

# CLASSES AND CLASS DIFFERENTIATION IN INDIA'S COUNTRYSIDE

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**Abstract:** Central to an understanding of the agrarian question is the identification of the nature of classes that arise on the basis of the development of capitalism in agriculture. We need to understand classes in order to understand social and economic inequality, the nature of the state in India, and the ways in which the state intervenes in the countryside. In identifying classes, our task is two-fold: on the one hand, to establish certain general theoretical categories and criteria in order to distinguish classes in the countryside, and, on the other hand, to identify classes in situ, that is, in the specific agro-economic and social circumstances that prevail in different regions and localities.

**Key words:** agrarian relations; peasant differentiation; the state in India; agricultural labor

## Introduction

A village is a social complex of classes and other social strata, and the Indian village, in particular, is a swamp of inequity. When applied to India, the term “village community”—at least insofar as the term “community” is taken to mean a social group sharing common essential characteristics and interests—is a fiction. Capitalism and the market, particularly when superimposed on the kinds of backward social relations that persist in India, are profoundly unequalizing.

Central to an understanding of the agrarian question is the identification of the nature of classes that arise on the basis of the development of capitalism in agriculture. We need to understand classes in order to understand social and economic inequality. We need also to understand classes in the countryside in

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order to understand the nature of the state in India, and the ways in which the state intervenes in the countryside. In identifying classes, our task is two-fold: on the one hand, to establish certain general theoretical categories and criteria in order to distinguish classes in the countryside, and, on the other hand, to identify classes *in situ*, that is, in the specific agro-economic and social circumstances that prevail in different regions and localities.

The three main sets of criteria that have classically been used to differentiate classes in the countryside have been: the ownership and control by households of the means of production (particularly, though not exclusively, land); the relative use of different forms of family and hired labor (particularly, though not exclusively, in the process of production in agriculture), and the surplus that a household is able to generate in a working year.<sup>2</sup> It is immediately clear, of course, that these are factors that have changed greatly over time and vary greatly over space, and are influenced by circumstances within the village and without.

No serial data exist in India from official, semi-official or other sources on household incomes (for recent critiques of the database on rural household incomes, see Bakshi 2011 and Swaminathan and Rawal 2011). The existing serial data on household assets, particularly land owned and operated, are incomplete and unreliable (for a recent critique of the database, see Chavan and Ramakumar 2008); and there are no regular sources of data on the different forms of labor that a household employs and in which it participates (for a similar critique, see Dhar 2011).

Detailed studies of class formation in rural India thus require field-based study. I have been engaged with other colleagues for the past few years in a project on agrarian relations in India (PARI). This project, planned for the period 2006–13, involves detailed census-type household surveys in villages across diverse agro-ecological regions of India.<sup>3</sup> The number of villages surveyed as part of PARI is now 20, for which data have been analyzed for about half. While no aggregation of case studies can claim to be representative of the country as a whole, these do, we believe, give us an insight into methodologies and into on-the-ground developments in different regions of village India.

With these notes of caution in mind, we consider certain broad criteria for the identification of classes in the countryside

## Landlords

### Socio-economic characteristics

Landlord households own the most land and generally the best land in most Indian villages, and the members of landlord households do not participate in the major agricultural operations on the land. Their land is cultivated either by means of the

labor power of hired workers, or by tenants, to whom land is leased out on fixed rent or share. Landlord families are, in general, historical participants in the system of land monopoly in the village. Landlords dominate not just economic, but also traditional social and modern political hierarchies in the village. It is essential to remember that—to quote E. M. S. Namboodiripad—“landlordism is not only an economic category but also social and political” (Ramachandran 1998).

Capitalist farmers also do not participate in the major manual operations on the land. The main difference between these capitalist farmers and landlords is that the former did not traditionally belong to the class of landlords. Some of them came from rich peasant or upper-middle peasant families that had a tradition of family labor, whose members, in fact, actually worked at major manual tasks even in the present or previous generation. Such families invested the surplus they gained from agriculture or other activities—including moneylending, salaried employment, trade and business—in land. Agriculture was or became the focal point of their activity, and the basis of their economic power.

Capitalist farmers of this type may be of the traditionally dominant caste. They may also be from castes designated officially as Backward Classes. In any case, although their position in the ritual hierarchy may not be equivalent to the traditional dominant or ritually “superior” castes, big capitalist farmers are also entrenched in positions of social and political dominance.

We term the biggest landholders in this category “new capitalist landlords.” Their landholdings are in the same size-bracket as that of the landlords, as are their incomes and overall ownership of the means of production and other assets.

The basis of the power of the landlords and big capitalist farmers is their control over land. Even where the main source of income is not agriculture, and even where landlords are in debt and running a balance-sheet loss, land is still the foundation of their power. However, land is not the only resource controlled by landlords and big capitalist farmers, nor is it their only source of wealth. Many are also involved in lucrative business activities, including, for example, moneylending, grain mills, dairying, trade and speculation in foodgrain and other agricultural, horticultural and silvicultural commodities, cinema theatres, petrol pumps, lodging houses, transport, the sale and lease of agricultural machinery, receiving incomes from financial assets, and so on. Landlord families seek entry into the institutions of state power—*panchayati raj* institutions (elected institutions of village-, block- and district-level government) and the higher legislature, the bureaucracy and police, and the legal profession—and are generally the first to take advantage of opportunities for higher education and modern organized-sector employment.

This class is very clearly the main pillar of the class power of the state in the villages. It follows, then, that it is the mainstay of the power of political parties of

the ruling classes in the villages, and the class to which all parties (other than those of the Left) turn to deliver them the rural vote.

### The reversal of land reform as policy

Genuine agrarian reform alters class relations in favor of the peasantry and rural manual workers, frees demand constraints and opens up home markets in the countryside, and provides a basis for broad-based productive investment. The promise of land reform was part of our freedom movement, a promise never implemented in practice by the ruling classes in the years following Independence.<sup>4</sup>

Despite the fact that India has an abundance—an overabundance—of land reform laws, and despite the popular misconception that land concentration has been broken up, estimates from official data show the chasm between potential and performance in India.

