend with bread and salt," says Karma, Mr Damor's daughter-in-law. "Now everyone gets equal food."Her neighbour, Ramila Damor, said her family had their first meal together two years ago.

"When I heard about it for the first time, I went home and cooked and I told my husband that from now on, we'll all eat together. It felt really nice sharing a meal," she said. All the other women I spoke to in the village said family meals had become the norm in their homes too.

A survey done at the end of the two-year campaign in May showed heartening results - food security among the surveyed women had more than doubled. As the wellbeing of children is often linked to that of mothers, their food security too showed a huge increase.

The impact of the campaign was not limited to improving nutrition levels, it brought on other positive changes too. Mr Damor says his daughter-in-law no longer covers her face entirely and the veil has moved up. "Also, now she calls me Ba (father) instead of Haahoo (dad-in-law) and my wife Aaee (mother) instead of Haaharozi (mum-in-law)."

Meals do have a way of bringing families together. Like they have done in the case of Damor's.

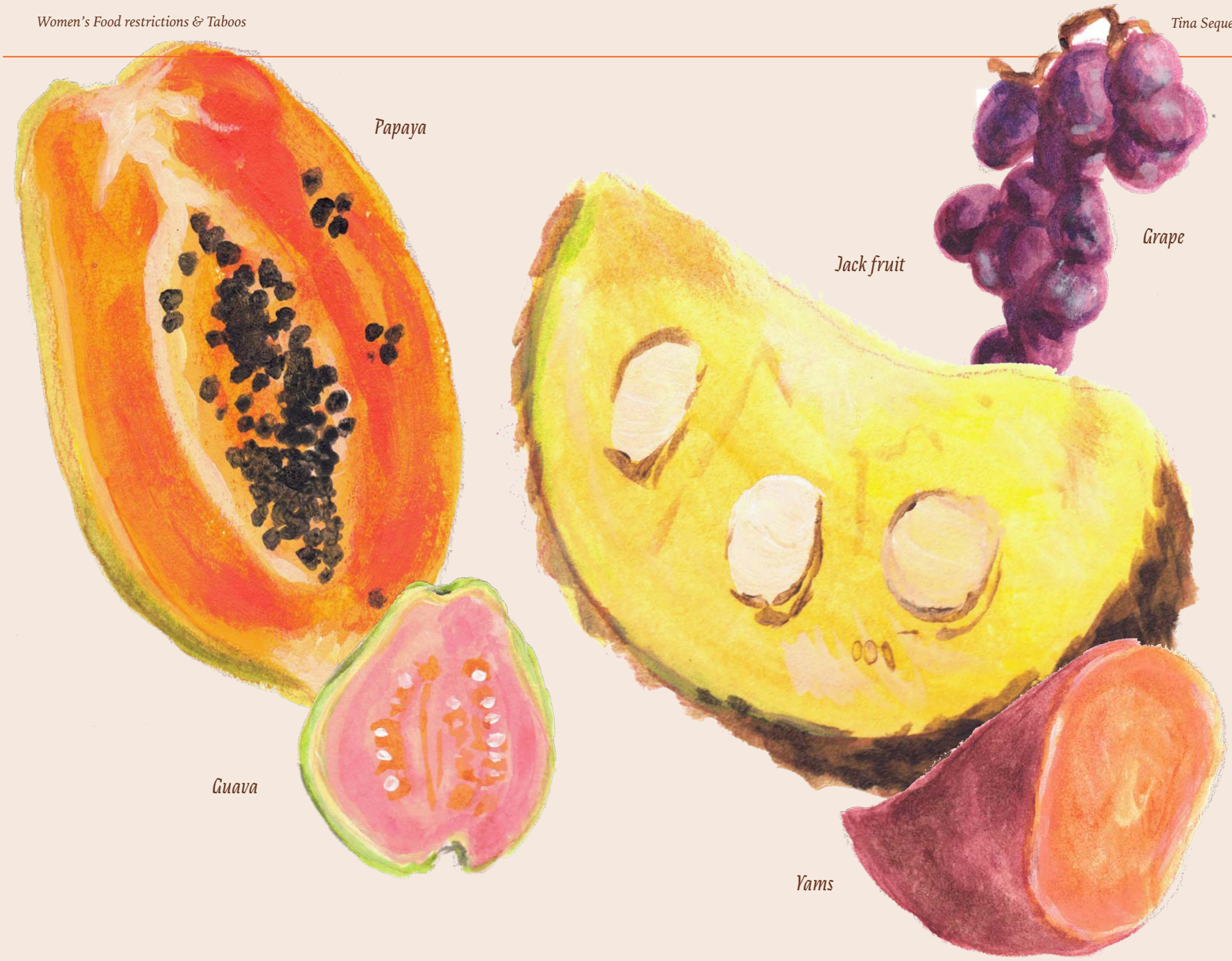
WOMEN'S FOOD RESTRICTIONS & TABOOS

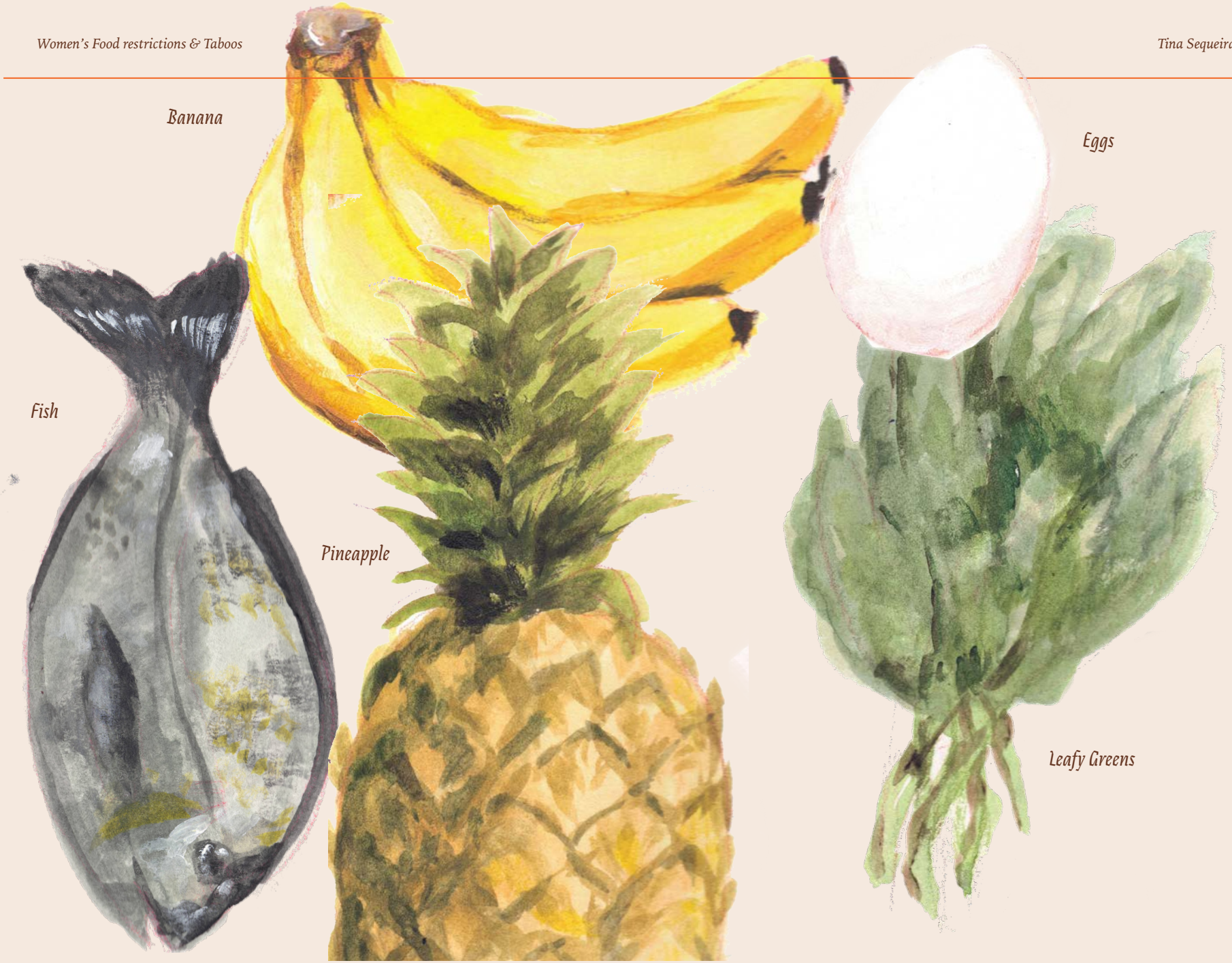
Tina Sequeira
August 14, 2012

Pregnancy is the time when a balanced nutritious diet is necessary.

But in rural India, pregnant and lactating women are expected to abstain from some essential foods as a part of traditional food habits.

Some of these foods include:


Papaya
Grape
Jack fruit
Guava
