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# Rural Transformation in India: What can we learn from village studies?

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## **Rural Transformation in India: What can we learn from village studies?**

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## *Abstract*

This article examines rural transformation in India through a review of longitudinal village studies conducted over the past three decades. It argues that rural India is not undergoing structural transformation in the classical sense. While labour is steadily moving out of agriculture, this shift has not led to higher productivity in agriculture or the development of a robust rural nonfarm economy. Instead, what unfolds is a process of deagrarianisation, driven by out-migration of male workers to cities where they engage in informal nonfarm employment. This transition is uneven and remains deeply embedded in existing hierarchies of caste, class, and gender, which shape both access to opportunities and outcomes. By identifying common patterns across diverse regional contexts, the article shows how village studies provides a grounded perspective on the nature of rural change.

Keywords: Structural change, non-farm employment; de-agrarianisation, rural India, village studies

## **1. Introduction**

Rural transformation is often understood through the lens of structural change or structural transformation in development economics. Structural transformation usually refers to a shift in the share of national income and employment from agriculture to non-agriculture sectors, along with an increase in productivity across the economy (Lewis, 1954; Kaldor, 1966; Syrquin, 1988). According to FAO (2017), rural transformation is both a consequence and a driver of broader structural transformation. These changes are enabled by a robust agriculture sector marked by rising productivity, which in turn facilitates the movement of people across sectors and geographies, and fosters new linkages between agriculture and other parts of the economy (Timmer, 2009; Dong et al., 2023). In the Indian context, this would also mean addressing questions of inclusion- whether historically marginalised groups are able to benefit from these changes.

However, the changes taking place in rural India do not always follow this neat picture. While there is a visible shift of labour away from agriculture and a rise in non-farm employment, this does not seem to be accompanied by significant gains in productivity or the emergence of a strong non-farm economy in villages (Yadu and Mehra, 2024). What we see

instead is a process that is uneven and shaped by social structures like caste and gender. To understand these processes better, we need to go beyond macro-level data and look at how these changes are unfolding at the local level.

In this context, this paper looks at rural transformation in India through the lens of village studies. Village studies help us capture the everyday realities of change; how people make a living, how they shift between sectors, and how social relations are affected in the process. This article primarily draws on studies that involve longitudinal fieldwork in villages across rural India. To provide a broader perspective, some cross-sectional village studies are also included. A key challenge with longitudinal studies is the variation in their time frame - some cover changes over a century, others over a few decades. To bring some consistency, this paper looks at studies that include at least one round of fieldwork after 1990. All the cross-sectional studies included are based on fieldwork done in the last ten years. This period is particularly important as it coincides with India's post-liberalisation growth phase, which has had a significant impact on the rural economy.

The remainder of this paper is organized into the following sections. The second section constitutes the core of the chapter and is divided into thematically arranged sub-sections. The key themes identified across the studies include: (1) land relations, agriculture, and livelihoods; (2) employment in the non-farm sector; (3) women and work; (4) social relations and power dynamics; and (5) the role of social welfare policies. Each of these themes is discussed in detail, followed by a concluding section that summarizes the main findings of the paper

## **2. Assessing Change in Rural India: Factors and Processes**

### **2.1 Land relations, agriculture and livelihood**

The decline of landlordism and land as a factor of dominance is a major theme in village studies. Most report the absence of large landholders (Wilson, 1999; Tyagi and Himanshu, 2011; Datta et al., 2014) while on the other hand fragmentation of land continue unabated

(Gupta, 2020; Di Santalo et al, 2024). Wealthy landowning households have diversified their assets beyond agriculture, and non-cultivating landowners are increasingly common (Wilson, 1999; Heyer, 2000a; 2000b; Vijay, 2012; Pattenden, 2016; Trivedi, 2017). Yet, caste hierarchies in land ownership persist, with upper castes continuing to dominate and Dalits and other marginalised communities facing limited access (Trivedi, 2017; Ramakumar and Raut, 2024; Kaur and Kaur, 2024). Notably, landlessness no longer automatically implies extreme poverty, although the poorest remain landless (Harriss-White and Janakarajan, 2004).

A recurring theme in village studies since the mid-1990s is the ‘agrarian crisis’ leading to widespread farmer suicides<sup>1</sup>. Neoliberal reforms are widely cited as exacerbating rural distress, pushing agriculture and farmers into ‘advanced marginality’ (Vasavi, 2009). The profitability of farming, especially for small and marginal farmers, has declined due to rising cultivation costs and stagnant or falling yields (Jha and Thakur, 2016; Harilal and Eswaran, 2016; Suthar, 2022; Kaur and Kaur, 2024). In Tamil Nadu, for instance, between 1994 and 2018, paddy cultivation costs rose by 11 percent, while output value dropped by 14 percent (Yadu, 2022).