With regard to inequality in the distribution of land holdings, the Gini coefficients for ownership and operational holdings computed from National Sample Survey (NSS) data show very high *levels* of inequality, and actually show an *increase* in inequality between 1960–61 and the most recent data (Table 1).

Table 1 Gini coefficients for the distribution of operational and ownership holdings of land, India, 1960–61 to 2003–04

<i>Type of holding</i>	<i>1960–61</i>	<i>1980–81</i>	<i>2003–04</i>
Operational holdings	0.58	0.63	0.62
Ownership holdings	0.73	0.71	0.74

Notes: These are official estimates of Gini coefficients. Ownership holdings in these estimates refer to ownership of any type of land including homestead land. Gini coefficient of ownership of agricultural land in 2003–04 was about 0.76 (Rawal 2008).

Source: National Sample Survey Organization, cited in Ramachandran and Rawal (2010).

Working with a ceiling of 25 acres a household, Surjya Kanta Mishra showed that “no less than 63 million acres of land would have been available in the mid-1950s and early 1960s for distribution among landless and land-poor farmer households” (Mishra 2007). The reality, according to the Annual Report of the Ministry of Rural Development 2006–07, is that only 4.89 million acres of land were distributed over the first 60 years of Independence (Mishra 2007), and more than 20 percent of that land was in West Bengal. A recent estimate by Vikas Rawal, based on the Survey on Land and Livestock Holdings (2002–03) by the NSSO (National Sample Survey Organization) suggests that the *current* extent of ceiling-surplus land is more than three times the extent of land that has *ever* been redistributed under land reform (Rawal 2008).

Our village-level data too show continuing concentration of land and other forms of wealth in the hands of the rural rich (for more information on land inequality, see Ramachandran and Rawal 2010). Tables 2 and 3 do not take up the class of landlords and big capitalist farmers as such, but compare the concentration of wealth in the hands of the richest 5 percent of the population with the aggregate holdings of the poorest 50 percent of the population. The villages, as mentioned, cover different States and agricultural and socio-economic types. The tables show extraordinary levels of concentration of land and other assets.

In India today, land reform as conceived during the Independence movement and in the first decades after Independence has been jettisoned by official policy, and reversed in certain areas in favor of counter-reform. Legislation is being considered and has been passed that raises ceilings to levels that undermine the objectives of land ceiling laws and make absentee farming by large owners and corporations a certainty. Such policies reduce the extent of land for redistribution, accelerate the loss of land by poor peasants and worsen inequalities in the distribution of land.<sup>5</sup>

This reversal of land reform—and its rejection as public policy—is not only an Indian phenomenon. Elsewhere in the world, in Latin America and Africa (South Africa, prominently), and in parts of Asia (the Philippines, prominently), the World Bank has pushed for what it calls “market-based land reform.”<sup>6</sup> It has also championed the reversal of all collective and public forms of cultivation in the European and Central Asian countries that were formerly part of the Soviet Union. This formulation (“market-based land reform”) itself is, of course, absurd: land reform is by its very nature a *non*-market intervention, undertaken by governments and people because markets cannot deliver that redistribution of land and assets that is essential for progressive social change. “Market-based land reform” is thus a contradiction in terms, and a cover-up for the abandonment of genuine land reform.

It is of some interest that there is now a literature on developments in Latin America that parallel developments in India. A very interesting recent article on agrarian relations in Ecuador illustrates points of relevance to India (Bretón 2008). First, the 1980s were a decade in which the ruling classes finally gave up even the slogan of land reform in favor of “integrated rural development.” In other words, in ruling-class ideology, small-scale self-employment schemes were made to stand in for the more basic resolution of the agrarian question represented by agrarian reform.

Secondly, the main institutional instruments for this change were to be the local ruling classes, multilateral agencies and NGOs, which, in turn, worked to direct the development process away from basic institutional change and to detach issues of democratic local government and income-enhancement from those of agrarian reform for all rural working people.

Thirdly, while radical agrarian movements need to pay special attention to the deep-rooted social and economic consequences of cumulative historical

Table 2 Share of agricultural land owned by the 5% of households with the largest ownership holdings and the 50% with the smallest ownership holdings, selected villages in %

Serial number	Village	Year of survey	Share of agricultural land owned by	
			top 5%	bottom 50%
1	ANANTHAVARAM, Guntur district, south coastal Andhra Pradesh	2006	54	0
2	BUKKACHERLA, Anantapur district, Rayalaseema region, south-west Andhra Pradesh	2006	33	17
3	KOTHAPALLE, Karimnagar district, North Telangana region, north Andhra Pradesh	2006	41	1
4	HAREVLI, Bijnor district, Western Uttar Pradesh	2006	39	2
5	MAHATWAR, Ballia district, Eastern Uttar Pradesh	2006	40	6
6	WARWAT KHANDERAO, Buldhana district, Vidarbha region, Maharashtra	2007	35	10
7	NIMSHIRGAON, Kolhapur district, Marathwada region, Maharashtra	2007	24	5
8	DUNGARIYA, Adivasi village, south Udaipur district, Rajasthan	2007	23	18
9	25 F GULABEWALA, Sri Ganganagar district, Gang Canal region, Rajasthan	2007	43	0
10	GHRSONDI, Gwalior district, Madhya Pradesh	2008	44	6
11	ALABUJANAHALLI, Mandya district, Karnataka	2009	26	8
12	SRESANDRA, Kolar district, Karnataka	2009	31	16
13	ZHAPUR, Gulbarga district, Karnataka	2009	49	2
14	DHAMAR, Rohtak district, Haryana	Dec 2001–Jan 2002	36	4
15	BIRDHANA, Fatehabad district, Haryana	May 2003	74	0
16	PALAKURICHI, Nagapattinam district, Tamil Nadu	2004	74	0
17	SATHANUR, Thanjavur district, Tamil Nadu	2004	39	0

Note: Agricultural land includes net sown area and current fallows.

Sources: PARI survey data; Rawal (2002); and Surjit (2008).

