



## **Changing Agrarian Social Relations in Contemporary Rural India**

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### **Abstract**

The changing agrarian social relations in contemporary rural India reflect a significant transformation influenced by economic liberalization, technological advancements, land reforms, and globalization. Traditionally, rural India was characterized by caste-based landownership and labour hierarchies, where upper-caste landlords controlled agricultural production, and lower-caste labourers had limited access to resources. However, the introduction of mechanization, rural employment diversification, market-driven farming, and migration trends has reshaped these traditional structures. The Green Revolution and neoliberal policies have led to the commercialization of agriculture, benefiting large landowners while marginalizing small and landless farmers. Additionally, rural-to-urban migration has altered household structures and labour patterns, shifting many agricultural workers into non-farm employment. Women's increasing role in agriculture, despite lacking land rights, highlights gender disparities in the rural economy. Furthermore, corporate farming, contract agriculture, and climate change continue to influence rural livelihoods, often increasing financial vulnerability. While government policies like MGNREGA and land redistribution efforts have provided some relief, agrarian distress remains a significant concern. This study examines the shifting class and caste dynamics, labour transitions, and the socio-economic impact of these changes, offering insights into how contemporary agrarian relations are evolving. Understanding these transitions is crucial for formulating inclusive policies that address inequalities, ensure sustainable rural development, and create resilient agrarian economies in India's rapidly transforming landscape.

**Keywords:** Agrarian Social Relations, Rural Employment, Land Ownership, Economic Liberalization, Sustainable Development.



## **Introduction**

There are the transformations due to economic liberalization, technological advancements, and shifting land ownership patterns. Traditional structures, which were largely defined by caste-based landholding and labour systems, have been gradually reshaped by market-driven forces, state policies, and rural industrialization. The decline of feudalistic landlord-tenant relationships, the rise of commercial farming, and increasing rural-to-urban migration have altered power dynamics within villages. While land reforms and government interventions have aimed to create more equitable land distribution, disparities in land ownership and access to resources persist, reinforcing socio-economic hierarchies. Mechanization and the adoption of modern agricultural techniques have reduced dependency on manual labour, impacting the livelihoods of marginalized communities, particularly landless labourers and small farmers. These shifts have contributed to both economic empowerment and social marginalization, creating a complex rural landscape where traditional and modern agrarian structures coexist.

Another crucial factor in changing agrarian social relations is the role of rural employment diversification and the increasing influence of global agricultural markets. Many small and marginal farmers, unable to sustain themselves solely through farming, are engaging in non-agricultural occupations such as construction work, rural entrepreneurship, and service-based employment. Government schemes such as the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) have provided alternative livelihood options, reducing absolute dependence on agriculture. However, this transition has also led to distress migration, leaving rural communities fragmented and altering traditional family and social structures. Women's participation in agriculture and allied sectors has risen, yet they often face wage discrimination and limited land ownership rights. Furthermore, climate change, unpredictable monsoons, and environmental degradation pose new challenges to agrarian stability, compelling farmers to adopt sustainable and resilient agricultural practices. Understanding these evolving social relations in rural India is crucial for formulating inclusive policies that address disparities, ensure equitable resource distribution, and promote sustainable rural development.



Historically Indian agrarian social relations have been moulded by land ownership patterns, caste hierarchies and traditional patterns of labour structure. Feudal landlord-tenant relationships dominated the economic life of the rural economy; landlords had great power over what was produced on the land and agricultural workers were often under exploitative conditions. After independence, the Indian government introduced several land reform and tenancy laws, intended to redistribute opportunities of land and combat inequality but, in practice have ensured that various disparities in land ownership and economic power persist. Economic liberalization, technology and state led rural development programmes in the decades to eliminate the traditional farming system and the development capitalist agriculture. As a consequence of the shift towards market driven agriculture and rural industrialization social relationships in villages have been restructured and the manner in which land, labour, and capital relate to one another in contemporary India.