However, the crisis affects farmers unevenly. Studies show that costs and returns vary across agrarian classes (Ramachandran et al., 2010; Rakshit, 2011; Swaminathan and Bakshi, 2017). Rich capitalist farmers are more resilient, managing to accumulate through alternative means (Das Gupta, 2019; Sinha, 2021), while small and marginal farmers are more vulnerable, facing indebtedness and, in extreme cases, suicides (Mohanty, 2019; Mohanty and Lenka, 2019; Suthar, 2022).

Technological change and mechanisation, initiated by the Green Revolution, continue to transform agriculture. While trends in yields vary across different villages with some showing mild increases while others show stagnant or declining yields, studies note increased use of tractors, threshers, and chemical inputs (Tyagi and Himanshu, 2011; Jodhka, 2016; Lindberg et al., 2014; Sahay, 2019). Irrigation technology, particularly the widespread adoption of

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<sup>1</sup> A comprehensive understanding of farmers suicide based on a multistate village study can be found in Suthar (2022).

pump sets, has been especially transformative, converting dry land into irrigated plots and enabling the cultivation of high-yielding varieties (da Corta and Venkateswarlu, 1999; Yadu, 2022).

Yet, this technological shift has brought ecological stress. Groundwater overuse has led to a drastic fall in water tables (Taylor, 2013; Srivastava, 2016; Yadav, 2022; Nair et al., 2024), with severe consequences for livelihoods. Srivastava (2016, p.201) notes pump sets running dry within minutes. Farmers often take loans to deepen borewells, and when these fail, they fall into debt traps (Taylor, 2013; Yadu, 2022; Karamchedu, 2024). This ‘race to the bottom’ has created a landscape of failed borewells, withered crops, and escalating debt (Taylor, 2013), disproportionately affecting the small and marginal farmers.

With agriculture becoming increasingly unreliable, many households adopt coping strategies. A dominant response is ‘pluriactivity’—labouring outside agriculture to sustain livelihoods (Rodgers et al., 2016; Jodhka, 2016; Jha and Thakur, 2016; Rathi, 2022; Satheesha and Thomas, 2024). Simultaneously, several studies note a decline in agricultural employment, with falling labour demand and fewer workdays for agricultural workers (Ramachandran et al., 2010; Elias Khan et al., 2014; Singh and Bhogal, 2016; Bansal, 2024; Kaur and Kaur, 2024). The reduced availability of farm work, alongside the expansion of the non-farm sector, has led to male outmigration, leaving agriculture increasingly feminised.

## **2.2. Non-farm sector as an alternative employment avenue**

One of the most significant changes in rural labour relations has been the growth of the non-farm sector and the new avenues of employment it has opened. Across studies, there is broad consensus that a growing share of rural labourers now depend on non-farm employment. However, for most of the villages, this shift has not been driven by rural industrialisation. Instead, most rural households access non-farm work through migration to urban labour markets.

Migration is shaped by a complex web of social and ecological reasons in the village economy. Push factors include poverty, the agrarian crisis, climate change, ecological

degradation, and declining rural employment. Pull factors often involve higher wages in cities, the aspiration to exit agriculture, and an escape from oppressive social hierarchies (Mosse et al., 2005; Di Santalo et al, 2024).

In most village studies, non-farm wage work is equated with casual labour in the construction sector, although some cases show growth in self-employment and other informal sector work<sup>2</sup> (Rawal, 2006; Dodd et al., 2016; Himanshu et al., 2011; Trivedi, 2017). However, the sector's capacity to provide stable and gainful employment remains uncertain (Singh and Bhogal, 2020). Working conditions in the urban centres are often exploitative, marked by high insecurity and decent work deficits (Guerin et al., 2013; Pattenden, 2016).

Despite these limitations, non-farm employment especially through migration has brought tangible benefits most importantly a rise in household incomes (Dat et al, 2024; Di Santalo, 2024). Migration is frequently linked to higher household incomes, asset accumulation, and enhanced bargaining power at home (Deshingkar et al., 2008; Rodgers et al., 2016; Srivastava, 2016). However, these gains are unevenly distributed. Deshingkar and Start (2003) distinguish between 'cumulative migration streams typically accessible to dominant caste groups and subsistence ones, often involving Dalits and Adivasis, where earnings are low and work is unstable. These caste-differentiated outcomes are shaped by uneven access to physical, social, and human capital (Jeffrey et al., 2008; Jodhka, 2014; Heyer, 2016; Yadav, 2022).