Table 3 Share of value of assets (land, and other productive assets, and all assets) owned by the 5% of households with the largest assets holdings and the 50% with the smallest assets holdings, selected villages in %

Serial number	Village	Year of survey	Share of land and other productive assets owned by		Share of total assets owned by	
			top 5%	bottom 50%	top 5%	bottom 50%
1	Ananthavaram (AP: south coastal)	2006	65	1	60	2
2	Bukkacherla (AP: Rayalaseema)	2006	46	8	42	10
3	Kothapalle (AP: north Telangana)	2006	54	5	45	9
4	Harevli (UP: western)	2006	45	2	43	3
5	Mahatwar (UP: eastern)	2006	43	6	38	9
6	Nimshirgaon (Mah: Kolhapur)	2007	41	7	41	9
7	Warwat Khanderao (Mah: Vidarbha)	2007	66	0	26	6
8	25 F Gulabewala (Raj: Sri Ganganagar)	2007	39	0	35	0.6

Note: Land includes all the agricultural, non-agricultural, and homestead land.

Source: PARI survey data.

discrimination against *specific* social groups (the indigenous people of the Americas, Dalits and Adivasis in India, and so on), an important task of such movements is to unite *all* sections of the working people in the struggle to resolve the agrarian question. Ruling-class-led agrarian policy in the present era has been divisive rather than unifying with respect to the different component parts of the working population.

## Manual Workers

### Socio-economic characteristics

At the other end of the spectrum of classes involved in agricultural production is the class of manual workers, whose major income comes from working as hired workers on the land of others and at tasks outside crop production.

In general, manual workers work on a wide range of tasks, and the set of skills necessary for most tasks in, say, a village are found among most manual laborers in that village. In recent years a new development in certain areas of crop diversification is the emergence of groups of agricultural workers with specialized skills—for example, betel-leaf workers in coastal Andhra Pradesh and elsewhere, grape workers in Theni district in south-western Tamil Nadu, flower (including chrysanthemum and orchid) workers in Kolhapur district in Maharashtra, fresh-water fishery workers on the east coast, and so on. Such workers spend all or most of the working year at the specialized tasks (and in some cases, run a closed shop vis-à-vis the entry of miscellaneous workers into these jobs). Taking the country as a whole, however, such specialization is a very limited phenomenon.

This section of the article is termed “manual workers” rather than “agricultural workers” (with another sub-title for “nonfarm” workers) because it is no longer possible (nor particularly helpful) to separate a *class* of non-agricultural workers from the larger pool of manual workers—that is, to recognize rural farm and non-farm workers as discrete categories—in most villages. The typical rural manual worker today can be characterized more as a “miscellaneous worker in rural society” than as solely an agricultural worker.

Most manual workers are casual workers who work at daily-rated tasks or for piece-rates. Some, however, are annual workers: farm servants who do agricultural, non-agricultural and some domestic tasks for a single employer for a monthly wage (and generally on an annual contract).

Manual workers can also have other sources of income. These can include, for instance, animal husbandry, petty vending, domestic work and miscellaneous low-remuneration jobs in the private sector.

For historical reasons, in most regions, a majority or a large proportion of Dalit households and households belonging to other region-specific oppressed castes,

belong to the class of manual workers. Nevertheless, since manual work remains the rural occupation of last resort, manual labor tends also to be the most caste-heterogeneous class in village society.

How far does the agricultural labor force constitute a rural proletariat? In Marx, a proletariat is one who possesses a double freedom: he or she is free from ownership of the means of production, and free to sell their labor power to the employer of their choice.

A feature of India's agrarian history, and one of continuing relevance to production relations in agriculture, is that the creation of a propertyless labor force in Indian agriculture, a "specially repressed" class of agricultural laborers, considerably pre-dates capitalist relations in agriculture and the onset of colonial rule. Irfan Habib dates the emergence of agricultural labor as a separate class to the first millennium AD, the period that saw, he says, "the completion of the great division between the peasantry and landless labor." He says that this section of the people was "largely created out of the food-gatherers and forest folk who had already been converted into ostracized *jatis* [castes] during the five centuries before Christ" (Habib 1982: 21).<sup>7</sup>

Today, many manual workers are landless, the legacy both of historic exclusion from land ownership and of modern processes of differentiation. Manual workers may also cultivate, as owners or tenants, small plots of agricultural or homestead land, and it is often difficult to draw a clear line between this latter section of agricultural workers and the poorest sections of the peasantry. There are also workers, for instance, in Haryana or Sri Ganganagar district in Rajasthan, who combine in themselves features of share-tenant and long-term worker (called *siri* workers).<sup>8</sup> The extent to which manual laborers are landless (and the general degree of landlessness in village society) can, of course, vary widely. In general, landlessness among manual workers is higher in areas of relatively high irrigation (particularly surface irrigation) and high population density than in dry areas with low population densities (although there are interesting and important exceptions to the general rule).

To restate the proposition: a wage laborer or proletariat is a hired laborer who is propertyless and is free to sell his or her labor power to the employer of his or her choice. This is in contrast, for instance, to a bonded laborer, who, though a hired laborer all right, is unfree to choose his or her employer. In practice, the freedom of the wage laborer to sell his or her labor power is often subject to constraints, and between proletariat labor and the labor of dark bondage intervene many gradations, nuances. From the standpoint of the evolution of socio-economic relations, then, the crucial difference is that between the freedom of workers who can sell their labor power to the employers of their choice and the unfreedom of those who cannot.

A whole set of factors works towards the commoditization of labor power, towards impersonalizing the relationship between worker and employer and establishing

the freedom of the worker to sell her labor power to the employer of her choice. At the same time

combined with poverty and unemployment are other factors that work against the dissolution of unfreedom in employer-employee relations: the social and economic dominance of a small group of landlords and rich capitalist farmers; caste discrimination and the practice of untouchability; severe discrimination against women; indebtedness and usury; widespread illiteracy and the slow rate of spread of primary and secondary education among the poor, and especially among women and people of oppressed social groups; and in general the slow penetration of scientific culture in the daily lives of the people. (Ramachandran 1990)

### Issues of rural employment

The decline of public investment in agriculture, the decline in direct agricultural extension and information dissemination, and the consequent deceleration in agricultural growth have had a direct impact on the number of days of employment that a hired worker in rural India receives. So has the process of agricultural mechanization.