This study is important for is the ability to analyse how these transformations changed rural livelihoods, class structures, and social mobility. Rural population growth, maturing rural to urban migration and expanding non agriculture employment and rising participation of women in agriculture warrant the study of evolving agrarian social structure. Government policies, corporate farming, contract agriculture and globalization are also examined as means to examine the power relations in rural communities. Additionally, other issues like climate change, environmental degradation, and sustainability of small farmers have brought new dimensions to the agrarian challenges. Through an examination of these factors, this research contributes to our understanding of contemporary rural India, by highlighting changes that are ongoing and by providing policy inputs to enable inclusive and sustainable rural development. These findings will be useful for policy makers, researchers and practitioners for rural development who are working to end inequalities and foster agrarian resilience in a context where the socio-economic landscape is changing at an unprecedented pace.

### **Historical Overview of Agrarian Social Relations in India**

The pattern of land ownership, caste hierarchy and customary labour structure have historically determined agrarian social relations in India. The agrarian system in pre colonized India was mostly based on a feudal system with the kings, zamindars and the village elites holding the land



and the peasants and the labourers were subjected to their collection. Land ownership and the assignment of the role in the occupational hierarchy were frequently determined by certificate of the jati (caste) system, with lower-caste communities often restricted to work s in the agricultural fields and upper castes owning land and wealth. Under British colonial rule, the Permanent Settlement of 1793 aggravated inequalities through usurpation of land rights and their concentration in the hands of the landlords who proceeded to exploit peasants. Subsistence farming declined, and frequent famines and agrarian distress became a part of the colonial economy due to promotion of cash crop farming for export. British also introduced Ryotwari and Mahalwari systems as the revenue relationship between the government and cultivators where cultivators usually ended indebted more often.

After independence, the Indian government attempted to change the agrarian structure through land reforms and tenancy laws so as to redistribute the land to landless farmers and removing zamindari (landlordism). Although some states were partially successful with land reform, structural inequalities continued to exist and wealthy farmers managed to retain their land through legal loopholes. The turning point in the history of agriculture came with the Green Revolution of the 1960s and 70s, bringing highyield crop varieties, mechanization and chemical fertilizers, thereby raising productivity, but it also created a gulf between well off and poor farmers. In due course of time, economic liberalisation (1991), the rise of rural industrialization and globalization altered the agrarian social relations, tending to pull out labour from conventional agriculture to non-agricultural employment. The points that the new agrarian structure has reached are varied: it is a mix of capitalist agriculture, contract farming, declining importance of the land-based occupations and this has made evident new power dynamics and transformations of rural India. Thus, it is important to explain this historic trajectory if one aims to analyse the current or future problems of agrarian communities.

### **Research Problem**

Economic, political and technological changes have transformed agrarian social structure in rural India. Agriculture, as the main occupation, and a basis of caste based social hierarchy was traditionally linked with land ownership determining economic and social status. Nevertheless, with the coming of economic liberalization, mechanization, market-oriented agriculture, land reforms and rural to urban migration, these traditional structures have got transformed in new class and caste



dynamics, labour relations, and livelihood patterns. However, these changes fail to address a number of important concerns. What have been the consequences of these transformation movements on landless labourers, small and marginal farmers as well as women in agriculture? What has been the extent of rural employment diversification and thereby reducing agrarian dependence? How has the world around it been affected by globalization affecting local agricultural practice and access to markets? Furthermore, government policies, rural distress and the role of corporate farming in redefining power structures is still under debate among the researchers. This study aims to understand these evolving agrarians' social relation; the opportunities as well the challenges for contemporary rural India as it tries to transform from traditional agrarian society into the modern rural economy.

### **Factors Driving Changes in Agrarian Social Relations**

Having multiple economic, technological and policy related factors have transformed agrarian social relations in India, which have changed traditional power structures and livelihoods in rural areas. Economic liberalization and market-oriented agriculture is perhaps one of the most important factors as farming has been brought from subsistence base to a commercially oriented production. This has involved a change in patterns of ownership with the integration of contract farming, agribusiness and corporate investment in agriculture, making small and marginal farmers victim of large-scale farming operations. The population has also increased and inheritance laws mean land has been fragmented into tiny pieces, rendering a small-scale farming destined to fail, leaving farmers with no choice but to engage in wage labour or migration. The mechanization of agriculture and the use of tractors, irrigation systems and other mechanized tools have reduced the demand for manual labour and dampened the prospects for the landless labourers and especially marginalized communities who survive on such work.