Nevertheless, non-farm work—despite its precarities carries social value. Migrant workers often perceive urban casual labour as less degrading than agricultural labour, enhancing their self-worth and distancing them from traditional caste-based hierarchies (Himanshu et al., 2011; Jodhka, 2014; Kumar, 2016; Yadu, 2022).

Migration has also contributed to broader changes in the village labour market. The shift of workers to the non-farm sector has tightened rural labour markets, making it difficult for local landlords to find farm labourers (Heyer, 2016; Datta et al., 2014; Rai, 2018). This shortage is not only due to sectoral shifts but also demographic changes such as declining

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<sup>2</sup> Notable exception to this general trend where there was an increase in the availability of regular jobs can be found in two village studies done in Karnataka and Tamil Nadu (Satheesha, 2023; Di Santano, 2024)

fertility and rising school enrolment (Heyer, 2016a). This has led to improved bargaining power, higher wages, and better working conditions for those who remain in the agrarian workforce.

The increased availability of non-farm jobs has also loosened the grip of traditional labour bondage. While older forms of hereditary bondage have declined, what remains are transitional and short-term forms of coercion. Studies describe this as ‘neo-bondage’ a form of unfreedom tied to seasonal migration and labour intermediaries rather than long-term, caste-bound attachment (Breman, 2013; Guerin et al., 2015). Labourers, mostly from Dalit and Adivasi communities, often face debt bondage in brick kilns, stone quarries, sugarcane harvesting, and other informal worksites (Breman, 2008; Jodhka, 2012; Guerin, 2013).

Importantly, migration has not only enhanced economic agency but also reshaped socio-political dynamics in many villages. Jha (2004) notes that migration has expanded marginalised groups’ ‘elbow room’ in both economic and political terms, weakening older patron-client dependencies. These transformations in labour relations reflect the non-farm sector’s growing significance as both a site of opportunity and a space of continued precarity.

### **2.3 Women and Work**

‘Feminization of agriculture’ is the most important theme addressed by village-level studies over the last three decades. Various studies show that, without any significant change in asset-holding structures or power relations, the increasing employment of women in agriculture has not brought meaningful gains for them (Kapadia, 1995; da Corta and Venkateswarlu, 1999; Garikipati, 2008). The persistent inequalities in asset ownership and decision-making power continue to shape women's work choices, pushing them into low-paid and ‘socially debasing’ wage labour (Garikipati, 2008, p.635). As da Corta and Venkateswarlu (1999) argue, this pattern reflects a ‘class division between a non-propertied/waged workforce composed of women...and self-employed men’ (p.104).

With a significant proportion of men migrating from villages to urban areas in search of livelihoods, women’s burden of household reproduction has multiplied. Their labour has

become central to sustaining small farms, and some studies report a shift in the agricultural labour process, with women increasingly performing tasks previously considered ‘masculine’ (Paris et al., 2005; Datta and Mishra, 2011; Padmaja et al., 2014; Yadu, 2022). These changes have not necessarily translated into greater control or economic agency for women, however, particularly given the absence of parallel shifts in institutional norms or asset access.

Non-farm sector jobs and migration opportunities remain largely male-dominated (Guerin et al., 2015; Srivastava, 2016; Rodgers et al., 2016; Datta, 2016; Swaminathan et al., 2024). In most cases, the only non-farm work opportunity in the villages for women were MGNREGA where they are over represented (Das et al., 2024; Di Santalo, 2024). Otherwise, women’s entry into non-agricultural sectors tends to be through informal and home-based work or migration facilitated by ‘couple contracts’ (Rawal, 2006; Garikipati, 2008). Even as new roles open up, they often do so within constrained terms marked by local patriarchal and caste norms. For instance, Rodgers (2016), in her study of thirty-six villages in Bihar, notes that middle-caste and upper-caste women entered the labour force primarily in response to male out-migration, but only into jobs considered ‘socially acceptable’ within the village.

Many village studies have reported a decline in female workforce participation (Elias Khan et al., 2014; Heyer, 2016; Himanshu and Stern, 2018; Yadu, 2022; Bansal, 2024). Palampur study shows that households improve economically, women tend to withdraw from the workforce, whereas in declining economic conditions, they often join the workforce ((Himanshu and Stern, 2018). In Tamil Nadu, for example, Dalit women who had gained upward mobility through better-paying jobs expressed a preference for leaving agricultural labour, which they viewed as degrading and exploitative (Heyer, 2015; Carswell, 2013). In such cases, withdrawal from the workforce may reflect improved household status or a desire to avoid employers who do not ‘behave well’ (Srivastava, 2016), rather than a lack of demand for female labour.