There are not good enough macro-data on the number of days of employment, agricultural and non-agricultural, per worker per year in India. Not only do the data from the Rural Labour Enquiries appear intuitively to be incorrect, but it is also well recognized that employment data from micro-studies show consistently lower volumes of employment than Rural Labour Enquiry data. There remain major conceptual, definitional and methodological reasons for this divergence; such divergence is also caused by the simple distortion of official statistical information.<sup>9</sup>

Across India, micro-studies show the average number of days of employment available to manual workers to be very low indeed. Illustrations are in Tables 4, 5 and 6.

Table 4 Manual worker households as a proportion of all households, selected villages in %

<i>Village, State</i>	<i>Year of survey</i>	<i>Proportion of manual worker household</i>
Ananthavaram (AP: south coastal)	2006	31
Bukkacherla (AP: Rayalaseema)	2006	24
Kothapalle (AP: north Telangana)	2006	25
Harevli (UP: western)	2006	40
Mahatwar (UP: eastern)	2006	12
Nimshirgaon (Mah: Kolhapur)	2007	45
Warwat Khanderao (Mah: Vidarbha)	2007	29
25 F Gulabewala (Raj: Ganganagar)	2007	47
Gharsondi (MP: Gwalior)	2008	29

Note: "Manual worker households" are households that gain 50% or more of total income from agricultural and non-agricultural laboring out.

Source: PARI survey data.

Table 5 Average annual number of days of employment obtained per manual worker in manual worker households, by sex, selected villages

<i>Village, State</i>	<i>Year of survey</i>	<i>Average number of days of employment</i>	
		Male	Female
Morazha (Kerala)	2000–01	69	42
Dhamar (Har)	Dec 2001–Jan 2002	103	44
Birdhana (Har)	May 2003	102	46
Ananthavaram (AP)	2006	92.0	71
Bukkacherla (AP)	2006	112	80
Kothapalle (AP)	2006	78	101
Harevli (UP)	2006	131	75
Mahatwar (UP)	2006	150	28
Nimshirgaon (Mah)	2007	104	114
Warwat Khanderao (Mah)	2007	86	103
25 F Gulabewala (Raj)	2007	114	51
Gharsondi (MP)	2008	96	65

Note: “Manual worker households” are households that gain 50% or more of total income from agricultural and non-agricultural laboring out.

Sources: Ramakumar (2003); Rawal (2002); and PARI survey data.

Table 6 Proportion of workers who gained employment for 180 days or more in a preceding year, in manual worker households, by sex, selected village, in %

<i>Village, State</i>	<i>Year of survey</i>	<i>No. of workers worked more than 180 days</i>			<i>Worker got more than 180 days employment in the proportion of all workers</i>		
		Male	Female	All	Male	Female	All
Ananthavaram (AP)	2006	55	8	63	12	2	8
Bukkacherla (AP)	2006	21	12	33	21	9	14
Kothapalle (AP)	2006	32	35	67	22	16	18
Harevli (UP)	2006	24	1	25	29	2	17
Mahatwar (UP)	2006	42	8	50	41	12	30
Nimshirgaon (Mah)	2007	56	39	95	14	18	16
Warwat Khanderao (Mah)	2007	21	18	39	11	10	10
25 F Gulabewala (Raj)	2007	20	0	20	18	0	7
Gharsondi (MP)	2008	18	7	25	16	9	13

Note: The figures do not include monthly and annual contract wage employment.

Source: PARI survey data.

An immediate caveat has to be entered here. The tables do not refer to the total number of days of all types of work undertaken by manual workers, but only to the days of work for which a worker receives a wage or wage-like payment. In particular, it does not include the time spent on self-employment in animal husbandry, in forms of other small-scale non-farm employment, in fuel- or water-collection, in collecting forest produce, in productive activity on homesteads, or other such activity.

Even with these qualifications, the average number of days of employment available to a male worker in a manual worker family in the villages we surveyed was about 101 days, and, for a woman, 84 days. In each village the proportion of workers who received more than 180 days of employment in a year was also low, with an average of 13 percent. This figure was much lower for women, ranging from zero in one village to a high of only 18 percent. A striking example of decline in the number of days of employment available to a working family comes from south coastal Andhra Pradesh. P. Sundarayya (1976) reported that an agricultural laborer family received, on average, 247 days of employment in a year. Our survey data showed that manual worker households in the same village, Ananthavaram, obtained an average of 195 days of employment in 2005–06.

We have seen, then, that the average number of days of paid employment available to a manual worker is low. Although there are many ways in which technological change can advance employment, the *prospects* for employment-enhancement today are disturbing indeed.<sup>10</sup>

### **Wage rates and incomes**

Wage rates vary widely, by region, by crop, and gender. Diverse types of time rates (daily, monthly, seasonal, and annual) and piece-rates (product piece-rates and area piece-rates) prevail, along with diverse combinations of wages that are paid in cash, in kind and in cash plus kind. Wages in kind take the form of payment in produce (grain, fodder, leaves) or part-payment in cooked food provided on the field. It is of note that there are villages where grain production predominates, but wages have become entirely monetized over the past two to three decades.

In general, rural wage rates are low (see Table 7). In all villages in the table, the gender gap in agricultural wages—mediated by a gender-specific division of labor in agricultural operations—remained very wide indeed.

High levels of unemployment, combined with low levels of wages, made it very difficult for a hired manual worker household to earn even the poverty-line level of income solely by means of wage labor. Table 8 shows that there were only two villages thus far in our survey program where an average per-capita income of Rs25 per day (at 2009–10 prices) was gained by members of manual labor households.

