



THE REAL “ANNAPURNA” OF INDIAN AGRICULTURE: WOMEN FARMERS WHO FEED THE NATION



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In Indian tradition, Annapurna symbolizes nourishment and abundance. Yet, beyond mythology, the true “Annapurnas” of Indian agriculture are millions of women farmers who sustain the nation’s food system every day. Their labour feeds families, supports rural economies, and strengthens national food security—often without recognition, rights, or resources. According to the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), women constitute nearly 43% of the global agricultural workforce. In India, various government and academic estimates suggest that over 30–35% of farmers and more than 70% of women in rural areas depend on agriculture for their livelihood. Women are actively involved in seed selection, transplanting, weeding, harvesting, livestock rearing, and post-harvest processing. In many regions, especially during male migration to cities, women effectively manage farms as de facto heads of households.



Despite their critical role, less than 13% of rural women in India own land in their own names. Land ownership is not just a legal

formality—it determines access to institutional credit, crop insurance, government subsidies, and agricultural extension services. Without land titles, women farmers are often excluded from schemes designed to support farmers, even though they perform the majority of farm labour.

The gender wage gap in agriculture further highlights inequality. Studies indicate that women agricultural workers earn 20–30% less than men for the same work. At the same time, women shoulder the “double burden” of farm labour and unpaid domestic work—cooking, collecting water and fuel, caring for children and the elderly—resulting in longer and more physically demanding workdays.

Women farmers are also key guardians of traditional agricultural knowledge and biodiversity. In regions like Odisha, Chhattisgarh, and the North-East, women-led self-help groups have revived indigenous seed varieties and promoted mixed cropping and organic practices. For example, women’s collectives in Odisha’s tribal districts have successfully conserved traditional millet varieties, improving both household nutrition and climate resilience. Millets, which are drought-resistant and nutrient-rich, are now being recognized nationally as “climate-smart crops,” largely due to grassroots efforts led by women.

Climate change has intensified challenges such as erratic rainfall, soil degradation, and water scarcity. Women, who are often responsible for fetching water and managing household food, are among the first to feel these impacts. Yet, they are also at the forefront of adaptation—adopting water-saving techniques, kitchen gardens, composting, and diversified cropping systems. Evidence shows that when women farmers have equal access to resources, farm productivity can increase by 20–30%, significantly strengthening

food security.

Empowering women in agriculture is not only a moral imperative—it is smart economics. Securing land rights for women, improving access to credit and digital tools, offering targeted training, and ensuring their representation in farmer producer organizations (FPOs) can unlock enormous potential. Programs that link women farmers to markets, value chains, and agri-entrepreneurship are already showing promising results in several states.

Recognizing women farmers as the real “Annapurna’s” of Indian agriculture must go beyond symbolism. It demands policy reform, social change, and sustained investment. When women farmers thrive, agriculture becomes more productive, families become healthier, and rural communities become more resilient. Honoring the real Annapurna’s means creating a future where the hands that feed the nation are finally seen, supported, and empowered.



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