

never really taken off and has failed to combat the politics of mega-identity. If we consider the caste-based and material interests being served/pursued by the politics of mega-identity then the seriousness of this issue does not need to be overemphasised.

The discourse of Gandhi and Ambedkar separately deal with these issues but jointly strengthen liberating forces by opening up new theoretical spaces.

Finally, two clarifications. The title and tone of Rao's response suggest that my piece was an attempt at "eliding the significant differences between Gandhi and Ambedkar" and perhaps my piece was part of a grand strategy of denying the uniqueness of Ambedkar's discourse. Hence her title, "Arguing against Inclusion". I believe that I have not tried to cover over either political or ideological differences between the two. Besides my piece was an attempt to argue that "...there exists some ground where the agenda of Gandhi and Ambedkar might actually be complementary" (p 2070) and it suggested

that we might seek to build bridges between the two rich discourses of our times (p 2072). Surely, arguing in favour of complementarity is different from arguing for 'inclusion'.

I am indeed thankful to Rao for reminding me that "...serious historical analysis and political critique does not proceed from the assumption that 'personalities' and great men make history" (p 427). What I have actually said is this: "(T)he present note proceeds with the assumption that Gandhi-Ambedkar clashes resulted from their personalities as well as their respective positioning in the contemporary political contexts." And: "...Gandhi-Ambedkar relationship needs to be probed in the context not of personalities or political strategies, but in terms of their respective emancipatory projects" (p 2070, emphases added). Rao could have saved some trouble to her sense of sound analysis if she had carefully read the third paragraph of my piece where I sketch the context of the political clashes between Gandhi and Ambedkar.

subsequently made a public pronouncement that this would be done, but information about changes, if any, that have been introduced is not available to the concerned public.

The crucial question as far as the last two demands are concerned is that of a fund from which social security and welfare measures can be financed. As far back as 1988, *Shram Shakti*, (the Report of the National Commission on Women in the Unorganised Sector) had recommended the setting up of a National Maternity and Childcare Fund, a demand which has been reiterated several times by FORCES (1989, 1992, 1995, etc). As far as maternity is concerned, some states (Tamil Nadu and Gujarat are outstanding examples) have already shown the way through the provision of maternity benefits, though at an abysmally low level, and through schemes riddled with the usual red-tapism, corruption and delay. The centrally-funded Maternity Benefit Scheme introduced in 1995 is a small attempt, and at a snail's pace, to carry this forward to the rest of the country.

Tamil Nadu, with its extensive network of childcare centres is well placed to demonstrate how the needed flexibility could be built in to provide for the needs, both seasonal and year-round, of women agricultural workers with young children, who are now the worst sufferers because of the ill-paid, irregular and arduous nature of their mothers' employment. What is needed is some additional funding and staffing, and imaginative planning. Above all, decentralisation of implementation is required, so that panchayats are responsible for providing the actual services. In other parts of the country, however, where such a well-developed framework does not exist, more investment would be needed.

Undoubtedly, an important part of the funds required to build up and maintain such a welfare fund would have to come from the employers of agricultural labour, that is, the landed classes, though of course, as suggested by numerous reports, the fund could be strengthened by tax-exempt contributions from the corporate sector, public donations, social security contributions from the labourers, and existing insurance funds. And it seems that this 'burden' is what the 'farm' lobby cannot swallow. Can one expect this government, which has sworn to pass the Women's Reservation Bill and has inducted four women into cabinet posts recently, to recognise and respond to the plight of millions of women agricultural workers whose sweat and toil in oppressive conditions feeds the nation?

## Gender and Agricultural Workers

Mina Swaminathan

THE second lead article in your June 28 issue, 'Farm Workers' Bill: Expected Reluctance' rightly draws attention to the cynical manner in which the long-overdue Agricultural Workers' Bill has once more been postponed due to the pressure of powerful lobbies. At the same time, it is also worth noting the significant lack of gender awareness in the bill as it is, especially in the light of the avowed commitment of the present government towards the empowerment of women at all levels.

The bill (as brought to the house in July 1996) showed little awareness of the pronounced and steadily increasing feminisation of the agricultural labour force. Of the total farm labour force, nearly 38 per cent women, at the all-India level are women, and 66 per cent of these are dalits, but this conceals wide regional variations (see Table). In Tamil Nadu, for example, the female/

male ratio among agricultural workers is already 47/53, and all indications are that, with the steady migration of men out of this unremunerative and unattractive form of employment, the feminisation will continue, so that in the next century, more than half of all agricultural labourers in this country will be women. In this context, it is a sad commentary on both the trade unions and political parties that no special provision for women workers, taking into account their practical gender needs, were included.

In August 1996, the Forum for Creche and Child Care Services (FORCES) along with leading women's organisations and women's wings of some of the political parties, brought this to the notice of the then labour minister, with three specific demands - that the bill include provision for equal pay for equal work, maternity entitlements and child care services. The minister

TABLE: AGRICULTURAL LABOURERS

	Male	Female	Total
India (in 1000's)	45,482 (62)	28,270 (38)	73,752 (100)
Tamil Nadu	41,71,571 (53)	37,24,724 (47)	78,96,295 (100)

Note: Figures in parentheses are percentages.

Source: Registrar General and Census Commissioner, India, The Census of India, Final Population Totals - 1991.