Table 7 Average agricultural wage rate per day for workers in manual worker households, by sex, selected villages in rupees, in 2009–10 prices

<i>Village, State</i>	<i>Year of survey</i>	<i>Average wage rate in agriculture</i>	
		Male	Female
Dhamar (Har)	Dec 2001–Jan 2002	94	74
Birdhana (Har)	May 2003	102	58
Ananthavaram (AP)	2006	131	66
Bukkacherla (AP)	2006	109	75
Kothapalle (AP)	2006	125	49
Harevli (UP)	2006	73	45
Mahatwar (UP)	2006	64	57
Nimshirgaon (Mah)	2007	112	59
Warwat Khanderao (Mah)	2007	72	57
25 F Gulabewala (Raj)	2007	76	53
Gharsondi (MP)	2008	81	75

Notes: Wages are deflated using consumer price index for rural laborers.

“Manual worker households” are households that gain 50% or more of total income from agricultural and non-agricultural laboring out.

Sources: Rawal (2002); and PARI survey data.

Table 8 Mean household per capita income per annum, manual worker households, selected villages in rupees, in 2009–10 prices

<i>Village, State</i>	<i>Year of survey</i>	<i>Mean per capita income</i>	
		Annual	Daily
Ananthavaram (AP: south coastal)	2006	7,035	19
Bukkacherla (AP: Rayalaseema)	2006	7,722	21
Kothapalle (AP: north Telangana)	2006	9,081	25
Harevli (UP: western)	2006	6,265	17
Mahatwar (UP: eastern)	2006	3,873	11
Nimshirgaon (Mah: Kolhapur)	2007	9,178	25
Warwat Khanderao (Mah: Vidarbha)	2007	6,074	17
25 F Gulabewala (Raj: Ganganagar)	2007	7,310	20
Gharsondi (MP: Gwalior)	2008	5,249	14

Notes: Wages are deflated using consumer price index for rural laborers.

“Manual worker households” are households that gain 50% or more of total income from agricultural and non-agricultural laboring out.

Source: PARI survey data.

A quick calculation from the villages we studied in Andhra Pradesh showed that if wages were to remain unchanged, the days of employment per household would need to increase substantially—to 335 days per household in the Rayalaseema village, 349 days in the south coastal village and 507 days in the north Telangana village—in order to reach even the official poverty-line level of income. Similar computations can be carried out for other States and regions.<sup>11</sup>

**Some comments on the gender composition of the labor force**

There appear to be a few noteworthy trends with regard to the gender composition of the labor force that have important implications for women's employment in agriculture and for the mobilization of women in agricultural workers' organizations. The first occurs in situations where men are able to take greater advantage than women of the opportunities for non-agricultural labor, consigning women to the drudgery of agricultural tasks. Here, there is a feminization of the agricultural labor force in three senses: first, the absolute number of female agricultural workers is higher than the number of male agricultural workers; secondly, the share of agricultural labor predominates over the share of non-agricultural labor in women's work profiles; and, thirdly, of the aggregate number of labor days worked by manual workers in agriculture, the major part is female labor. This is a trend that is consistent with the data from two of the villages that we studied in Andhra Pradesh, the Rayalaseema village and the north Telangana village.

The second trend is when, as more and more time-rated tasks are converted to piece-rates, and as piece-rates are monetized, crop operations are performed by large groups of workers among whom men predominate. Large groups of male contract-workers take over even those tasks, such as transplanting and harvesting, in which women predominated earlier. In this case, men outnumber women in the labor force, and male labor predominates in the aggregate number of days worked by all manual workers in agriculture. This hypothesis needs further study and confirmation, but is consistent with our data from the southern coastal Andhra village of Ananthavaram. It must be tested for other parts of India.

Thirdly, the only entirely new sectors in which we have seen an expansion of female labor absorption per hectare in recent times has been in new forms of non-cereal production, for instance in floriculture in southern Maharashtra. This is still a specialized and niche form of cultivation, however, and is not a large-scale enough an employer of female labor anywhere to make a significant difference to average annual employment to the *class* of manual workers. There has also been an increase in female labor absorption per hectare in cotton cultivation.<sup>12</sup>

Fourthly, and this is an important point when we consider female employment in large parts of India, traditional—and particularly socially- and caste-determined—impediments to the expansion of female work participation in manual labor remain, particularly among caste Hindu households.

There is an important and self-evident policy conclusion that emerges from the data on employment conditions among rural workers. It is that whether the village is one that is characterized by relatively advanced agriculture, or by drought-prone conditions, state-financed schemes that create employment in a range of productive tasks, farm and non-farm, are essential if the long periods of joblessness in a working person's year are to be filled.

## The Peasantry

Peasant households, whose members work on all or some of the major manual operations on the land, constitute the sector of petty producers that lies between landlords and big capitalist farmers on the one hand, and manual workers on the other. While peasants have shown great resilience as a social category, having existed continually under different historical social formations, the hallmark of the modern peasantry is its subjugation to the capitalist market.

Although the populist image of the peasantry is of a homogeneous rural group, it is neither homogeneous nor a single class; on the contrary, the peasantry is marked by great heterogeneity, and is differentiated into socio-economic classes.

As part of our research, using the classical texts as guideposts, we have tried to work out broad criteria for the classification of peasants in the modern rural Indian context into different class categories. These criteria are as follows:

1. Ownership of the means of production and other assets.
2. The labor ratio, defined as the ratio between the sum of number of days of family labor, and the number of days of laboring out of members of the household in agricultural and non-agricultural work (in the numerator) and the number of days of labor hired in by the household (in the denominator).
3. Rent exploitation, that is, rent received or paid by the household.
4. Net income of the household, making separate note of the gross value of output from agriculture and the investment in agriculture per hectare.
5. The sources of income of the household.

We emphasize here the problems of classifying the peasantry on the basis of a single year's data, when socio-economic circumstances typically fluctuate from year to year. We use, in other words, static data to study dynamic circumstances. This problem affects income particularly, since peasant incomes typically fluctuate from year to year.