Government intervention in terms of policies and rural development programmes, including the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA), are another key driver of change by creating substitute employment opportunities and thereby restricting rural dependence on agriculture. In addition, while state support for subsidized inputs, minimum support prices (MSPs), and credit schemes has been uneven, only larger farmers have been aided with smallholders vulnerable to debt and crop failures. At the same time, rural to urban migration has also transformed agrarian relations whereby youth and marginalized workers have to go and look for a



place in cities to work, thereby leading to labour shortages and changes in traditional family structures. Furthermore, climate change and environmental degradation, such as erratic monsoons, land degradation and water scarcity, have also distorted traditional farming methods to the point that farmers have had to adopt new sustainable practices or leave farming all together. Women's growing participation in agricultural activities, often as heads of farming households in the absence of men who went for work elsewhere, has brought women's farm work in the foreground and changing gender role, but women are discriminated as regards wage and have little rights to ownership of farmland. The phenomenal rise of capitalism through the primitive accumulation of agriculture, the diversification of rural livelihoods and the transformation of caste hierarchies has set new trends in contemporary India with regard to its agrarian structure.

### **Changing Class and Caste Dynamics in Rural India**

The class and the caste dynamics have undergone merges transformation, altering the dynamics in agrarian social structure of rural India thereby transforming the power hierarchies. Land ownership was historically largely concentrated in the hands of upper castes landlords and the landless labourers consisted mainly from scheduled castes and scheduled tribes working under highly exploitative conditions. Legal loopholes, bureaucratic inefficiencies, and elite resistance had limited the success of the post-independence land reform movements, created to redistribute the land. But economic liberalization and the Green Revolution led to the rise of a new class of capitalist farmers, most notably in the middle caste groups, the Jats, Yadavs and Patels, who started accruing both economic and political power. With growing mechanization and marketization in agriculture, landless labourers mostly drawn from Scheduled Castes (SCs) and Scheduled Tribes (STs) have been displaced and have moved out of villages and migrated to cities and got engaged in various forms of informal employment. Although the caste hierarchy still exists, diversified economic opportunities offer an escape from the need to remain directly beholden to upper caste landlords.

Despite these changes, caste discrimination continues to permeate rural India in a manner which disadvantages those most socially disadvantaged of the people to access to land, credit, education and employment. Some lower caste groups have used reservation policies and affirmative action programmes to get government jobs and educational opportunities, accessing social mobility and creating a marginalised middle class. However, this upper caste dominance continues to exist in



many rural areas which are further backed by caste-based network, marriage practices and political affiliations. The traditional landlord-tenant system has not slipped into oblivion; the caste inequalities have not evaporated, but have been transformed into new forms of exclusion, of economic and political nature. It has led to agrarian distress; farmer protests and resources being privatized with small and marginal farmers fighting against large agribusinesses and corporate power. These women from lower castes, who had historically been limited to participate in agricultural labour, are now part of self-help groups (SHGs) and micro finance initiatives, which not only break the patriarchal and the caste based economic structures but also in the process helping in shaping their own representations. Though the economic growth and political awareness have increased caste mobility, conflicts over land, resources, and representation indicate how class and caste relations in rural India are complex and changing.

### **Rural Employment Diversification and Migration**

The employment diversification and increased migration have led to the significant decline of the hitherto traditional dependence on agriculture as the primary livelihood source in rural India. In terms of economic life, in the past, it revolved around subsistence farming where the distribution of labour was determined on basis of caste and people in different occupations. Yet, regardless of these, rural populations have sought other sources of incomes due to land fragmentation, decline in agricultural profitability, mechanization, and climate change. Many small and marginally, farmers, not proportionately capable to live by themselves only on farming, have shifted to non-agricultural sectors of constructions, transportation, out lets, and manufacture. The Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) and other government employment schemes have given alternative income options through providing wage labour to rural households. Economic diversification has also contributed to the growth of rural self-employment and cottage industries through microfinance of which women and lower caste groups can access independent sources of income.