## 2.4 Changing social relations and power equations

Caste relations in rural India have been transformed significantly over the past few decades. The disappearance of power-wielding landlords from the village landscape has ushered in greater democratisation of social relations in the countryside. Rather than being centred on a singular pole of power, the village is now organised around ten to fifteen focal points of power, creating new opportunities for political mobilisation among lower castes and expanding their participation in education (Jakobsen, 2016, p.258). These positive shifts in caste-based social relations and power dynamics can be seen as the combined result of three factors: (a) the expansion of capitalism and market relations inside and outside the village, (b) local struggles and assertions, and (c) constitutional guarantees and state support.

Migration to urban jobs has emerged as a key pathway out of patron-client ties, offering new avenues for economic and social mobility (Kapur et al., 2010). As one landowning farmer in Maharashtra observed, "These boys don't work for us. They're ashamed of working in the fields in the village" (Rai, 2018, p.176). The new avenues opened by the non-farm employment also caused a transition from customary, caste-bound roles—such as being 'beck and call' labourers—to more autonomous work arrangements involving voluntary contracts, fixed hours, cash payments, and negotiated wages and holidays (Jodhka, 2012; Heyer, 2016a, 2016b; Mosse, 2018). Studies also note a shift in upper-caste attitudes—moving from verbal abuse to more respectful forms of address such as 'Bhaiya' and 'Babu' (Srivastava, 2016) - accompanied by a broader transition from clientelism and patronage to more democratic, market-based labour relations (Rai, 2018; Jodhka, 2006; Himanshu and Stern, 2016).

Migrants often return to their villages with a newfound political consciousness that challenges older caste and class hierarchies. In a vivid example, Iyer (2017) reports how a Dalit migrant in Karnataka brought home a photo of Ambedkar and placed it on the wall beside his deceased ancestors, symbolising a reconfiguration of authority and reverence in rural households.

Village studies report several instances of collective struggles by landless Dalit labourers to raise wages and demand their rightful access to common pool resources (Lerche, 1999; Wilson, 1999; Trivedi, 2017; Kaur and Kaur, 2024). These actions have secured higher wages and greater dignity in the workplace. This rising consciousness from below—what Harriss et al. (2010) term ‘Dalit political mobilisation’—has played a key role in ensuring more secure and dignified livelihoods. Numerous studies highlight the increasing assertion of Dalits and its impact on labour markets and political dynamics in the countryside (Kumar, 2016; Jodhka, 2006, 2014; Lerche, 1999; Wilson, 1999). For instance, Carswell and De Neve (2015), drawing on Tamil Nadu village data, observe that Dalit workers increasingly resort to legal measures to counter caste-based abuse by upper-caste employers.

Democratisation of local governance through constitutionally mandated reservations for lower castes has further contributed to shifting power equations. The introduction of reservation in Panchayati Raj Institutions has facilitated improved access to welfare schemes for Dalit settlements and enhanced their political confidence (Pai, 2000; Jodhka, 2014; Kumar, 2016; Himanshu and Stern, 2016; Carswell et al., 2016). The presence of Dalit representatives in village administration has translated into a more inclusive flow of state benefits and has broadened their participation in political processes.

Despite these gains, the transformation cannot be interpreted as a ‘social revolution’, as Harriss et al. (2010) caution (p.58). A crucial limitation remains in the persistent inequality in resource ownership. As Harriss-White (2016) notes, “Dalits have struggled successfully against oppressive relations of patronage, but less successfully over the acquisition of land” (p.489).

## **2.5 Role of the State and Social Policies**

The role of state intervention and social welfare policies by national, sub-national and local governments has been crucial in bringing positive changes to rural India. This is particularly evident in village studies from Kerala and Tamil Nadu, where state action has significantly reshaped rural social and economic relations. In Kerala, ‘public action’—including land

reforms and a suite of associative welfare measures—brought radical changes in rural power structures and improved the quality of life for the rural masses (Ramakumar, 2006). In Tamil Nadu, similar improvements occurred even without large-scale land reforms, driven instead by welfare-oriented governance and the competitive populism of political parties (Srinivasan, 2015).

Studies have consistently emphasised the transformative role of government investments in infrastructure—especially electricity, irrigation, water supply and education—in improving rural livelihoods (Srinivasan, 2015; Iyer, 2016; Carswell et al., 2016). The state’s commitment to expanding education has yielded wider social benefits, including enhanced employment opportunities and shifts in aspirations (Rao and Nair, 2003; Ramakumar, 2006). Carswell et al. (2016), for instance, highlight how Tamil Nadu’s efforts to ensure school enrolment have significantly raised education levels in rural areas.