With regard to the labor ratio, the extent of participation of working members of peasant households in the labor process in agriculture depends on the nature of land use and cropping pattern in each village, on economic and social status. In every village, cropping pattern and technological processes are such that there are substantial variations in labor absorption per crop, and the relative ratios in which family labor, exchange labor (if it exists at all) and different types of hired labor are deployed. In particular, the wetland cultivation of rice and of certain other crops in India are characterized by substantial employment of hired labor by *all* sections of the peasantry. Patterns of labor deployment also vary with caste and religious community, and with traditional gender roles, particularly between different castes.

It is clear also that as (i) agricultural mechanization advances and covers more and more crop operations, or (ii) occupational diversity within households becomes greater, or (iii) agricultural tasks themselves become specialized or based on specialized skills, the labor criterion becomes less and less robust a criterion for differentiating classes.<sup>13</sup>

We then classified households into rich, upper-middle, lower-middle and poor, on the basis of their ownership of the means of production, labor ratios and incomes. This is in itself a complex effort, and the point to remember is that the purpose here is not to provide a universal one-definition-fits-all scheme, but to use both certain overall methodological guidelines as well as village-level data and observation to identify classes in different socio-economic and agricultural environments.

Rich peasant households have the highest levels of ownership of means of production, particularly land and other productive assets, while, at the other end of the spectrum, poor peasants hardly have any productive assets at all other than small plots of land. In some villages, poor and lower-middle peasants are tenants, so do not own any land. With respect to the labor ratio, in general, the coefficient is above 0 but very low for rich peasants, generally in the vicinity of 1 among middle peasants (less than 1 for upper-middle and greater than 1 for lower-middle peasants), and greater than 1 among poor peasants.

Incomes can vary from high surpluses based on relatively heavy investments among the rich, to subsistence and even negative incomes among the poor (this is discussed in greater detail below). The income criterion was particularly important in resolving borderline problems in the classification of the middle peasantry into upper and lower sections.

A very important feature of the situation in some parts of the country is that even middle peasant households—particularly from Dalit castes, but also from other castes—labored out heavily. In our study of Ananthavaram in south coastal Andhra Pradesh, for example, poor peasants and all tenants were substantially and characteristically semi-proletarians with respect to days of laboring out, but with respect to hiring in, they were relatively heavy employers of labor. In fact, of all the days of labor worked by hired labor for wages, no less than 42 percent came from the peasantry, particularly poor and lower middle peasants. In the two villages in Uttar Pradesh, Harevli and Mahatwar, the corresponding figures were even higher, 53 percent and 46 percent.

In most villages, it is difficult to draw an exact line that distinguishes the poor peasantry from manual workers.

### **Tenancy in the contemporary period**

Official data on tenancy are utterly inaccurate, as they do not capture informal tenancy contracts in any meaningful way (according to official statistics, only about

6.5 percent of the operational holdings of households in rural India is leased in). Survey data, on the other hand, show that while there are large variations in the incidence of tenancy across regions, on the whole, the incidence of tenancy can be substantial (Table 9).

Table 9 Incidence of tenancy, PARI villages in %

<i>Village</i>	<i>Land leased in as a proportion of operational holding</i>	<i>Land leased out as a proportion of ownership holding</i>
Ananthavaram, Guntur district, south coastal Andhra Pradesh	67.4	42.2
Bukkacherla, Anantapur district, Rayalaseema region, south-west Andhra Pradesh	16.2	26.7
Kothapalle, Karimnagar district, North Telangana region, north Andhra Pradesh	22.6	16.2
Harevli, Bijnor district, Western Uttar Pradesh	25.9	19.0
Mahatwar, Ballia district, Eastern Uttar Pradesh	16.7	2.7
Warwat Khanderao, Buldhana district, Vidarbha region, Maharashtra	6.5	5.1
Nimshirgaon, Kolhapur district, southern Maharashtra	3.8	7.6
25 F Gulabewala, Sri Ganganagar district, Rajasthan	18.6	28.7
Dungariya, Udaipur district, Rajasthan	12.6	6.7
Gharsondi, Gwalior district, Madhya Pradesh	10.3	6.0
All villages	19.5	18.8

Source: PARI survey data.

Other than in States where the Left has been in power, tenancy contracts are almost invariably unregistered, oral and short-term.

Tenancy contracts across the country are marked by great diversity and complexity. With changes in cropping pattern and technology, forms of tenancy have changed and new tenancy arrangements have emerged in many areas.

Some extremely exploitative forms of tenancy have survived, and in some cases intensified, in certain study villages where agriculture is characterized by high productivity, mechanization, and, in general, high levels of development of the productive forces. The paddy-growing regions of southern coastal Andhra Pradesh, or cultivation on labor rent (the practice is often called *siri*) in parts of Haryana and Rajasthan, or seasonal tenancy among Dalit poor peasants in Bijnor district in western UP are examples of such areas. In Haryana, the introduction of specific forms of mechanization was associated with increases in rent. When landlords began to provide water from tubewells or provided tractors for field-preparation,

they raised rents as well. In coastal Andhra Pradesh, rents on paddy lands rose with productivity. In fact, a comparison of our data from Ananthavaram with studies made by Sundarayya (1976) shows that landowners extracted almost the entire increase in productivity of paddy that took place between 1974 and 2005–06 in the form of increased rent.

In some areas, “lease” contracts combine features of tenancy with unfree forms of hired labor. We have mentioned the example of labor-rent above; another example is from sugarcane-growing areas of Bijnor district in western UP, where landlords lease out small plots of land to farm servants for the cultivation of paddy after sugarcane is harvested.

Although both small and large landowners participate in the tenancy market as lessors and lessees, there are significant differences in the terms of contracts on which they obtain land across classes and social groups. In general, Dalit, landless and poor peasant households obtain land on high rents, often rack-rents. These tenancy contracts can be interlocked with employment and credit transactions. On the other hand, the rich lease in land on relatively easy terms, either from non-residents, from friends and relatives, or from poor landowners. Such “reverse” tenancy—that is, the phenomenon of small, poor landowners leasing out land to rich cultivators—can be substantial in areas where poor landowners are unable to take advantage of technological transformation because they do not own non-land means of production or have access to funds for investment. The decline of public services—for example, of public irrigation in old canal-irrigated areas and a consequent dependence on privately owned tubewells—has contributed to creating conditions in which poor landowners lease out land to rich cultivators.

