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How do gender-caste intersectionalities influence the involvement of communities in organic cotton farming?

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Abstract

The socioeconomic and environmental benefits of organic farming have been widely explored in research, while topics like gender equity and labour are often neglected. In India, the influence of caste and gender identities adds another layer of complexity to these aspects. Using a case of a research and training project implemented in the Nimar Valley region of Madhya Pradesh since 2007, we explore gender and caste intersectionalities within conventional and organic cotton farming systems. The project promotes organic cotton cultivation and food crop diversification, and trains women from marginalised tribal communities, among others. We use a relational approach, as proposed by David Mosse, to understand differences in organic and conventional cotton farming systems in the representation of caste and gender and concerns and barriers to the involvement experienced by different actors. We interviewed 80 respondents employing participatory social network mapping, gendered seasonal calendars, in-depth interviews and participant observation in training, applied during a three-month fieldwork in 2022/23. Preliminary results show among others that, representation in terms of caste and gender has been static in both conventional and organic farming systems. Mainly females from scheduled castes (SC, Dalits) and scheduled tribes (ST, Tribals) are represented as casual labourers in seeding, weeding and cotton picking. The bargaining power of labourers, deciding both wages and working hours, has increased in recent years. This potentially is a positive social change, but puts a higher burden on organic cotton farmers as it is more labour-intensive compared to conventional farming. Our results further indicate that due to high labour wages, there is a resurgence of labour-sharing arrangements for cotton harvesting amongst rich upper-caste farmers and, novel involvement of upper-caste women in cotton farming activities. Tribal farmers in turn start growing conventional cotton. Also, with less cultivable land owned, project activities are less accessible to Dalits. We emphasise that ensuring direct benefits for Dalits in project activities would contribute to increasing equity and promoting pro-poor outcomes, albeit potentially increasing the costs of organic cotton. These could be offset by higher prices for organic cotton. Further more women-inclusive training could potentially lead to synergies, e.g. with cotton quality.

Keywords: Caste gender intersectionality, India, organic cotton farming, production relations