Rural employment shifts have also tended to exhibit the characteristic of migration, be it seasonal or permanent. It is economic necessity, lack of viable agricultural income, and the aspiration of improving the quality of life by moving from the rural to urban areas that largely drive rural-to-urban migration. In young men, migration often goes to cities to work in construction, factory labour,



or service industries, and in women, domestic labour and informal sector work. Seasonal migration (in which workers temporarily move out of farms during lean agricultural periods) has also become common and altered patterns of rural social structure and the dynamics of families. Though migration has raised incomes and facilitated social mobility, it has also led to the creation of problems of job insecurity, living conditions in the urban areas and the feminization of agriculture where in case of absence of male family members, women are left to manage farms. Moreover, the COVID 19 pandemic revealed weaknesses in migration patterns whereby there were massive reverse migration streams that prompted the need for strengthening rural employment policies. With the rural development continuing to diversify the rural employment, future strategies should concentrate on raising the skill top level, beefing up of rural industries and guaranteeing a better social security for migrant labourers to form a well-balanced and resilient rural economy.

### **Globalization and Its Influence on Rural Agriculture**

The impact that the process of globalization has made on rural agriculture of India is tremendous, altering traditional farming practices, opening the market to new opportunities and changing the economic structures. This introduces opportunities and challenges of rural farmers integrating Indian agriculture into global market. While one of the major benefits of globalization is the growth of export-oriented agriculture which opens a scene to farmers to grow high value crops such as fruits, vegetables and spices to sell to the world markets. Modern irrigation techniques (Foreign Direct Investment (FDI)), multinationals agribusiness corporations, technological advancement among others, have introduced genetically modified crops, improved supply chains, and increased the productivity and efficiency level. Furthermore, through e-commerce and digital platforms farmers have been able to eliminate middlemen, enabling direct market and thus selling their crop at affordable prices. But these benefits have not been equally distributed; mainly benefiting large scale farmers with access to capital and resources whereas small and marginal farmers struggle to compete with growing corporate economy of agriculture.

Technological change has gone hand in hand with increased vulnerabilities in rural agriculture. Agriculture is becoming more risky due to removal of agricultural subsidies, volatile global commodity prices and dependence on multinational seed and pesticide companies, especially for small farmers. The replacement of the traditional farming systems, which were based on local





seed varieties and organic practices by the commercialized, input intensive agriculture has resulted in the soil degradation, biodiversity loss and the environment problems. Besides, agrarian distress has been worsened by globalization which has resulted in growing indebtedness of small farmers as the cost of inputs increases and the prices in markets fluctuate making rural indebtedness and farmers' suicides common. Corporate contract farming and leasing of land to agribusinesses are becoming more pervasive and have further marginalized smallholder farmers, diminishing their bargaining power. With globalization changing rural agriculture, it becomes imperative for sustainable farming policies, fair trade practices, and strengthened rural support systems to accompany it so that they are not left behind in the global economy.

### **Conclusion**

The transformation of agrarian social relations in contemporary rural India is a complex and ongoing process influenced by economic, technological, and socio-political changes. Traditional agrarian structures, once dominated by landlord-tenant relationships and caste-based labour divisions, have been significantly altered by land reforms, mechanization, and market-driven agriculture. The rise of commercial farming, contract agriculture, and rural employment diversification has provided new economic opportunities but has also led to the marginalization of small farmers, landless labourers, and women in agriculture. Rural-to-urban migration, driven by agrarian distress and declining farm incomes, has reshaped family structures, social mobility, and labour dynamics, often leaving rural women to manage farms while men seek non-agricultural jobs in urban centres. Globalization and corporate involvement in agriculture have further deepened inequalities, favouring large landowners while increasing risks for smallholders due to price fluctuations and market dependency. Despite these challenges, government policies, rural employment schemes, and cooperative farming models offer potential solutions to address rural distress and inequality. However, for sustainable agrarian transformation, inclusive policies ensuring equitable land distribution, financial support for small farmers, and environmental sustainability must be prioritized. The evolving class and caste dynamics, gender roles, and livelihood patterns in rural India highlight the need for a balanced approach that integrates technological progress with social justice and economic equity. Moving forward, addressing the structural disparities in rural agriculture will be crucial for ensuring long-term agrarian resilience, rural livelihoods, and sustainable development.



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