### Peasant incomes

Our village data also show up a phenomenon that is new in its extent and scope, and has serious implications for the future of the peasantry: data from nine villages in the States mentioned above showed that 21 percent of households (mainly poor peasants) actually had *negative* crop incomes. By contrast, the average agricultural income of households in the top decile was over 3.2 lakhs per household (Table 10).

Not only do the data show that aggregate incomes from agriculture are highly unequal across cultivator households, they also show that there are large variations in the costs of cultivation and profitability across crops, and, for a given crop, across regions. Variations in the profitability of crops across different classes are substantial. Tables 11 and 12 show differences in gross output and net annual incomes from agriculture per acre of operational holding across villages and between cultivators operating smallest 20 and largest 20 land holdings. The data show that, given the concentration of land and other means of production in their hands, landlords and rich peasants are able to keep production costs lower than middle and poor peasants.

In contrast, the poor peasants are forced to buy inputs at a higher unit price than the rich, and to pay rents for land and machinery. With more efficient input use, and better access to markets, landlords, big capitalist farmers and rich peasants also receive a higher income per unit of production than middle and poor peasants.

Table 10 Average income from crop production of households operating land, by deciles of agricultural income, pooled data from PARI villages in 2008–09 prices

<i>Deciles of households ranked by income from crop production</i>	<i>All villages</i>
1	-19,161
2	-2,397
3	859
4	3,296
5	6,419
6	11,788
7	19,427
8	33,338
9	60,661
10	323,049
D10/D9	5.32

Notes: This table is based on data from three villages in Andhra Pradesh, two villages in Uttar Pradesh, two villages in Maharashtra, one village in Rajasthan and one village in Madhya Pradesh. It includes all cultivating households, including landlords.

For the purpose of comparison, incomes of all households were converted to 2008–09 prices using State-level Consumer Price Indices for Agricultural Laborers (CPIAL).

Source: PARI survey data.

Table 11 Average gross value of annual output from crop production per acre of operational holding, bottom 20 households, all households and top 20 households, PARI villages in 2008–09 prices

<i>Village</i>	<i>Bottom 20 households</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>Top 20 households</i>
Ananthavaram*	14,810	38,886	66,302
Bukkacherla*	3,245	8,637	13,226
Kothapalle*	6,188	12,047	15,653
Harevli	14,849	27,622	33,576
Mahatwar	6,152	11,880	17,567
Warwat Khanderao	3,426	12,025	23,370
Nimshirgaon*	5,933	22,813	44,227
25 F Gulabewala	10,091	15,430	20,178
Gharsondi	3,719	13,178	30,437

Notes: The table includes all cultivating households, including landlords.

“Top” and “bottom” are with respect to the size of household operational holdings.

All incomes were converted to 2008–09 prices using State-level CPIAL.

\* Figures for bottom and top 20 households of these villages are averages of sample households.

Source: PARI survey data.

Table 12 Average annual net incomes from crop production per acre of operational holding, bottom 20 households, all households and top 20 households, PARI villages in 2008–09 prices

<i>Village</i>	<i>Bottom 20 households</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>Top 20 households</i>
Ananthavaram*	-11,712	5,621	31,232
Bukkacherla*	-5,027	1,049	6,648
Kothapalle*	-1,801	3,091	8,015
Harevli	-4,965	6,343	16,350
Mahatwar	-3,016	2,665	9,017
Warwat Khanderao	-782	6,301	15,893
Nimshirgaon*	-72	10,598	26,253
25 F Gulabewala	3,553	7,737	12,024
Gharsondi	-5,172	5,338	20,081

Notes: The table includes all cultivating households, including landlords.

“Top” and “bottom” are with respect to the size of household operational holdings.

All incomes were converted to 2008–09 prices using State-level CPIAL.

\* Figures for bottom and top 20 households of these villages are averages of sample households.

Source: PARI survey data.

A major feature of state policy in India over the last 20 years is that it has acted as a vast depressor, undermining policies of administered agricultural input costs and output prices, scaling down public investment in rural physical and social infrastructure, dismantling the institutional structure of social and development banking, withdrawing quantitative restrictions on the import of agricultural products, and weakening national systems of research, extension and the protection of national plant and other biological wealth.<sup>14</sup> Indian agriculture has been exposed, in a new and unprecedented way, to volatility in the international prices of food and non-food crops (see, for instance, Ghosh 2005). Among the important policies of the Government of India in this regard are, of course, the removal of quantitative restrictions on the import and export of a very wide range of agricultural commodities, including wheat and wheat products, rice, pulses, edible oils and agricultural seeds, and substantial cuts in import tariffs on crops. New incentives and support to exports of agricultural commodities will inevitably have an impact on land use and cropping pattern.

The Minimum Support Prices (MSP) announced by the Government to ensure remunerative prices have not compensated for the actual costs of production per unit of output for most crops in a majority of States. Further, the very policy of MSP has not been implemented in most States and for many crops.

The impact of these policies on incomes from agriculture has been highly differential across regions, crops and classes, a fact that comes out clearly from our survey data from Andhra Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh, Maharashtra, Rajasthan and Madhya Pradesh.

## Concluding Discussion

The structure of classes is, along with interrelated structures of caste, gender, and other forms of sectional deprivation, a fundamental determinant of social and economic inequality in rural India. Any methodology to study rural class structures must face a two-part challenge: on the one hand, to establish certain general theoretical categories and criteria in order to distinguish classes in the countryside, and, on the other hand, to identify classes *in situ*, that is, in the specific agro-economic and social circumstances that prevail in different regions and localities.

The analysis undertaken as part of the Project on Agrarian Relations in India has used a combination of three criteria to classify households into socio-economic classes: the first considers the productive assets owned by (or available to) a household; the second the labor employed and labor power expended by the household; and the third the incomes and surpluses gained by the household from different sources. Using our field data, we found these criteria to be hardy and reliable indicators of class position, but since class structures are neither static nor uniform (particularly across India's extraordinarily diverse agro-ecological regions), these criteria needed to be applied carefully and modified for different crop systems and agrarian regimes.