Yams


Banana
Eggs
Fish
Pineapple
Leafy Greens

INDIA'S INVISIBLE Women FARMERS

Neeta Lal

January 14, 2021

Neeta Lal

At Tikri village, bordering the western fringes of India's national capital New Delhi, thousands of farmers from across the country have been agitating since November 26. Their target: the government's new farm laws, which they view as "pro-corporate" and "exploitative" toward Indian farmers.

The protests at Tikri, like at many other sites across the country, have also spotlighted a new type of revolutionary: the woman farmer. Normally confined to villages and homes, the female farming community is out in full force this time, lending its voice to one of the biggest agrarian movements that has roiled India since the country gained independence in 1947widely followed to this day, especially in rural areas.

From shawl-swathed 80-year-olds braving the extreme winter chill to middle-aged housewives wearing salwar kameez to farm widows whose husbands committed suicide due to crippling farm loans, they are all out on the front lines.

"We have one foot in our homes and one foot at the protest," says Jagpreet Kaur, 36, a member of Kisan Sabha, an all-India farmers' group. Kaur traveled to Tikri on an overnight bus from Sangrur, Punjab, leaving her two young daughters with her sister. She'll return to her village after a week, she says, and her sibling will take her place at Tikri while Kaur takes care of her two boys.

"We have one foot in our homes and one foot at the protest"

Jagpreet Kaur

Gender-based discrimination plagues Indian women farmers every step of the way

"We've been doing rotations to manage our homes, kids, our wheat fields, as well as the protests," she says.

Harshdeep Deol, 59, a member of the Stree Jagriti Ekta Manch, a women farmers' group, arrived two days ago from Patna, in India's eastern state of Bihar. "My three sons are leading the protests here. I'm here to support them," she explains. "Once I'm back, I'll be busy with my home chores, farming work as well as taking care of my ailing husband."

According to non-profit Oxfam, around 80 percent of farm work in India – including sowing, winnowing, harvesting, and other labor-intensive processes and non-mechanized farm occupations – is undertaken by women.

The heavy lifting on farms, often done by the men, has also fallen upon their shoulders since November, when the protests started.

Despite their pivotal contribution to the agriculture sector, which contributes 15.4 percent to the national economy, however, women farmers remain an invisible work force. Neither the farming sector nor the macroeconomic policy framework recognizes their labor, which technically disqualifies them from receiving institutional support from banks, insurance, cooperatives, and government departments.

"Gender-based discrimination plagues Indian women farmers every step of the way," Their voices often go unheard owing to their gender, and they struggle to establish their identity at the grassroots level due to patriarchal traditions and gender socialization," states Mariam Dhawale of the All India Democratic Women's Association, A Womens activist group.