A key social welfare intervention frequently discussed in village studies is the Public Distribution System (PDS). While its impact varies across regions, many studies highlight how subsidised food grains have altered class dynamics by reducing workers' dependence on landowners, thereby enhancing their bargaining power (Rai, 2018; Yadu, 2022). In a Maharashtra village, for example, Rai (2018) found that PDS access enabled labourers to reject exploitative terms of employment, as they were no longer compelled to work solely for food or survival wages.

This shift aligns with earlier findings, such as those of da Corta and Venkateswarlu (1999), who noted that state policies helped male workers escape bonded labour, weakening employers’ control and, in some cases, enabling independent ventures.

More recent village studies have focused on the transformative impact of the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MGNREGS). The scheme has reshaped rural economic relations by raising rural wage levels and generating employment for both men and women across different states (Jeyaranjan, 2011; Pankaj and Tankha, 2010). Its social implications are equally significant, particularly for lower castes, by expanding their ability to make choices, negotiate with dominant castes, and challenge

entrenched hierarchies (Carswell and De Neve, 2014). MGNREGS also shows potential for reducing gender wage disparities and has even disrupted traditional work roles, such as cowherding, by offering alternative livelihood options (Pankaj and Tankha, 2010; Otten and Simpson, 2016).

Comparative studies from different states reveal that the effectiveness of welfare systems depends greatly on collective action. In Tamil Nadu, decentralised mobilisation across caste, class and gender lines has strengthened public service delivery through sustained local pressure (Srinivasan, 2015). In contrast, in states like Uttar Pradesh, sharp social divisions—particularly along caste and religious lines—have weakened collective action, resulting in inadequate and declining public services (Himanshu and Stern, 2016).

The delivery of public services is also shaped by the social constitution of the state, which is often vulnerable to elite capture. Das Gupta (2019) documents how dominant farmers obstructed the implementation of a canal irrigation scheme in her study village. However, where lower castes or marginalised groups are able to effectively engage with the state, they are more likely to secure access to public resources. Studies further highlight how welfare schemes like PDS and MGNREGS are often mediated by caste and class hierarchies, with elite groups disproportionately controlling access and benefits (Anderson et al., 2015; Vikol, 2016; Roy, 2015).

### **3. Towards a conclusion: taking stock of rural transformation in India**

While India's development trajectory is marked by diversity, longitudinal and comparative village studies reveal some common structural features of rural transformation. At the core lies a deep and protracted agrarian crisis. Agriculture has become increasingly unviable for the majority of cultivators, especially small and marginal farmers, as rising input costs, ecological fragility, and market vulnerabilities have eroded its economic base. It is difficult to imagine structural transformation unfolding when agriculture sector in particular and rural economy in general is in a state of distress.

Instead, what we see is a process of deagrarianisation, where labour is moving away from farming without any remarkable rise in productivity or the emergence of a dynamic rural

nonfarm economy. The growth of the nonfarm sector in the country is largely marked by casual and insecure employment, often found in low productivity work such as urban construction. This kind of transition is not only far from what is ideally imagined in theories of structural change, but it is also uneven, fragmented, and shaped by social institutions.

Nonetheless, this shift has brought about some positive changes. Many village studies document a weakening of traditional forms of labour bondage, greater mobility for the working poor, and the erosion of extreme forms of caste-based discrimination in rural social relations. For many Dalit and landless households, migration and welfare policies such as MGNREGS and the Public Distribution System have expanded their bargaining power and capacity to assert dignity. However, these gains remain fragile and uneven, often dependent on local political configurations and the effectiveness of public service delivery.

Importantly, this transformation is gendered and exclusionary. Women in general continue to be concentrated in low-paid agricultural work and remain largely excluded from the more remunerative nonfarm sector. Emerging evidence also points to caste-based exclusion in access to better-quality nonfarm opportunities, where dominant castes often control entry into skilled and stable employment through different forms of capital they possess. Moreover, Women and marginalised caste groups continue to face significant barriers in accessing land and other critical resources necessary for economic advancement.

On the whole, what is unfolding in rural India today is not structural transformation, but a process of deagrarianisation shaped by social and economic divisions. To move toward a genuinely inclusive rural transformation, it is not enough to simply enable labour mobility across sectors. There is a need to revitalise agriculture, expand gainful nonfarm employment, and tackle deep-rooted social hierarchies, all of which call for active state involvement. This will require going beyond the limits of the current policy environment and placing renewed emphasis on equity and redistribution.

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