The data on classes yield many results, and there is much work ahead in respect of analyzing them. I shall here highlight only a few conclusions that have emerged in the course of recent research, and which are somewhat new in the recent literature.

First, the village in India continues to be deeply stratified. Despite changes that have occurred—in agricultural production and agrarian structure—neither the green revolution years nor the years of liberalization have undone the socio-economic and political domination of the institution of landlordism in the countryside. The ownership of land and wealth continues to be concentrated in this class, and its members continue at the apex of social, political and administrative hierarchies in the village.

Secondly, although we need carefully to analyze specific agrarian regimes to understand the diverse forms differentiation takes, it is clear that the peasantry is sharply differentiated. A new feature of the data is the very wide prevalence of *negative* crop incomes among the poor and middle sections of the peasantry today.

Thirdly, it is noteworthy that the villages are still predominantly farm- and crop-production-based. Of the total populations of the villages, about 60 percent actually cultivated operational holdings, and 85 percent cultivated land and/or worked on land as manual workers. While landlords made up a few households in each village, all manual workers + poor peasants + middle peasants constituted about 64 percent of the households in the villages for which we have analyzed data.

Fourthly, a striking feature of rural India today is that very wide sections of the rural population work as manual workers. Indeed, the catchment area for hired workers extends well beyond the class of manual workers (that is, the class whose major income is from payment for hired manual work), and covers wide sections of the peasantry.

An awareness of the dangers of ignoring class is both a fundamental motivator for the study of classes in the countryside as well as the most salient result of such study. Class-blindness affects any understanding of long-term social and economic change: historical experience and current research confirm that no basic transformation of conditions of poverty in Indian society is possible without a resolution of its agrarian question, a process in which class issues must play a crucial role. Class-blindness affects, in a more immediate way, government policies and programs designed for the countryside. For example, in computing minimum support prices, official analyses of costs and incomes disregard variations in costs and incomes across regions, seasons and types of cultivators (such as owner-cultivators and tenants). Basing a policy measure on an “average farmer” is unlikely to ensure adequate returns to all cultivators, given systematic differences across classes of cultivators. To take another example, programs for rural employment creation will have to note that wide sections of the rural population (and not just those whose major income is from hired work) seek work as manual workers. These, however, are matters for separate scrutiny.

## Appendix

### List of villages mentioned in the article

<i>Village</i>	<i>District</i>	<i>State</i>	<i>Regions (Planning Commission)</i>
Ananthavaram	Guntur	Andhra Pradesh	East Coast Plains and Hills region (South Coastal Andhra)
Bukkacherla	Anantapur	Andhra Pradesh	Southern Plateau region (Rayalaseema)
Kothapalle	Karimnagar	Andhra Pradesh	Southern Plateau region (North Telangana)
Harevli	Bijnor	Uttar Pradesh	Upper Gangetic Plains region
Mahatwar	Ballia	Uttar Pradesh	Middle Gangetic Plains region
Warwat Khanderao	Buldhana	Maharashtra	Western Plateau region
Nimshirgaon	Kolhapur	Maharashtra	Western Hills region
25 F Gulabewala	Sri Ganganagar	Rajasthan	Trans-Gangetic Plains Region (Arid)
Dungariya	Udaipur	Rajasthan	Central Plateau and Hills region (Southern Plain)
Gharsondi	Gwalior	Madhya Pradesh	Central Plateau region (Gird)
Alabujanahalli	Mandya	Karnataka	Southern Plateau and Hills Region (Southern Region)
Siresandra	Kolar	Karnataka	Southern Plateau and Hills Region (Central Region)

<i>Village</i>	<i>District</i>	<i>State</i>	<i>Regions (Planning Commission)</i>
Zhapur	Gulbarga	Karnataka	Southern Plateau and Hills Region (Northern Dry Region)
Gokilapuram	Theni	Tamil Nadu	Southern Plateau and Hills Region (Central plateau)
Dhamar	Rohtak	Haryana	Trans-Gangetic Plains Region
Birdhana	Fatehabad	Haryana	Trans-Gangetic Plains Region (Arid)
Palakurichi	Nagapattinam	Tamil Nadu	East Coast Plains region
Sathanur	Thanjavur	Tamil Nadu	East Coast Plains region

## Notes

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2. For attempts to establish criteria for identifying classes in the Indian countryside in an earlier period, see Sundarayya (1976), Patnaik (1987), Athreya, Djurfeldt and Lindbergh (1990), and Ramachandran (1990).
3. An introduction to the project is at <http://www.fas.org.in/pages.asp?menuid=16>
4. A detailed discussion in Ramachandran and Ramakumar (2000).
5. See Ramachandran and Ramakumar (2000), and Ramachandran and Rawal (2010) and the sources discussed therein, including Hirashima (2000).
6. See the contributions to Ramachandran and Swaminathan (eds.) (2002).
7. See also the discussion and references in Karashima (2011), and in Ramachandran (1990), Ch. 1.
8. These are, of course, characteristics that have a bearing on the nature and pattern of proletarianization in the relevant regions.
9. See the discussion in Dhar (2011).
10. On factors affecting the volume of employment in contemporary rural India, see Ramachandran and Swaminathan (2006) and Ramachandran and Rawal (2010). For evidence from a Tamil Nadu village, see Ramachandran, Rawal, and Swaminathan (2002).
11. See Ramachandran, Rawal, and Swaminathan (2010). This gap is very far from being filled by the days of employment created under the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (for discussion, see Government of India 2011, Gupta 2007, ISWSD 2007, Karat 2005 and 2008, and Usami 2010).
12. There are, for example, data on the expansion of female labor absorption in Bt cotton cultivation in Vidarbha (Ramakumar and Raut 2011).
13. Labor ratios are also affected by year-to-year fluctuations.
14. In recent years, small producers have gained little benefit from public systems of information dissemination in agriculture. It is often said, in fact, that more advice is now given to them by village-level fertilizer and pesticide merchants than by agricultural extension officers.

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