The role of women in the agricultural sector cannot be ignored, adds Dhawale, given that they comprise 33 percent of the agriculture labor force and 48 percent of self-employed farmers. Despite this statistic, however, 83 percent of agricultural land in the country is inherited by male members of the family and less than 2 percent by their female counterparts, according to the India Human Development Survey 2018.Association, a women's activist group.

A 17-country study by Corteva Agriscience, the agriculture division of DowDuPont, showed widespread gender discrimination both in the developing and the developed world, as reported by Business Standard. The study, which included 4,160 respondents, found gender discrimination to be pervasive across the board, reported by 78 percent of survey participants in India and 52 percent in the U.S.

What further tilts the balance against Indian women farmers are region-specific socioeconomic problems, including the "feminization" of the agricultural workforce. According to the Economic Survey 2017-18, with growing rural to urban migration by men, an increasing number of women are working in multiple roles as cultivators, entrepreneurs, and laborers. As Kaur puts it, "In the absence of men in our households we are also responsible for taking decisions related to home management as well at our farms."

Adding further to their difficulties are debts triggered by suicide among the menfolk. According to the National Crime Records Bureau of India, more than 296,438 Indian farmers committed suicide between 1995-2020, compelling women "to carry the burden of feeding their children, taking care of household chores, [and] providing minimum access to health care with no proper intervention by the state or welfare groups."

In 2018, the Mahila Kisan Adhikar Manch, a nationwide forum promoting women farmers' rights, conducted a survey of 505 women farmers whose husbands committed suicide due to the farm crisis in 11 districts across Marathwada and Vidarbha. The survey found that 40 percent of women widowed by farmer suicides between 2012 and 2018 had yet to obtain rights to the farmland they cultivated. Critics point out that it is technically challenging for an Indian woman farmer to own agricultural land in India because of entrenched gender inequities in the system. "Though women are involved in all aspects of the agricultural processes, they have no role to play in decision making. They are confined to subservient roles – as helpers to their male family members, most of whom own the land or have migrated to urban cities in search of better economic opportunities," explains Sukriti Pandey, a High Court lawyer and activist.

Worse, adds Pandey, rich landowners exploit contractual workers by paying them wages lower than a subsistence amount, and the exploitation is further magnified in the case of women farmers. Low awareness about women's right to land exacerbates the problem.

An attempt to promote gender equity in agriculture was initiated through the Women Farmers Entitlement Bill in 2011. However, the bill never saw the light of day due to lack of governmental support, and it lapsed in 2013. And even though the National Policy on Farmers 2007 accorded high priority to "recognition and mainstreaming of women's role in agriculture" and highlighted incorporation of "gender issues" in the agricultural development agenda, its implementation remains poor, critics say.

The government also commemorates women farmers each year through Rashtriya Mahila Kisan Divas (Women's Farmers' Day) on October 15. However, experts argue that such tokenism is meaningless without sustainable legislative or institutional changes. They further warn that with the pandemic leaving women farmers even more economically vulnerable, the tenuous hold of women on land will be in even greater jeopardy, further weakening their position.

"It is imperative torecognize female farmers as landowners and provide them access to the same institutional remedies that are available to their male counterparts," States Pandey. Women must also have access to rural credit, assets, technology, and irrigation, which have not reached them due to flawed policies and the lack of a gendered lens in the agricultural sector. Land ownership will instill social and economic security among women farmers, which will in turn provide for a more inclusive environment in the country's most important sector, Pandey asserts.

environment in the country's most important sector, Pandey asserts.

The United Nation's Food and Agriculture Organization estimates that "if women had the same access to productive resources as men, they could increase yields on their farms by 20-30 percent." This could raise agricultural output in developing countries by up to 4 percent, which could in turn whittle down the number of hungry people in the world by 12-17 percent, or 100-150 million people.

Until then, however, hard-working women farmers like Jagpreet and Harshdeep will continue to struggle for their rightful place in the sun.

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